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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (0845)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues, to the 140th meeting of the foreign affairs and international development committee.

Today we're marking the seventh annual Iran Accountability Week in the Canadian Parliament.

While our focus during this hearing will be the Iranian regime's deplorable record of human rights abuses, we also take note of the regime's export of violence and terror around the world.

Iran's role as a destabilizing force in the Middle East and specifically its role in propping up the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad is disturbing, and its state sponsorship of terror has continued to expand. In particular, the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah, have caused immense suffering for millions of people in the Middle East.

Domestically, Iranians continue to be the subject of human rights violations from a malicious regime and a vindictive judicial system. As parliamentarians, we remain steadfast in our call for the freedom of Canadian citizen Maryam Mombeini, who remains in Iran against her will following the unacceptable detention and death of her husband, Canadian Kavous Seyed-Emami.

To begin our hearing, we have two esteemed witnesses before us. By video conference from London, we have Shirin Ebadi, a lawyer, writer and teacher. She received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work to promote democracy and human rights in Iran. We are also joined, in person, by Masih Alinejad. A political activist and journalist, she is a leading advocate for women's rights and equality in Iran. Both Dr. Ebadi and Ms. Alinejad share the distinct experience of having been imprisoned by the Iranian regime for their work.

Dr. Ebadi, we will begin with your statement. We will then proceed to Ms. Alinejad, and then move into questions from the members.

Dr. Ebadi, please begin.

Dr. Shirin Ebadi (Founder and Chair, Centre for Supporters of Human Rights): [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

Honourable members of the Parliament of Canada, I'm grateful for the chance that has been given to me to talk to you. I'm sorry that I couldn't be there in person.

My country, Iran, is now facing two crises. The first one is an economic crisis. The rate of unemployment, according to the government's report, is 35%, but the actual statistics are even higher than that. Workers receive their pay with many months' delay. People come to the streets every day to demand their economic rights, but what is the reason for the economic crisis?

The first reason is the corruption in the government. Unfortunately, this corruption starts at the highest levels of government and comes down to the employees in lower levels. Nothing progresses in Iran unless corrupt money is handed over. The reason is the wrong programs of the government.

For example, I can mention the situation of foreign currencies. Several times there have been wrong programs put in place for foreign currencies and investments that were pointless, especially handing over government organizations and factories at very low prices to relatives and people with close ties to the government. This has caused many of the factories to be closed down.

A third factor is the economic embargo, which has harmed the Iranian people the most. At the same time, the government has taken advantage of the situation because of the economic sanctions and has accumulated unclean money for its own purposes.

Iran is facing a political crisis. This political crisis, in my opinion, started from the beginning of the government in 1979 and slowly spread. The main reason was the ideology of the government, which believes that the revolution has to be exported to other countries. For this reason, exactly two years after the revolution in Iran, we saw that Hezbollah established in Lebanon, and they started interfering in Lebanon.

When the poor people of Syria started the uprising against Bashar al-Assad, Iran immediately came to his aid. There was a lot of money spent in Syria by Iran. After the fall of Saddam, the Iranian government had a lot of influence in Iraq and spent a lot of money in Iraq. The Iranian government has given arms to the Houthis of Yemen and has armed them against Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the Middle East, even in African countries the Iranian government has tried to influence and establish ties with dissidents. For example, Senegal cut its ties with Iran three years ago, although they now have relations again. Morocco cut its ties with Iran because of arms aid to the dissidents. For this reason, in the region and in the world, Iran has been isolated. The number of countries that support Iran is very low and, of course, they have their own political and economic profits. For example, Russia has always supported Iran because it has many advantages in its ties with Iran, as does China, because of its many contracts with Iran.

● (0850)

Iran, among countries in the region, has been completely isolated. Because of these crises, and in the middle of these crises, the people of Iran are always protesting and taking to the streets, but the government always cracks down on them. The only response of the government to the people is threatening them with jail, with imprisonment, and sometimes, execution.

Unfortunately in Iran right now, political prisoners are executed. In the last few years, several people have lost their lives because of their opinions. The exact number of people executed in Iran due to their opinions is not clear, because the government will not announce it, and the families are threatened not to speak about it.

Cracking down on social organizations has been widespread. My organization was closed down. After the office was closed, my colleagues were imprisoned. I would like to mention one of them, Ms. Narges Mohammadi, who spent six years in prison. After completing her sentence, she continued her activities and was arrested again. This time she was sentenced to a total of 16 years in prison, 10 years of which must be served. Right now, she is in the fifth year of her sentence.

I was the founder and one of the main members of this committee. I was head of the Nobel Women's Initiative for women who defend human rights. The main office is located in your city, Ottawa. We have spoken a lot, and I'm very happy that the Government of Canada is paying attention to this. I hope you will be more careful about people who are imprisoned because of their defence of human rights. They need protection and support.

Many Iranian Canadians have been imprisoned. The freedom of these people must be demanded of the Iranian government. Any political ties with the Iranian government must be simultaneous with improvement in the country's human rights situation.

What is the solution? How can we come through these crises?

In my opinion, the first step is to change the constitution of the country. According to the constitution, all powers are given to one person, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. He can nullify any law. All of the country's economic and political policies are passed according to his notions. He is selected for life by a select number of high-ranking clergymen. He is not selected by the people. Selecting the supreme leader is like selecting the pope in the Vatican.

In Iran, people have very limited freedom. There is a lot of censorship. People always joke that in Iran there is one freedom and that is the freedom to go to heaven. That means the government is forcing everyone to go to heaven. You don't have the right to go to hell.

● (0855)

Now, imagine writing a book or speaking and what a high price it could have in Iran. Some writers and poets are now in prison in Iran.

Changing the constitution and changing Iran into a democratic, secular republic is up to the people of Iran who are fighting for this purpose. This is a responsibility for all of us.

We have no expectations from other governments. This is our responsibility and people are struggling for it. What we demand and expect from the international community, and especially from Canada, is to not let thieves and corrupt people into your country. Unfortunately, right now, I have to say, some people who have done embezzlements and corruptions and have taken unclean money from Iran have invested it in Canada. For a country with a reputation like Canada's, a democratic country like Canada, it's not good. It's very bad. Because everyone respects the culture of your country and the government of your country, they are surprised at how the law related to money laundering is not being executed in Canada and about why corrupt people who escaped from Iran to Canada are investing millions of dollars in your country. Some of these people have even been convicted in courts in Iran. Even though the courts are not completely fair, their crimes have already been confirmed in the courts in Iran. Why do you let these people into your country?

My demand is that any trade relations or political relations with Iran must be preconditioned to improvements in the situation of human rights in Iran, and especially freedom of the defenders of human rights in Iran, particularly lawyers. At the present time, we have four lawyers in prison who have been defending human rights in Iran. One of them is my close colleague in our NGO, Ms. Nasrin Sotoudeh. She has been sentenced to 33 years on seven counts of political crimes. Ten years of this prison term must be served. Right now, she has spent more than one year in prison.

Because human rights are universal and anything happening in Iran is related to every other part of the world, please pay more attention to the violation of human rights in Iran the same way that you've been doing before.

My special thanks go to the Canadian government. In the past few years they have proposed many resolutions against the regime in Iran to the United Nations General Assembly in regard to human rights violations. That's why I believe I should thank you for your goodwill.

Thank you for listening to my speech.

● (0900)

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

We will move straight to Masih Alinejad.

If you would also take around 10 minutes or so, and then of course we'll open it up to the members of the committee for some questions for both of the witnesses.

Please go ahead, Ms. Alinejad.

Ms. Masih Alinejad (Journalist and Founder of White Wednesdays Movement, As an Individual): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, thank you for inviting me to the Canadian Parliament to testify about human rights abuse in Iran. How ironic: 15 years ago I got kicked out of the Iranian Parliament just for exposing the corruption. At that time I never thought that I would be in another parliament testifying about what's going on about human rights in my own country.

I want to actually start with one known Iranian Canadian journalist. I'm sure all of you know the tragic tale of the beautiful, amazing and brave woman called Zahra Kazemi. She was an Iranian Canadian photographer. She went to Iran. She was arrested and she was murdered in the hands of Saeed Mortazavi, one of the notorious prosecutors general in Iran. He didn't even get a slap on the wrist.

At the time I was a political journalist working in Tehran. A year or so later after the death of Zahra Kazemi, I was summoned by Saeed Mortazavi, the same notorious prosecutor. I was very scared because I knew that what happened to Zahra Kazemi could easily happen to me. All journalists in Iran knew of Mortazavi and we did our best to avoid him—all of us.

Saeed Mortazavi was a nightmare not just for the journalists or political activists but for a lot of protestors as well. He didn't get justice punishment. This is what happened in 2009. During the protests, again, after the stolen election, he was in charge of arresting the protestors. There were four protestors who were killed in the hands of Saeed Mortazavi. In 2009 more than 100 people were killed. Thousands of people were arrested.

I myself have interviewed the families of 57 people who were killed in the Iranian protests.

Today I am here to tell you that as long as there is no independent judiciary system in Iran, there is no freedom of expression, no political freedom. There is no free press. There is no freedom to practice your own religion. There is no freedom to choose what you want to wear in Iran.

None of the oppressors are being punished in Iran. The responsibility then goes to every individual outside Iran and international communities to take responsibility and to take action.

I want to speak about a system that makes life hell—there is no other word for it—for women as well. Girls from the age of seven have to wear a compulsory hijab. If they don't, they won't be able to get an education. They won't be able to get a job. They won't be able to get a driver's licence. They won't be able to get any kind of official documents. In fact, they won't be able to live in their own country. They will be kicked out of their own homeland just because they don't wear a hijab.

Five years ago that was actually the reason that I launched a campaign called “My Stealthy Freedom”. This is a homegrown campaign. It's a grassroots movement that has more than three million followers on Instagram and Facebook. I provide a platform for women inside Iran to practise their civil disobedience by taking off their hijab and walking unveiled in public. This is a punishable crime but they want to challenge the government.

The risk is very high. In only one day the Government of Iran arrested 29 women of the White Wednesdays movement. The campaign has different initiatives. White Wednesdays is about women going in public and waving or holding their white head scarf.

● (0905)

In another initiative, which is called “My Camera Is My Weapon”, women practise their civil disobedience and film the harassers. They film the morality police while being beaten up. They film extremists whom the government of Iran and the law allow to beat up women and force them to wear the hijab.

For five years we spoke up very loudly about the compulsory hijab, but all the politicians around the world kept silent. They didn't want to touch the issue. Why? They think this is a very sensitive issue and they don't want to talk about it. Another reason is some negativity about President Trump in the United States. They want the whole world to keep silent because they don't want to be associated with the Trump administration and put pressure on Muslim minorities.

Let me be clear with you. I am a victim of the travel ban. I haven't seen my son for two years, but I haven't seen my family for 10 years, and Trump is not guilty here. It is the Islamic Republic that banned me from hugging my family. They interrogated my 70-year-old mother because of my activities here.

If I am loud enough to condemn the travel ban, then I have to invite the rest of the world to condemn the “women ban”, to condemn the ban of all Iranians who have different thoughts.

When I raise the issue of the compulsory hijab, people have four arguments to keep me silent.

As their first argument, they say the compulsory hijab is a cultural issue and that they don't want to talk about a cultural matter; let the Iranian people deal with it.

I remember that when Javad Zarif, the foreign minister of Iran went to France, he was challenged about the hijab. A female politician from France actually asked him why they forced non-Iranians—female politicians around the world who go to Iran to visit his beautiful country—to wear the hijab. Do you know what he said? He said that the hijab is part of our culture, and foreigners should respect it.

First of all, I Photoshopped him in our so-called culture. I Photoshopped him in a hijab and I said, “If this is the culture, respect it yourself. If anyone wants to understand what it means to be forced to respect the culture, try it. Wear the hijab by force for only one day. Then you will understand and will never say that forcing a woman to wear the hijab is part of your culture.”

More important than this, culture is flexible; it is not written in stone. It changes from generation to generation.

More important than even that—let me be clear—is that before the revolution, women in Iran had a choice about whether they wanted to wear the hijab or not. My mother used to wear the hijab before the revolution and does so right now. Here, we are talking about compulsion and calling a discriminatory law part of our “culture”. This is an insult to a nation.

The second argument by which people around the world keep me silent about fighting against the compulsory hijab is this. They say that this is the law of the land, so we have to respect the law. That's wrong. Slavery used to be legal. A bad law should be challenged to make it a respectable law. Many women in Iran sacrificed their lives to challenge a bad law. When you legitimize the same law, you're actually empowering the government to put more pressure on women.

On the same day that Shaparak Shajarizadeh, one of the women from my campaign, was arrested just because of waving a head scarf in public, three female politicians from the Netherlands who went to my country obeyed the compulsory hijab law without even challenging it. Their argument was that they wanted to respect the law. When a woman risks her life and gets arrested to challenge a bad law, then it is the responsibility of all the female politicians around the world, when they go to Iran, to understand the point and challenge the bad law. Why? Let me give you another example.

● (0910)

If my government goes to France, the first thing they ask is to remove all the alcoholic beverages from any official dinner. Why? They stand up for Islamic values. They never say that this is the culture for France, or this is the law or we have to respect the culture of another country. They stand up for their values. So, I want you to stand up for human rights values.

We all remember the burkini ban in France. The world united and condemned it. Nobody said that this is part of French culture, that this is a law and we have to respect the law in France. We all condemned it. When it comes to the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia, why does the whole world keep silent?

The third argument is when they never helped Iranian women. They say that the compulsory hijab is an internal matter, that it's a domestic issue. This is wrong. As far as the government of Iran forces all non-Iranians, all female politicians, even foreign ministers, even the First Lady to wear a hijab when they visit Iran, then this is not an internal matter and this is not about women inside Iran. It's about all women around the world.

I want to give you an example. All the athletes are forced to wear a hijab if they want to attend any international tournament in Iran. Think about it. In Canada, if the government comes in with a law and says that all the Muslim women are allowed to attend any tournament in Canada if they remove the hijab, what would you do? What would the rest of the world do? This is what I want you to do.

When all the female athletes are forced to wear a hijab, then we have to stand up for women's dignity. Here we are talking about women being forced to wear it or to remove it—it doesn't matter. But, if you take action on one side and you keep silent on the other side, then you are hypocrites. We have to respect the international standard, not apply a double standard.

The fourth argument is when the whole world kept silent. They say they don't want to touch the compulsory hijab issue because it will cause Islamophobia. It's because you never lived in a country, and you never experienced “women phobia”. I just made up that term.

We live in a country where they're scared of women, scared of my body, my hair, my identity and my existence. So you think we're causing Islamophobia—or the law lashes me, arrests me, beats me up, kicks me out, or interrogates my mother. Are we causing Islamophobia by lashing people for drinking, thinking or choosing another lifestyle? No. All of those are sharia laws, which count us as second-class citizens. They are causing Islamophobia, not us.

Believe me, supporting women's rights in Iran and Saudi Arabia does not make you Islamophobic. Join us.

The last thing is they always say this is a small issue, and the Middle East has so many bigger problems so let's just focus on bigger problems. Let me be clear. In 2014, the Government of Iran arrested 3.6 million women just because they were wearing an inappropriate hijab. Within eight months, they impounded 40,000 cars just because the drivers had an inappropriate hijab. Do you still think this is a small issue?

It is not a small issue when the head scarf and hijab is in the hands of a government that forces you to carry a fake identity every day. For 40 years, the Government of Iran wrote their ideology on the backs of Iranian women, so we are the ones carrying the most visible symbol of oppression with us. For 40 years this became the genetic code of the Islamic Republic, the main pillar of the Islamic Republic.

If you still think this is a small issue, I'm going to give you another example. When this government does not allow you to control what you put on your head, believe me, this government is never going to allow you to control what's going on inside your head. That is why I always say that and invite all the politicians around the world to stand up for universal values. Don't call it internal matters, because human rights are a global issue and we all need to take a stand.

● (0915)

I know I talk a lot, because I have a lot to say here.

My last point is that Iranian women are fighting and risking their lives. Right now, there are three activists in prison. Yasamin Ariani and her mother are in prison because they handed out flowers to women who wear the hijab and they invited them to join the White Wednesdays movement. Mojgan Keshavarz and Vida Movahed are in prison because they protested against the compulsory hijab.

If you think this is a small issue, think about women being imprisoned just because they want to make decisions about their own body. My body is my choice. This is not a small issue.

When Iranian women are fighting for their dignity, take a stand and make the Islamic Republic responsible. Sanction all the oppressors and make them accountable. Ask them to release all the women who protest against the compulsory hijab. Ask them to release all the political prisoners. That's my demand and the demand of many Iran women inside Iran.

Thank you so much.

● (0920)

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you for your passionate testimony.

I also acknowledge and point out that this morning we're doing this hearing in co-operation with our Subcommittee on International Human Rights, chaired by Anita Vandenbeld. We have David Anderson and other members of the subcommittee here as well.

With that, we're going to go to questions, beginning with MP Genuis, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you so much. It's an honour to be here to hear you and to be part of this testimony.

I salute your courage and the courage of the Iranian people.

Ms. Alinejad, you talked about these cultural arguments. I've seen the culture of the Iranian people in the freedom movement. I've seen Iranian Canadians who come out in -30°C weather to protest and raise awareness among other Canadians about these issues. I've seen the incredible courage of so many people. When I think about Iranian culture, that's what I think of. It's a great culture that you should be so proud to celebrate.

Ms. Masih Alinejad: Thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I want to situate my question in some of the conversations we're having here in Parliament around Canada-Iran relations.

There was a motion passed in June of last year to call on the government to designate the IRGC a terrorist entity under the Criminal Code. It was a motion that came from the official opposition, but it passed with the support of every government member who was present. I think many members on all sides are hopeful to see that lead to action eventually, although it hasn't yet led to that listing.

Can you tell us specifically about the role played by the IRGC in the issues you talked about, both within Iran or throughout the region?

One of the counter-arguments we hear on sanctions issues is that sanctions are going to hurt the people, not the regime. Could you speak to that as well, if you agree that a sanction targeting the IRGC specifically is going to be helpful to the people of Iran?

Ms. Masih Alinejad: Thank you so much for this important question.

I support targeted sanctions, and I want to make clear that, yes, general sanctions hurt Iranian people. Ordinary people are suffering from general sanctions. However, targeted sanctions sanctioning Sepah, the revolutionary guard and Iranian national TV are what the Iranian people want, because these are the main propaganda tools.

Islamic television actually brings the activists on TV to make a false confession. They do that to a lot of activists: political activists, student activists, women's rights activists and the lawyers.

The revolutionary guard as well had an important role in oppressing the Green Movement. As I said in my testimony, more than 100 people were killed and it was the revolutionary guard that was responsible. That is why I strongly believe that targeted sanctions would help people.

Actually, a lot of people are using social media to express themselves. When Javad Zarif or the president of Iran condemn that and ask the rest of the world to read their Twitter account and understand that people are not happy about sanctioning the revolutionary guard, I have to make clear that it's a big lie.

Twitter is filtered in Iran. The Government of Iran actually filtered social media to ban people from expressing themselves. How ironic is it that they're using social media to say this sanction is hurting people?

People were actually taking to the streets in Tehran and saying, "Our enemy is here. They lied to us. Our enemy is not America."

They were asking for the benefit of the deal. People celebrated the Iran deal in the street, dancing together. They were very happy and the main slogan in the protest was "Why are you sending money to Gaza? Why are you sending money to Lebanon? Why are you sending money to Syria?" They were complaining about not receiving the benefit of the deal.

That is why many people in Iran are actually supporting the sanctioning of the revolutionary guard and sanctioning the Islamic main propaganda tool, Iranian national TV.

● (0925)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

I want to get in one other question before the end of my time, but before that, Ms. Ebadi, do you want to comment on the IRGC issue?

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

The revolutionary guards, all the corruption, the economic corruption in Iran which I spoke about, the majority of them go back to the revolutionary guards because they are present in all the economic sectors and all of them belong to the revolutionary guards. As well, the revolutionary guards are not only a military force, but also an economic force with a huge security sector.

Let me explain that one of your scientists, Kavous Seyed-Emami, who was part of a human rights NGO, was arrested by the revolutionary guards. He was told that he was charged with espionage. He perished in jail. His death was suspicious. His wife, who is an Iranian Canadian and wants to leave the country, is not allowed to leave the country.

Seven people were charged with espionage and arrested by the revolutionary guards. They're in revolutionary guard jails, but the minister of information and the minister of intelligence announced several times that they are not spies. In fact, there is a government within a government in this plan, which is the revolutionary guards.

I am completely in agreement with sanctioning the revolutionary guards because their hand must be cut off from the power. Alinejad mentioned Zahra Kazemi who was tortured and killed in jail. She was my client. I'm completely aware of the file. Zahra Kazemi was arrested and killed by the revolutionary guards.

Other Iranian Canadians, Homa Hoodfar, Ramin Jahanbegloo and Mazier Bahari, were all arrested by the revolutionary guards. Therefore, I am in agreement with sanctioning the revolutionary guards, but I emphasize again—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ebadi.

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

Let me add this. The economic sanctions are against the people. They will suffer. Satellite sanctions do not allow Iranians, the Iranian government to use western countries' satellites and TV channels, non-Persian TV channels, to broadcast to other countries and to deceive people that way. That would be necessary—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ebadi.

I want to leave time to make sure we can get to the other questions.

We're going to go straight to MP Vandenbeld, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Ms. Ebadi and Ms. Alinejad, I want to express my absolute respect and admiration for the work that you're doing, for your perseverance and for your courage.

Ms. Alinejad, you talked about the women of the world being in solidarity with Iranian women. I can assure you that the women of Canada are there standing side by side with Iranian women.

Ms. Masih Alinejad: The men are as well.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Yes, the men are too, absolutely. We need the men and the women. Thank you.

I'm very struck by your testimony about 3.6 million women being arrested because of what they wear. You used words like "women ban" and actually I think a very apt expression, "women phobia", that is happening there. That's probably a very accurate expression... the morality police, the kinds of things that are happening today to women in Iran, but it wasn't always like that.

Ms. Ebadi, I note from your CV that you were a judge.

● (0930)

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: Yes.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Women were educated. Women were in senior positions. You spoke about culture. You spoke about law. If you look at the culture and law before 1979, this was not part of that. Could you talk a little bit about the fact that you had women who were in prominent positions, women who had rights? What was the impact on society of those rights being taken away from an entire generation at this point?

How can we, internationally, help Iran and help Iranian women to be able to get back to a place—or go even further—where they have those basic fundamental human rights?

Ms. Masih Alinejad: Should I start or does Ms. Ebadi want to answer?

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Go ahead.

Ms. Masih Alinejad: Let me give you a better picture of what happened to us, the people of Iran, after the revolution.

Ms. Ebadi was a judge, but after the revolution, she was banned from being a judge. We had female ministers. We had singers. We had women entering stadiums or practising any kinds of sports that they wanted to do.

After the Islamic revolution, all the social freedoms were taken away from us. That is why I always say that this Islamic revolution became a revolution against women. If we want to win the battle, then every individual woman should have her own revolution against the oppressors. This is actually what women in Iran now have been doing.

I just want to give you an example about the cultural change in Iran. From the beginning of when I launched the “My Stealthy Freedom” campaign and I invited women to join the movement against the compulsory hijab, people were saying that it's going to create a cultural war. I kept reminding them that no, our culture is tolerant. Before the revolution, as I said, we had beautiful pictures of women walking side by side together. This is my dream, to walk with my mother shoulder to shoulder. She wears a hijab and I don't want to wear a hijab. It was difficult for people inside Iran.

Right now, this is the most prominent civil disobedience movement in Iran where people are actually creating a cultural transition. They're talking together and having a free debate. One woman was actually using her camera and she filmed the morality police to show the rest of the world that this is not our culture. This is one of the most discriminatory laws where women were being beaten up. She filmed it. She sent a video to me. I posted it on my Instagram account and it got nine million views. Believe me, the supreme leader of Iran doesn't get that many views.

That actually shows the power of ordinary women who bring change within the society. What we want is that you do not ignore them and that the international community recognize these women. Before the deal, when Catherine Ashton, the high representative of the European Parliament, the EU, went to Iran, their condition was that they want to come and have a deal but they want to meet with the human rights activists. They got it, and they talked to Narges Mohammadi. But after the deal, what happened? They buried the human rights deal under the nuclear deal and they ignored human rights.

What I want is that human rights are not buried and we care about these people who are fighting within the society.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Ms. Ebadi, perhaps from your own personal experience, what is your perspective on this?

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

In order to summarize, Ms. Alinejad said some words, but allow me to answer the next question by myself. If you want an answer to the same question twice, there would be a lot of time spent on this and we won't get to the others.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Okay. My apologies for that.

I would like one of the parts of my question answered. It's what can the international community do? What can international women...?

I know you're part of the Nobel Women's Initiative. There are others who are part of the World Movement for Democracy.

What is it that the international community can do that would actually empower women in Iran?

We'll start with Ms. Ebadi.

● (0935)

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

I'll speak very briefly. I can tell you that this revolution caused all of the rights women had to be lost. This revolution has been called the revolution of men against women, because all rules against women were passed during this regime.

Only four months after the revolution, before the constitution was passed, and when parliament was being controlled by the revolutionary council, they passed their first law. Do you know what it was? They passed a law that a man can marry four women. At the same time, I wrote an article asking, “Did you actually carry out a revolution so you could have four wives?” After that, other laws against women were also passed, and women were held back in all areas.

Because time is short, if you'll agree, when the next question is asked, please let one of us answer. There is limited time, and we don't want to leave anything out.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to move to MP Caron, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you very much, Ms. Alinejad and Ms. Ebadi, for your very compelling statements and testimony.

[*Translation*]

I'll start with Ms. Ebadi.

You said that Canada happens to be a country that facilitates the laundering of money from Iran and Iranians.

I tend to agree with you since, as recently as February 2019, the RCMP dismantled a money laundering network in Canada and made arrests. This case involved 17 people, so 17 arrests, and resulted in the seizure of $33 million.

This is indeed an issue. The Standing Committee on Finance studied the issue of money laundering. It recognized that Canada had very weak provisions in place to effectively review the flow of illicit money from Iran or other countries. The committee also recognized that the main agencies such as FINTRAC, the Canada Revenue Agency or the RCMP work in isolation.

You seem to know the subject. In your opinion, how serious is the problem with the flow of illicit money from Iran into Canada for laundering purposes?

In addition, the government seems to want to strengthen its anti-money laundering provisions by creating an agency that would consolidate some aspects of the three groups mentioned earlier. What would you recommend with regard to the creation of this new anti-money laundering agency in Canada and the work that it should accomplish?

[*English*]

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

The behaviour of this agency must be such that the source of the money is completely clear. Corrupt people in Iran, who steal money from Iran and bring it to Canada do not actually put it in their own name. It's usually in the name of their spouses or their children. When you realize that a young 30-year-old man is bringing in several million dollars of wealth and his father is a citizen of Iran, and he himself has dual citizenship in Iran and Canada, you could easily ask the young man how he made that amount of money, and what his business is in Iran. To discover the truth is not difficult.

Also, Iranians who live in Canada and defend human rights can provide the names of people they recognize. They can provide these names to you and the Government of Canada, and ask for the property of these people and their families to be investigated, so that the source of this wealth can be determined. If some of these corrupt people are limited, and their unclean money is confiscated, then it will be a smaller world for thieves and corrupt people. People who commit these acts should have their property confiscated.

● (0940)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you.

You're currently in London. We know what's happening with the American sanctions and the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran. These sanctions have severely affected the people of Iran. Great Britain, Germany and France decided to establish a type of mechanism called Instex. The goal of the mechanism is to facilitate trade with Iran in the form of a barter system. The United States says that this mechanism will facilitate money laundering and that it doesn't provide enough protection to prevent illicit money from leaving Iran and entering these three countries.

What's your opinion on this? Is this situation being discussed, for example in Great Britain?

If Great Britain agrees with the United States, what remedies is it proposing?

[*English*]

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

Bartering must be limited to food and medication—what people can benefit from directly. Also, when signing any contracts, you could include a condition for overseeing how it's carried out. The government cannot take advantage of these deals and turn them into weapons that are sent to Lebanon, or Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have time for a last, short question. I'm actually going to take that time myself.

Ms. Alinejad and Dr. Ebadi, we've seen the situation for human rights in Iran getting worse over the last number of years. Rates of executions are up. Rates of persecution are up, and this applies to women, religious minorities, such as the Baha'i, and the LGBTQ population in Iran. We're seeing a deterioration, and an increase in the brutality and repression of this regime.

I'm wondering if you can leave us with a message for parliamentarians in Canada and parliamentarians in other countries of what the reality is for the people of Iran, very separate from this brutal regime. What do the people of Iran need from us?

Ms. Alinejad, do you want to start?

Ms. Masih Alinejad: I'll leave it to Dr. Ebadi.

Dr. Shirin Ebadi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

As I mentioned in my comments before, any commercial or economic relations with Iran must depend on improving the human rights situation. As well, the Iranian government's use of satellite television and radio for propaganda must be stopped, must be shut down, so they understand that violation of human rights is punishable. Methods in the United Nations could be used. The drafting of UN resolutions to condemn Iran must be continued.

● (0945)

Ms. Masih Alinejad: I want to add to what Ms. Ebadi said about those people who were actually in power before, and stole the money of the Iranian people. They can easily travel to the United States of America and Canada. How ironic that these governments used to brainwash us to say, “Death to America!” Now, all their relatives are in the United States of America enjoying freedom. Even the children of the hostage-takers are in America. Even one of the ministers of Ahmadinejad, who stole money, is in America. He's very well known because of his corruption.

Those people who were in power can easily travel in Canada, but human rights activists get arrested in Iran, or when they escape from Iran, they get stuck in Turkey. It's obvious that you can help, and you can do a lot. Take action. Sanction the oppressors and help human rights fighters who risk their lives and their families' lives. They don't have the same freedoms as these people who are coming to the west and enjoying freedom.

That's it. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thanks to you both for being here and providing such important testimony as we begin our Iran Accountability Week in the Canadian Parliament. Parliamentarians and Canadians stand with the Iranian people in fighting this oppression.

We're going to suspend for a couple of minutes while we get our second panel in place.

● (0945)

(Pause)

● (0950)

The Chair: The meeting has resumed.

We now have our second panel of witnesses for Iran Accountability Week.

I would like to welcome Nikahang Kowsar, an Iranian journalist, cartoonist and geologist now living in Canada, following his arrest for his work in Iran. He is the co-founder of the Cartoonists Rights Network of Canada.

Also before us today is Richard Ratcliffe, an individual I had the honour of meeting at the recent Geneva conference on human rights. He is the husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British Iranian dual national who has been detained in Iran since April 2016 and sentenced to five years in prison on espionage charges. Their daughter, Gabriella, has been unable to leave Iran since then as well, and Richard has not seen her in a number of years.

Gentlemen, thank you for appearing before us today as we continue our Iran Accountability Week.

Mr. Kowsar, you may begin with your statement, after which we will move to Mr. Ratcliffe. Then we will open up the floor to members who I'm sure are going to have questions for you both.

Please begin, Mr. Kowsar.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar (Iranian Canadian Environmentalist, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, it is an honour and privilege for me as an Iranian Canadian to address this body on the matter of environmental accountability in Iran with a focus on water and, as a matter of fact, the lack thereof.

Based on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use.

The Islamic Republic has a long list of harmful activities that have led to the destruction of Iran's water resources, which has also resulted in misery, retrogression, and environmental rollback of the country. Unsustainable projects, such as the construction of more than 650 dams without proper environmental studies, and giving permits for digging 400,000 wells, in addition to shutting an eye on another 430,000 illegal wells, have had major negative effects on surface and groundwater resources all around the country. As a result, millions of struggling farmers have abandoned their farmland and evacuated their villages. This is similar to what occurred in Syria before the civil war.

More than 33,000 villages have been partially or fully evacuated, mostly because of the destruction of water resources needed for farming. In 2013 government officials confirmed that 85% of Iran's groundwater resources were gone. In that year, 12 million Iranians lived in city margins and slums, and in 2018 the number reached 19 million.

On the other hand, the absence of sufficient watershed management plans and projects has proven to have catastrophic effects, especially during the recent devastating floods. Iran is losing more than two billion tons of topsoil, with a value exceeding $70 billion Canadian. Soil erosion is a direct result of the degradation of grasslands and forests, especially during flood seasons.

I should also add the impact of desertification and the evacuation of farmlands. Throughout the recent floods in the western and southwestern provinces of Lorestan, Ilam, Khuzestan, and of Fars and the northern province of Golestan, dozens of innocent Iranians were killed because of murky floods, but mostly because of bad management. More than 10 million Iranians have felt the trauma that could have been managed and substantially contained.

As a water conservationist and journalist who warned former president Mohammad Khatami in 2001 about the policies of his government of building so many dams and transferring water from one basin to another basin, briefing him on the impacts of those projects, I'm sorry to say that after 18 years, what I predicted is happening right now. Iran is a water bankrupt nation. While ignoring the importance of watershed management and maintaining aquifers, they have destroyed everything.

The continuation of those policies, led by a number of former student leaders who occupied the U.S. embassy in 1979 with the help of the revolutionary guards, is destroying the nation. Those student leaders and the revolutionary guards are responsible for so many dams that have blocked rivers and have killed aquifers.

Different government administrations have co-operated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC, to build major dams and interbasin water transport projects without considering the environmental and social impacts of building these megastructures. As a result of the reckless construction of such dams as Karun 3 on the Karun River, tens of villages have drowned and been evacuated, thousands of hectares of farmland have been destroyed, thousands of years of history and cultural inheritance have disappeared, and tens of thousands of inhabitants have had to migrate to slums and margins of such towns as Izeh.

Until the recent torrential rainfalls, Lake Urmia had lost about 90% of its volume because of the construction of more than 70 dams and depletion of the basin's groundwater and the unsustainable development of farmland in the region. Transfer of water rights of marshes and of farmland to other regions has distressed the people of Isfahan province, where farmers were constantly protesting for over a year. Depletion of groundwater resources has resulted in land subsidence and desertification.

● (0955)

In late 2017 and early 2018, many of the victims of the regime's strategies, including its water policies, had lost their jobs and farms. They joined the nationwide unrest. Since December 2017, protestors who have lost their lives have been from regions and towns such as Dorud, Tuyserkan, Ghahdrijan, Kazerun and Izeh, which have suffered from water scarcity. Loss of annual water supply per person to under 1,000 cubic metres could be translated as a water crisis. Many Iranians are facing that scarcity.

Based on an analysis conducted by the Center for Naval Analyses, with the escalation of water stress, the possibility of civil unrest, instability and violence will significantly rise. Water scarcity and the escalation of violence will not be and cannot be a good sign for promoters of human rights and democratic values, where survival will become the priority in many parts of Iran and millions will have no choice but to flee the country.

Is the world ready for another exodus? In recent years some have had to pay a high price for raising awareness and trying to save the environment. The highest price was paid by Iranian Canadian environmentalist and social scientist Dr. Kavous Seyed-Emami, who was arrested by the security forces of the revolutionary guards and lost his life in solitary confinement under suspicious conditions. Nowadays, a number of his colleagues, including Niloufar Bayani, a graduate of the University of McGill, are under the threat of being sentenced to death for crimes they never committed.

Lack of accountability is the main result of a non-democratic system that has given leeway and impunity to members of the government from different political stripes, as well as the revolutionary guards. Cronyism and corruption go hand in hand, especially in the absence of a free and independent media. I should note that it has been brought to my attention that a number of members of firms and organizations that have partnered with the revolutionary guards and the Islamic regime in destroying Iran's water resources are comfortably residing in Canada, enjoying the wealth of living in a water-rich country, while millions of Iranians are suffering from the consequences of their actions.

I hope this committee as well as other responsible bodies would be willing to actively seek information from former partners of the Islamic regime who have migrated to Canada. Many of these wealthy individuals have happily wired millions to Canada but have closed their eyes to crimes against humanity and their environment. I hope they will come to their senses.

Thank you very much.

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

Now we will move to Mr. Ratcliffe, please.

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe (As an Individual): Thank you, Chair. I'm honoured to present to this committee. I'm honoured to be amongst such fellow panellists. I think it's a really important initiative.

I am here to bring these issues a bit closer to home, and to talk about the issue of foreign and dual nationals held prisoner in Iran, including Canadian citizens, and to talk about what the committee and Canada can do for those people.

As the chair said, my name is Richard Ratcliffe. I'm the husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British Iranian charity worker who is currently being held in Evin prison in Iran.

Nazanin's story, as the chair alluded to, started three years ago. She was arrested when on holiday. She was on a family holiday for Iranian new year with our 21-month-old daughter. She was arrested. Our daughter's passport was confiscated. She was put into solitary confinement and sent to an unknown location.

Later on she was accused in the Iranian media of espionage and was convicted for five years on secret charges at a secret trial. At her trial, she was not allowed to speak.

Just before she became eligible for parole, a second court case was opened against her formally blocking her eligibility for parole. This was famously blamed on the words of the then U.K. foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, who had mistakenly said that she was training journalists at the time. That was seized upon by the Iranian judiciary to justify it.

That second court case has been opened and closed periodically. Two days ago it was reopened by the judiciary spokesperson, and we await its verdict.

In reality, Nazanin is being held as diplomatic leverage by the Iranian authorities in a dispute between the U.K. and Iran over some unpaid monies that the U.K. owes Iran over an old arms debt. Most of the strange events in our case, and there have been many, can be related to the dynamics of that dispute. The judiciary spokesperson's words this week make sense because that dispute is back in court again in London later this month.

My point today is not to talk directly about Nazanin's case, but more to point out that Nazanin is not the only one being held. She is one of a number of dual and foreign nationals held in Iran on arbitrary charges. There are over 30 cases since 2014 that are known about. There are obviously others that aren't known because many families choose to keep quiet.

They include a number of current Canadian prisoners. Nazanin used to be a cellmate of a lady called Professor Homa Hoodfar, who has happily been released. Currently, there is a gentleman called Saeed Malekpour who has been in Evin prison for 11 years. As my fellow panellist just mentioned, Kavous Seyed-Emami was held and died in mysterious circumstances in Evin last year. His wife, Maryam Mombeini, is currently being held in Iran and had a national security case opened against her following his death.

Human Rights Watch has documented a systematic targeting of foreign and dual nationals by the Iranian security services, particularly those with links to the outside world, whether they are academics, charity workers, IT workers, or journalists in some cases. They are often framed with opaque national security cases used to justify internal control and then used for external bargaining with the country of their other passport.

A number of people have been picked up while on holiday, some of them very old and some of them young. In Nazanin's case, she was still breastfeeding when she was taken.

Last month a number of the families got together and produced a submission to the UN through the universal periodic review process, which was really their attempt to come together and talk in a common voice.

For me, it was striking just how many common patterns there were in these cases: the secret trials, the refusal of a lawyer, the use of solitary confinement to extract confessions, keeping prisoners incommunicado and away from their families, secluding them from any consular access, the denial of medical treatment as a tool of pressure. There have been quite a few heart attacks, particularly with the older men, and a need for heart surgery; very extensive back problems for many people from sleeping on the floor for many months; almost consistent depression; and often a number of hunger strikes to get access to medical attention. Also, there have been the broadcast of smears on the Iranian state TV; taking private documents and making up stories; an airing of confessions that were extracted while in solitary, often false confessions and often very embittering for the families afterwards; of course, raids on family homes and the taking of family assets; and the use of threats to maintain surveillance.

● (1000)

lt is a nasty business—and it is a business. Two weeks ago foreign minister Zarif was in New York. He was marketing the idea of a prisoner swap. He raised Nazanin's name in relation to it, and then once he had the media's attention, he took the offer away and made it clear that there were different requirements and a different deal was needed for Nazanin.

My agenda here today is to say that there is a protection gap for all of these people that are held in this way. This is a hostage crisis. We do need Canada's help, among other countries, to protect its own citizens and the citizens of other like-minded states and to really enforce some kind of accountability for this kind of hostage-taking.

There is a lack of protection partly because there is a failure to recognize quite what is going on and by treating these individual cases as sort of random and unfair, rather than effectively as an encroaching form of diplomacy.

Also, Iran is special in many ways, but it is worth noting that they're the only country that takes foreign citizens and uses them for leverage. Canada is experiencing that with China currently.

The erosion, it seems to me, of previous norms against state hostage-taking creates more than a protection gap for individual citizens. lt risks allowing a new middle ages of international law, and it is something that should be taken very seriously by all foreign countries and parliaments around the world.

The common frustration for us and the complaint you'll hear from Canadians and the Brits is that not enough is done for our individual families and that our cases can be like flotsam on the seas of bigger political concerns whether they be a nuclear deal or whatever.

1 think for me the issue is one of approach and accountability. That is why this week is very important. I think after three years there needs to be a very clear calling out of hostage-taking and I think Canada can play an important role in this. It has done that in other human rights areas.

There are obviously two specific areas that we are talking about. One is the work at the UN, where Canada plays a very important role with Iran and human rights resolution. It is the leading voice in the universal periodic review process. I think we will be pushing the U. K. to do an Arria-formula meeting at the Security Council. This is not just an issue of human rights. This is also an issue of international peace and security as a norm that's been eroded.

Also—and it's a topic that is part of this seminar—there are the Magnitsky sanctions and the idea of sanctions that are focused on individuals for individual accountability, not some sort of blunt tool of collective punishment, but that are targeted very clearly on the perpetrators of clear abuses.

Speaking personally, rather than on behalf of all the families, I think it's really important to raise the cost of hostage-taking in any way that can be done by Canada, like other like-minded states. In reality, it needs international coordination. We are all for resonance, for effectiveness across jurisdictions. It is often the case in individual cases, and Canada will experience it as well, that you can feel exposed by a lack of solidarity. Actually, it is really important that we are all stronger together.

I think three years have taught me that systematic abuses are rarely solved by euphemisms and not acknowledging what is going on, but through shared values and through accountability for a shared world. The world doesn't have to be this way.

If I have time, I'd like to end with a couple of words from Nazanin, just from what what she told me earlier on, that ordinary people are always at the centre of human rights issues. She wrote a letter on the anniversary of her arrest, stating:

> Do you remember the time that I was proud of my country and used to tell your family and friends about every little detail? Do you remember that I used to insist on going to Iran each year to spend Nowrouz? I will never ask you that again. This isn't what I was trying to teach about my country to you and your family.
>
> The first nine months of last year were spent because of an uncommitted crime, in various solitary cells. Many days during which I believed that I would never see you again. Every day and every second I would submerge more and more in an ocean of doubt, fear, threat, loneliness and more than anything mistrust.
>
> No one would see me scream for my two year old daughter who wasn't in my arms.
>
> But hold my hands, let us finish this chapter. We shall overcome this pain. Today freedom has got one day doser.

Thank you, all, for being here today.

● (1005)

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

Thank you, Mr. Kowsar.

We will now move to questions from members.

We are going to begin with MP Anderson, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll share my time with Mr. Aboultaif.

Thank you to both of you for being here today, especially Mr. Ratcliffe. I don't think we can possibly understand what you've gone through, and there are far too many people in the situation you find yourself in.

I don't know if you can actually tell us this, but do you have contact with your wife, or do the families of prisoners who are held have contact, and if so, what is that contact? Can you talk a little about that?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Yes is the honest answer, and it varies over time.

Broadly, in our experience, when someone is held in solitary, we have no contact for the first couple of months, which is the really live interrogation period. Thereafter, Nazanin was allowed to call me, which would typically be a very short phone call, with an interrogator standing next to her. It was a very sheltered type of sharing of information, but at least we'd know she was alive.

Evin prison, which is the main prison in Iran, is controlled in different parts by different bodies. The interrogation part, controlled by the revolutionary guard, is pretty terrifying, with very controlled communications. After Nazanin was convicted and after our appeal, she was moved to the regular ward, so she's now one of the women's ward prisoners with some very inspiring women.

There's a rota to when you get phone calls. I can't ever call her, but she can call me. All the phone calls are recorded, but it's not quite so....

In most of the cases, certainly the Canadian cases, anyway, they are now in that situation. They're able to have phone calls once or twice a week, normally enough to know what the news is. A 10-minute call is not necessarily great when someone is despairing. You know how someone feels, but you can't really do anything about it.

Some of toughest parts in the whole process are probably Nazanin despairing on the other end of the phone and me not being able to be there. I can be a campaigning husband, so I can take information and use it in the media and use it in part, but to be a real husband and just listen to her, not really.

● (1010)

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

Your wife was working for a charity when she was arrested. The NGOs have had trouble in Iran. I wonder if you have knowledge or if you can talk to us a bit to us this morning about the religious minorities and the pressure they face as well. We've talked about women, about prisoners, about some of the impacts on men, or whatever, but the Baha'í in particular are a group that has been targeted. Do you have any information on that, that you could share with us?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Not facts, but yes, there are obviously quite a few Baha'í women in the cells with Nazanin, some really inspiring and uplifting people. There were a number of Baha'í women released just recently. They were very lovely, calming influences. The ward is a bit more fractious now, since they've left, which is a terrible thing to admit.

Most of the Baha'í women who are in the cells with Nazanin were arrested for being involved in educational activities. It is illegal for Baha'ís to go to Iranian universities. They have set up their own educational activities and some of them have been punished for it. They are remarkably resilient and impressive people.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

I'll turn my time over.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you both for appearing this morning.

Mr. Kowsar, you highlighted an area: the water crisis in the country. I know this is a regime that is very pragmatic outside Iran and very corrupted inside Iran. Now 33,000 villages out of 64,000, or more than half, have been partially or fully evacuated.

The corruption is there on one side, on the economic side, but on the political side, do you believe these villages could belong to certain minorities in Iran that have no rights whatsoever?

For example, I am aware that in the Al-Ahwaz region, there are over 17 million people who don't even have the right to have proper schooling. Would you be able to detail or highlight in regard to those minorities what they're suffering because of this?

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: There have been so many villages in marginal provinces and near the Iranian border with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq that have been evacuated for different reasons. One is water, which I'm mostly concerned about, but also, they are mostly from the Sunni minority as well. Therefore, it's ethnic and also religious over there.

Those minorities have been deprived of their rights and the government has not helped them or has created a situation where they had no options but to leave. That is what I have studied in the last few years.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Would you be able to preface also the state of the Kurds in Iran?

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Many of the Kurds in various provinces, such as Kurdistan, Kermanshah or western Azerbaijan in the northwestern part of the country, are suffering from discrimination. Also, some of their water rights are being stolen from them. It's a fact that since the beginning of the revolution many Kurds have lost their lives to the revolutionary guards. Many activists have been imprisoned by the revolutionary guards and the regime and by the government as well. The ministry of intelligence is a main source of pressure on many Kurds. The economy is going down in many parts of the Kurdish regions, and there's no accountability on the government's side for the situation of Kurds in Iran.

● (1015)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to MP Saini.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Good morning, gentlemen. Thank you very much for coming here.

Mr. Kowsar, I want to start with you. I think you raise a very important question that I don't think many people around the world understand, because we're more focused on the nuclear deal and its ramifications. For me personally, the water crisis is existential for Iran for a number of reasons.

Reason number one is that, if you look back over the last 40 years, the Iranian population has doubled from around 34 million to about 80 million, but 85% of the groundwater has been lost. That creates not only an internal domestic problem but an external problem also, because Iran's water resources are shared with 12 countries. You mentioned Iraq and Afghanistan.

For me, however, there are a couple of reasons for the internal crisis. Right now and even over the last few years, because of the conflict with the west, Iran has wanted to have food security, so they started being more careful with wheat for their food security. That, however, is a very water-intensive industry.

You can also appreciate the fact that Iran sells electricity to other neighbouring countries and that you have a decreased production of hydroelectricity.

You also have issues with the desalination they're now trying to do, which also requires natural gas to pump water up to higher altitudes, so that natural gas consumption is going down.

Not only do you have a water crisis, but you have an internal stabilization crisis too. You have 60% of the population under 25 and you have high rates of unemployment. You also mentioned high rates of homelessness. There's even talk—you mentioned it, and the head of your environmental agency in Iran has said it—that over the next 25 to 30 years there could be up to 50 million people leaving the country. That will have a devastating effect on neighbouring countries.

Why is this situation not being analyzed or focused upon not only externally but internally also?

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: I'm working on a documentary about the water crisis in Iran, but I travelled to Israel last month to study their achievements and experience. If you compare Iran and Israel in the last 70 years, Israel has turned from a yellow country to a green one and Iran has turned from a green country into a yellow country.

The water resources of the people of Iran have gone from, let's say, possibly 13,000 cubic metres per person to around 1,000 cubic metres per person because of bad agriculture and food production policies, and not just because of the sanctions. It started with the ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini. He wanted to confront every country in the world and believed that we can use whatever resources we have to have a bigger population.

Ayatollah Khomeini said a few years ago that the population needs to reach 150 million, while we don't have enough water resources for 50 million. You can see that Iran doesn't need external enemies when it has the regime actually destroying its natural resources.

I want to compare Israel and Iran. Many people in Israel understand the value of water, but still in Iran people in cities, who have enjoyed having very good tap water, do not understand what people in other parts of the country and rural areas are facing. There's a big gap between people in major cities and in rich neighbourhoods and the people in rural areas who have lost their farmlands because of the regime's policies and bad water management.

The sad story is that many revolutionaries who were involved in all these food production policies became very rich and are living in multimillion-dollar mansions, and their children, some of them, are living in Canada, and people are suffering inside the country. There's this big gap.

We are trying to raise awareness. We are trying to inform the public about what they could do, but it's still not enough. We really need the help of nations such as Canada, with a good environmental report card.

● (1020)

Mr. Raj Saini: If we look at what's happening right now, 17% of the population of Iran is tied to agriculture, and as the land is becoming more arid, they're moving towards the cities now, even Tehran. Twenty per cent of the water consumption in the country is simply in Tehran right now.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Right.

Mr. Raj Saini: More importantly, it seems that the regime understands what is going on, because they are now arresting environmental activists. I think there were seven activists arrested from the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, so they understand, because now environmentalists are raising their voices and engineers are raising their voices saying this is not a geopolitical question but a "survival of our country" question.

I still fail to understand, when that is so apparent publicly, so apparent internationally—and domestically, for the regime's own survival in 20 to 30 years.... I know that part of it is corruption, too, because the regime has built dams when they're not necessary. They have taken contracts. I think Mr. Rouhani also diverted a river to his province for political purposes. What I don't understand is why, for their own survival, they are not focused on this, because I'm sure that people recognize that this is the question.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: That's a great question.

I would add that many of them do not believe that the regime will survive for even 10 years. That's the reason I can see for their wiring and funnelling money out of the country. If they believed that they were going to survive, they wouldn't need to use money-laundering tools to send money out of the country. I think many of the Iranian leaders are not even sure of their own futures after the death of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Mr. Raj Saini: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Caron, you have the floor.

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you.

I'll start with Mr. Kowsar.

I wanted to ask that question because I found it contradictory that a regime that wants to remain in power could be unaware of such an immediate danger. You're a geologist and you know about watersheds. I don't know anything about them. The issue is whether the situation can be reversed, through engineering or some other means. We know that part of the situation was caused by the establishment of multiple dams.

If there were ever a tendency to reverse these constructions or to eliminate some of them, could the situation be reversed so as to provide relief to the populations that need water, and could the agriculture be less intensive, for example?

[*English*]

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Thank you for the question.

Absolutely. First of all, we have so many aquifers all around the country that we can use different techniques to manage flood water to recharge them. Based on the numbers, we can actually store more than 12 years of total rain of the country in aquifers. That would be enough not only for this generation but for generations to come. Iran has destroyed its aquifers, but still we have aquifers that we can manage.

That's one thing. Two, we need to use different techniques and experiences from various countries on how to manage water resources and produce food. We have to be sensitive to the water footprint, which we are not.

Also, there are different ways to actually reuse water. We don't reuse water that much in Iran. In Israel they reuse the water: 90% of the waste water is being treated. In Iran, it's very minimal. That could change. The other thing is that the consumption rate by the people has to change. We need to educate the public.

There are so many things hand in hand, but agriculture is the main part. It uses 90% of Iran's water resources. We need to actually evolve our agriculture and go back to many techniques that Iranians were using for centuries, using our very small water resources, but using them wisely.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: They were optimizing the available resources.

[*English*]

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: I'll ask my other question. We know that a large part of the electricity produced is exported.

Was the intensive construction of these new dams primarily for export purposes, or did the dams meet a domestic need?

● (1025)

[*English*]

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: It's mostly for internal needs. A very small amount of the electricity is produced through hydroelectricity, through the dams. We mostly use thermal techniques to produce electricity. The minister of energy uses the excuse of creating clean energy, but we could have used solar panels or we could have use wind energy to produce electricity, and the regime is not investing in those two sectors.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you, Mr. Kowsar.

Mr. Ratcliffe, as a husband and father of young children, I have a lot of trouble wrapping my mind around or starting to grasp what you may be going through right now.

When your spouse was arrested, in 2016 I believe, you initially said that the issue was a dispute between Great Britain and Iran and that she became a pawn in the game.

We've just recently seen Iran begin to change its demands. There's talk of a potential prisoner swap, which Iran hadn't previously considered. Of course, we know that both Great Britain and Canada don't approve of the prisoner swap.

Why do you think the demand has changed? If the demand was more economical and Iran was asking for some payments, why have we ended up with another type of demand?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Thank you. It's a good question.

My sense of it is that they're not actually asking for something new. We were very surprised by the prisoner swap offer. The prisoner swap offer was made in the States and was specifically to an American audience, invoking Nazanin's name, but the prisoner on the other side was held by the States, effectively. It was then clarified that it was an offer for the U.S.

My reading of all of it is that it was in the end a way of getting American attention, and the president's attention specifically, to say, "Listen, we know that you are someone who likes to bring home Americans. We have some Americans and we're willing to do a deal. Don't send that aircraft carrier." In layman's terms, that's what I think was going on.

What the foreign ministry spokesperson in Iran signalled afterwards was that they were still interested in other situations. As I said, Nazanin's second court case was reopened two days ago to signal that they're dissatisfied with something. You are absolutely right that U.K. policy is not to do prisoner swaps and not to endanger its citizens in that way. That would be true for many countries. One of the two-tier conversations we have with the British foreign office is to say, "There's an industry here that you need to find a way to challenge and to stop, and to stop for the long term. Then, there are also real families and real people that you need to find a way to bring home."

You have to do both. I'm not saying it's an easy job, but you have to do both. It's not okay to just wait and pretend it's not happening, which in hard-nosed policy terms would make sense. You have to call out the Iranian regime and challenge them that it is not okay to use people as leverage.

In fairness to the current foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, that's what he's been doing, and he's been quite clear. He was very strong and critical of foreign minister Zarif's offer. We'll see how things move.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you, Mr. Ratcliffe.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Wrzesnewskyj, please.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen.

It's clear that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard is a state-sponsored terrorist organization, as has been recognized by our House of Commons, and that the Iranian theocracy is not only a sponsor of terror but as we've heard from previous testimony, also a corrupt, religious, oligarchic state.

Mr. Ratcliffe, you talked about sanctions and used the phrase that we shouldn't use the "blunt tool" of collective punishment. It was something referenced earlier as well. You don't want to punish the very people who are suffering under oppression. You want targeted sanctions.

One of the legacies of the 42nd Parliament will be the passage of Magnitsky legislation, which specifically targets gross human rights abusers and corruption.

Your wife went through, as you referenced, a secret trial. It's clear, though, that the regime, in its tools of oppression, uses a whole judicial system—police, prosecutors, judges, jailers, torturers—and although some of it is secret, I'm sure that the names of many of those individuals are known. In previous testimony, Mr. Saeed Mortazavi was referred to as a particularly notoriously well-known individual.

Are you aware of an organization that compiles lists of those individuals who are engaged in that judicial process of terror and domestic oppression?

● (1030)

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Yes is the short answer. The Raoul Wallenberg Centre has produced a report with a list of names. I think some of those names are directly connected to Nazanin's case and the cases of others. For some of the names, I can't say hand on heart that they're directly connected to Nazanin's case.

My sense is that I would echo exactly what you said. I think the Magnitsky sanctions are very important, because they are so directly linked to clear abuses. There's a whole evidencing process to go through, making sure it's robust and fair. I'm not sure we've done it. I would want to say, "Okay, that name and that name and that name", but I think it's a really important tool.

I would echo absolutely that the judicial process seems to be an extension of the security services. The TV seems to be an extension of the security services. Our court process wasn't fair. It wasn't trying to be fair. It was trying to be very clearly punishing. They must have filmed the TV broadcast of Nazanin's arrest at the airport, where they film everyone's arrest. They're really just showing that they're scary. Everyone watching who goes to that airport knows that they could be taken as well. It wasn't actually aimed at proving her guilt or anything.

The only thing I would say is that in my experience you never get to see the most powerful people. The decision-makers are different from the figures who are put up. For instance, in our case Nazanin was tried by a judge called Judge Salavati. He's quite a famous judge and has done many of the cases of dual nationals and many of the other important cases. It was clear he was waiting for orders before he passed his verdict. It's not clear who gave him the orders.

I think it's absolutely imperative to focus the Magnitsky sanctions on those who are directly culpable. To be clear, it's not some sort of grand conspiracy against Iran; it is challenging individual abuse. That said, there will be a detective process to work out who is really making the decisions, because as others have said, there is a sort of arm's-length dynamic to the Iranian state whereby it will allow others to go and rebuild a life elsewhere.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you.

Mr. Ratcliffe, perhaps I could ask you—and perhaps, Chair, through you, a previous witness, Ms. Ebadi, who was a judge previously in Iran and may have particular knowledge as well—whether there could be an undertaking to provide this committee with lists of those individuals who have been identified, for the public record of the committee and for consideration of recommending targeted Magnitsky sanctions against those individuals.

Thank you.

The Chair: MP Baylis, please.

Mr. Frank Baylis (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Mr. Ratcliffe, that's a very moving story. I'm somewhat at a loss for words to say in response to it.

You mentioned that Boris Johnson made it worse. Can you explain that?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: You're getting me into political hot water here. It would have been on the televisions around the world, so you may be partly familiar with the story.

In short, the then foreign secretary came before the U.K. foreign affairs committee in the House of Commons and gave evidence on Iran. Among other things he was asked a question about Nazanin, to which he responded inaccurately, defending and saying that it's unfair that she's been in prison, because as far as he was aware, she was just training journalists. She wasn't. She was on holiday. It was picked up by the Iranian judiciary and announced as a justification: "This is why we've opened a second court case against her. Clearly, the foreign secretary has confirmed that she's guilty."

Then it was on the Iranian state TV, and it was run day after day, and because he had got it wrong, because there was the potential of a second court case and it was going to add an extra sentence, it became a big, live issue in British domestic politics. I suddenly, for a brief period, became a very important person, so journalists were calling me the whole time and camping outside our front door to find out what was going on.

In reality, of course, they were playing a cynical game and were using his words to signal displeasure, because, as I said, there was this other issue running alongside.

It clearly would have been better if he had spoken better. We will see with the second court case whether it does get blamed in the courtroom.

● (1035)

Mr. Frank Baylis: It highlights the challenges, that he's trying to speak out, and.... I'm not going to get into the politics of what he was trying to do; I assume he was trying to help, but he misstepped, or something like that.

I guess it shows the challenges. We would be in the same boat. Let's say that we took a picture with you and said something negative against the regime. That might actually make things worse. Would it?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: It's a fair question that all public figures have to think through. I think that in a context in which I just talked about, Magnitsky sanctions, you're probably quite safe in terms of where the resentment is going to come.

He took a lot of political flack domestically. My sense, in all honesty.... I don't think that was the engine driving things. He didn't make it worse with his words. It played through, and they were used, and it would have been prudent, I think, for the foreign office to have been a lot more strident, saying, "Listen, that's just nonsense; back off", whereas they rather accommodated it.

If the question is, should we speak out on behalf of Canadian citizens abroad—

Mr. Frank Baylis: You have the same challenge yourself. I assume you want to speak. You've had to make decisions. Do you speak out loud and clear, or do you try to play along? What answer have you come to?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Across the piece of all the different families, we take different views. I'm definitely at the loud and clear end of things. There are a couple of things I perhaps wouldn't do, but broadly I think the truth is on our side and that we should be straightforward.

There are some families who keep quiet completely—

Mr. Frank Baylis: —because they're hoping that by keeping quiet it might—

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: —and they're being told that by the Iranian authorities, and sometimes they're being told that by their own foreign service, saying that this is a delicate issue and let's just go—

Mr. Frank Baylis: So even among yourselves, you're all challenged to try to find the right way.

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Yes, we're all muddling our way through.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Could I ask how many of you there are?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: In terms of those who were part of this UN submission—that's active families co-operating—there are about 15.

Not all of them were on the record there. There are some who are named authors, and some who are cases, and then there are some who were involved but wouldn't want to have it acknowledged. There are probably a number of others also who didn't want to be.

Mr. Frank Baylis: So there are 15 of you on record.

What countries are they from?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: The majority would be from the States, from the U.K., a couple from Canada, and from Europe—those would be from Austria, Sweden and the Netherlands—and then a couple of others.

Mr. Frank Baylis: There are actually, then, quite a few countries impacted by this.

Has there been any coordinated effort whereby the countries that are impacted got together and said that they were going to lever their coordinated efforts against...?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: I think that's a really important thing to happen. There is an element of divide and rule, if I'm honest, in the way Iran has played it through bilateral deals.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Could you repeat that?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Divide and rule, I mean in the way Iran has played it through individual bilateral deals, in secret.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Yes.

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: There is a sensitivity to this. Let us say you're the British foreign office. You have some cases like us who want to be public and you have some cases that want to be private, and where you position yourself is tricky. I think, though, that those of us who are public are certainly calling for international coordination.

Mr. Frank Baylis: You said you want to raise the cost of their doing this. They're doing it with impunity right now in saying, "Do whatever you want; you can't hurt us."

If these countries were to get together and say they were going to raise the cost, as you said, how would they be able to collectively raise the cost to say, "You're going to stop this"?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Well, I would have thought that something like the Magnitsky sanctions, coordinated, with the same sanctions—

Mr. Frank Baylis: If we were to take the Magnitsky sanctions and say that we should coordinate this, we should all act in parallel —

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Yes.

Mr. Frank Baylis: —and even maybe get some other countries from which they haven't yet kidnapped people and get them to join in on this....

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: For sure I think that would be very helpful. I think also that the UN, as a vehicle for the universal periodic review process, which is where Iran is up in front of the UN and has to justify its human rights record, that can be coordinated, with different countries raising the same points, specifically targeting on three or four issues, one of which could be—

● (1040)

Mr. Frank Baylis: As you know, they killed a Canadian citizen in cold blood. That was brought up by the—

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: Yes, and they did not let his wife leave the country.

I think it's of its time. Quiet bilateral diplomacy hasn't worked in many cases, and clearly standing up and saying that this is just a normal.... Of course there are differences between different countries, but it's a norm of a state, though, that you do not hold each other's citizens as leverage. It just doesn't work.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Anderson, please.

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

Thank you, gentlemen, again.

It's such a divided situation with so many potential solutions here that don't seem to be working very well. We have U.S. sanctions being cranked up, the EU basically trying to avoid the application of them, and the foreign affairs minister travelling to Turkey and Syria. I'm interested in hearing what you think the role of Turkey will be in the future.

Then, specifically, there is a pipeline agreement from Iran to Pakistan that has been delayed for some time. It seems that the Pakistani government has made a new commitment to it. I'm interested in how, from an environmental perspective, you see that, and whether you think it's going to go ahead or is just rhetoric in the face of the sanctions that have now been imposed.

Then, wrapped up in all of that, of course, is this whole atmosphere of corruption that seems to permeate everything as well.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: That's right.

Basically, if the IRGC gains money from all these contracts, things will happen, will go forward. That's what I can say based on my experience following the activities of IRGC.

On the other hand, I should point out that Turkey has had a negative environmental impact on the whole region because of blocking the Tigris and Euphrates, actually the tributaries and all the rivers that have to pass through Syria and Iraq and at the end reach a wetland between Iran and Iraq in the south. Because of the work of Turkey, water is not reaching properly to that wetland, and it has caused sandstorms and a lot of problems because it has dried up. I wanted to add this, to have it on the record, about the negative impact of Turkey on the whole region.

At the end of the day, I think we're talking about money. If the Erdogan administration is sure about any interests and money received from different parties that would help its deep pockets, I think they will go forward with it.

Mr. David Anderson: Does the Iranian government have the money still to help Turkey as well as some of the other places that they're spending it?

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: A lot of money has been funnelled to Turkey in the last 10 years, and some people have been arrested by the U.S. in that regard. The international community could possibly monitor things and see how it has gone through to block other monetary actions and transactions between the two regimes.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Ratcliffe, did you have anything to add?

Mr. Richard Ratcliffe: I'm out of my depth in this.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank all four of our witnesses, Dr. Ebadi, Ms. Alinejad, Mr. Kowsar and Mr. Ratcliffe.

If there's one common thread here today, it's the issue of accountability: for the women who suffer under the repressive regime and are forced to wear compulsory hijab; for the Iranian leaders who thrive and profit from corruption with impunity, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and other senior officials and judges; for the prisoners who suffer, like Nazanin, Maryam Mombeini and so many others; for the dual nationals, religious leaders, journalists, academics, environmentalists; for all the people this regime has made to suffer; for the terror that Iran exports around the world, threatening millions of people not just in the Middle East but well beyond.

In Canada, we must continue to push for accountability and an end to this impunity, raising our voice as we do every year as a leader on the resolution on Iranian human rights and repression adopted by the United Nations, but also using the legal and legislative tools at our disposal: the Justice for Victims of Terrorism Act, Magnitsky sanctions, as we heard here today; and, of course, the issue that has been raised several times, the listing of the full Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist entity in Canada.

These are the tools at our disposal. It's imperative, as we've heard from all of our witnesses, that Canada continue to hold this Iranian regime to account.

I want to point out that there will be two additional meetings happening in the Subcommittee on International Human Rights next week and also that we're working with our partners at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre. There will be a panel happening there this afternoon.

Every year, in the Canadian Parliament, Iran Accountability Week grows, because it's a sad necessity—a sad necessity that we have to continue to work to ensure that this regime is held to account.

I want to thank our witnesses and all my colleagues on the committee.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.