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● (0845)

[*English*]

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the study of the situation in eastern Europe and central Asia 25 years after the end of the Cold War, I'd like to welcome our witness, joining us via video conference today in Washington, Paul Stronski, who is a senior fellow for the Russia and Eurasia program.

Welcome. We're glad to have you here. You are our only witness in this hour, so we will get you to present your testimony over the next 10 minutes or so, and then we'll go back and forth among the members and ask questions and have a chance to follow up.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Paul Stronski (Senior Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace): Thank you very much.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you to speak about Russia, eastern Europe, and central Asia.

There are many questions that were posed to me, and I obviously cannot deal with them all in about 10 minutes, so I'm going to focus most of my comments on Russia, on Russia's impact on Europe and transatlantic security, and on central Asia, which are my three areas of expertise. I'm happy to take questions on any other topic, though, as well.

One thing I wanted to start by saying is that the west's relationship with Russia is at the lowest point it's been since the 1980s. The fault lines between Russia and the transatlantic community reflect major differences in interests and values, and this is not just about Ukraine. The relationship is cyclical, and there is no quick fix to the problems we face. Many western leaders, most notably former U.S. presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, tried to reset relations with Russia, and each saw the relationship end up in much worse shape than when they started. I certainly hope that President Trump now in the United States will come to realize that pretty soon.

When you look at Canadian-Russian relations, you see they've had their ups and their deep downs, as have U.K. and Russian relations, and I think you can apply that to pretty much any western state and notice that as well. But Russia's annexation of Crimea and its aggression in eastern Ukraine have upended the post-Cold War security landscape. Having lost much of its soft power in the region, Russia has been trying to carve out a sphere of influence in Eurasia using military force when it needs to, economic pressure when it can, as well as new hybrid tools.

Russia also wants to push back at western values and influences in Russia and in the former Soviet space, but it doesn't just want to do that. It wants to discredit western democratic political systems, and we saw a lot of this with what went on in the United States and what is going on in Europe now.

This is in part because the Kremlin and many other autocratic leaders in central Asia and elsewhere in the region see western democracy promotion and rule of law as security threats to their regimes. Russia today is no longer aspiring to be part of the west, as it did for the first 20 or so years after the collapse of the USSR, but it's seeking to rewrite the basic principles of international order and push back at a global system that has been dominated by the west for the last 25 years.

Russian meddling in the U.S. election has helped upend the U.S. political system, and it raises a lot of questions about Washington's commitment to NATO, to eastern Europe, and to Eurasia. We see Russian propaganda, information operations, and Cold War-style subversion going on in Europe as many elections approach. They are magnifying a dangerous wave of populism that is threatening European unity. It could help upend other European political systems, and this has brought repercussions for eastern Europe and countries of the former Soviet space.

This poses deep challenges to Canada and to its friends and allies at a time when NATO and the European Union are all much less united than ever before. This is in part due to the Trump administration's uncertain commitment to Europe and NATO but also because of Brexit and the EU's own internal troubles. As well, this is occurring at a time when there's a lot of social and economic unease in the former Soviet space.

Now, regarding central Asia, there are two main issues that I think are worth focusing on that impact its foreign and security policy. The first is to just underscore that this has been a region that has been very poorly governed, with populations that have been misserved by their leaders since the collapse of the USSR. Many of the region's future problems, as with the current problems, are related as much to the challenges posed by the governments and the political elites in these countries as they are to external threats, whether that be Russia or international terrorism.

Central Asia is in a process of finally moving from its first-generation post-Soviet leaders to the next generation, and of all the autocrats, they've all been there at least 10 years and some have been there more than 25 years. As this transition occurs, the question of political stability remains a key one, and one that looms over the region.

● (0850)

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which are the region's most powerful, wealthiest, and most populated countries, the transition is going to be key to overall regional stability. That process has begun actually in Uzbekistan with the death of President Karimov last fall. It is going unexpectedly smoothly, which is very good. But in Kazakhstan, which is the wealthiest of all of the central Asian countries, Nazarbayev is very old, and his successor is still not known. They seem to be in a process of trying to figure that out right now.

One of the things that I need to bring this back to is the fact that when the west and the U.S. and Russia have had the most difficult times in their relationship over the last 25 years, it generally has occurred when there have been leadership changes in other former Soviet states. The possibility for leadership change over the next five, 10, even one year in central Asia and in the south Caucasus, with these aging autocrats.... We also have elections planned in semi-democratic Kyrgyzstan as well as Armenia. The possibility for a leadership change is very high, and also the possibility for misunderstanding.

The Kremlin views any sort of popular socio-economic discontent and popular revolts not as something from the bottom up, as we in the west do, but as something that is orchestrated by outside powers. That is what led to a lot of the confrontation between Russia and the west over the Maidan in Ukraine, over the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the like. I think the possibility of some sort of misunderstanding between east and west is very high coming in the future.

Also, this leadership change is going to occur at a time of tremendous socio-economic difficulty for the region. Central Asia's main exports are all natural resources, things like oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, and other minerals, all of which are at historic low prices. Remittances from Russia are down, and high levels of corruption in the region are hurting the investor climate. We have a bad economic environment for the entire region, and the governments of central Asia are slashing budgets, devaluating their currency, leading to high inflation and growing poverty. This is pushing some people much below the poverty level.

The timing of this could not be any worse. We have a regional population boom. Half of the population of Uzbekistan now was born after the Soviet Union collapsed. These people need to find employment, they need health care, they need basic poverty alleviation, and this is a time when the governments have very little money to do that with.

Islamic extremism is another potential problem. It's not one right now, but it could be one in the future. The governments of central Asia and Russia all exaggerate the problem in order to justify authoritarian rule, but this exaggeration often muddies the waters about the true extent of whether this is a problem or will become one. What we do know is that central Asia has, for a long time, been a difficult recruiting ground for extremists due to the highly authoritarian nature of the region and the legacies of Soviet secularization. As I said, we have a population where about half of it was born after the Soviet Union collapsed. We don't have much public debate in the region about extremism, its causes, and its ties to socio-economic inequality, so it's really unsure how much of a problem this could be in the future.

We also know that the region has highly porous borders, a problem given that northern Afghanistan has become very unstable. There are reports of central Asian foreign fighters in Syria, who could easily move back. It's an issue that needs to be watched.

Finally, all of this is occurring in central Asia at a time when the west is disengaging from the region after drawing down from Afghanistan. For most western countries, central Asia is not a priority right now.

But that's not the case for China, which has become the major investor, focusing on infrastructure, mining, transportation, and telecommunications. China has surpassed Russia and the European Union as the main investor in the region. We see Russia, the former colonial power, still trying to use whatever soft power and residual economic influence it has. They're doing that through the Eurasian Economic Union, through bilateral arrangements and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. But the Ukraine conflict and Russia's heavy-handed approach to Ukraine has really unnerved many of the central Asian states. It makes them very nervous about what could come their way from Moscow, and they are keen to keep the west engaged in the region.

This is also occurring at a time when Iran is interested in expanding its influence and trade after the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal.

● (0855)

We have a very changing socio-economic and political environment in the region, and this is occurring at a time when there is a great geopolitical shift happening around it. I think it is a very interesting time and an important time to keep engaged on central Asia and Eurasia as a whole.

Thank you very much, and I'd be happy to take any of your questions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much, Mr. Stronski.

We are going to start with the opposition.

Mr. Kent, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Stronski, for being with us today.

I'll keep my preamble short because I have a number of questions I'd like to put forward.

First of all, I'd like your impression of the recent surge in the Russian-backed war in eastern Ukraine, whether it may be, as some said, a simple test of President Trump and the new administration, or it may signal a new attempt to carve out a greater territory beyond the current line of contact. What's your read?

Mr. Paul Stronski: I don't see it right now as trying to carve out new territory in eastern Ukraine. I don't see that the Russians need to do that. They pretty much have what they need. Right now they can keep Ukraine destabilized. They can keep the Ukrainian government disorganized and they have their hold over Ukraine the way it is. I don't think they really need to have more territory, but I do think it is a test of the U.S. administration. I also think it's a test of Europe and the west in general, where we have disagreements between various different states over what sort of response the west should have to this uptick in violence. It is a test of not just the United States, not just President Trump, but of all European and NATO unity at a time of tremendous unease in the west.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you very much.

What would you advise to resolve this new dimension, this new problem arising from the blockade of coal and other material from eastern Ukraine to where it's needed in the west? It's a new economic crisis.

Mr. Paul Stronski: It is going to become a huge problem. It already is, and it does threaten the energy security of Ukraine as a whole.

I think the west needs to continue to help support Ukraine, particularly in its energy security. We also need to have very tough conversations with the Russians as well. There is some international assistance that needs to be given to Ukraine to help it deal with this problem. A strong and very robust diplomacy needs to be done at the same time.

Hon. Peter Kent: To your remarks in the paper that you co-authored “Illusions versus Reality: Twenty-Five Years of U.S. Policy Towards Russia”, you and your co-authors stressed that the United States and allies will defend the norms that underpin European security and that the United States will continue its strong support for Ukraine.

In Canada this week, as you may know, the government announced the extension of Operation Unifier but did not respond to Ukraine's requests and recent appeals for an expansion of the training as well as defensive lethal weapons, anti-tank, and so forth.

Again, what are your thoughts? From one side, we have heard that adding new defensive weaponry will escalate the conflict. On the other hand, appeasement and turning aside will merely demoralize the domestic population and the army.

● (0900)

Mr. Paul Stronski: It's a very tough balance because I think not doing anything is demoralizing to the Ukrainian people and Ukrainian military, and both of them are trying to reform their government, really make Ukraine work, and hold their government accountable.

Having worked in government in the United States, one of the concerns that I have is, despite what we say rhetorically, the west traditionally has not been willing to back up its rhetorical support anymore. My fear is that this could easily become a proxy war and that, by giving these weapons, we could inflame the conflict more than it is without any real willingness to do anything else to try to resolve that.

It's a very tough dilemma. There's no easy answer. I think the reality is that Russia is always going to care more about Ukraine than any western government will, and we just need to be very cautious knowing that and knowing the consequences of providing that sort of assistance any time we do it.

Hon. Peter Kent: I have one final quick question.

We've also been told, on the committee's recent travels in eastern Europe and from some experts here, that despite Russia's bellicose talk and activities in Syria and Ukraine, in fact Russia is much weaker, both militarily and economically, than further possible adventures might allow.

What are your comments?

Mr. Paul Stronski: I would agree with that. I think the Russian economy is not in great shape. I don't think it's ready to collapse anytime soon, but it is hurting. We shouldn't expect it to collapse, and we shouldn't think that sanctions are going to cause it to collapse.

I think the political situation, and the entire structure of how that system works, is very brittle. The government knows it, and it is very careful in how it creates a very strong propaganda narrative for its own people, at the same time as it has become highly authoritarian. I think it knows that the system is not as strong as it was before. They know that there are people who question now, but they're keeping it very clear that questioning can only go so far.

I think we shouldn't expect the country to fall apart anytime soon, but we should always be expecting.... This place has a very brittle political, social, and economic system. It has the ability to absorb shocks, and I think it will, but the Russian people know very little about the setbacks that the government has had in Ukraine and Syria, or about the casualties the Russian government and military have had.

Most of the interactions the senior leadership in Russia has are very highly scripted. They're not like the ones in a western system, where a senior leader will have to go out and meet the population. That very rarely happens in an unscripted environment, and I think their government is very careful not to allow that to happen.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Kent.

We're going to move over to Mr. McKay, for six minutes.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, sir, for your testimony.

I want to go back to the role that China is playing and the emerging role, if you will, of China in this particular area.

It's trite but true that power abhors a vacuum. For all the huffing and puffing by the Russians, they are, in some respects, masking a serious economic and demographic decline. There is actual population shrinkage. That makes them dangerous, but it also makes them vulnerable. The Chinese, on the other hand, are exactly the opposite. They are a growing economic power and they are starting to assert their influence.

I just want you to comment on two areas. First, do you see a larger game plan on the part of the Chinese government in that particular area, aside from simply economic influence?

Second, the Chinese government has been in continuous conflict with the Uighurs, a Muslim group of people in the west of China, which I assume receives some comfort from some of the central Asian republics as well. I wonder whether you could offer any observations with respect to those two things: the underlying agenda of the Chinese government and its relationship with Islamic people in its own country, and also with those in central Asian republics.

● (0905)

Mr. Paul Stronski: I think your question about the Uighurs in Xinjiang is very relevant for what China's overall ambitions are for the region. I actually was in Beijing and Shanghai about two weeks ago and had discussions there about central Asia with various government and private sector representatives.

There are two aspects to the Chinese involvement in central Asia. The most important one is to make sure that central Asia remains stable. They are very concerned about instability in Afghanistan, and instability in Afghanistan bubbling up into central Asia, and then from there having a very unstable border right next to its Uighur population. A lot of their investment and their efforts to promote economic development in the region is very much with a goal to make this region more stable and to provide economic opportunity to the region.

The problem is very tied to their domestic issues. The problem is the way the Chinese do this. They generally work through political and economic elites, and there's a high level of corruption in the way in which they invest in the region. They also very often bring Chinese labourers in to do their various projects. This idea that you can create stability, create greater economic prosperity when you are doing it in the typical way that they've done it in Africa and other places, I think is misguided. I do not think that it really is.... The way that the Chinese are investing, I think, fuels some of the corruption problems that the region has, and it really isn't trickling down to the average people. You can see this. There was a protest last year in Kazakhstan and it was over Chinese influence and fear that China was going to acquire land in Kazakhstan.

I do, however, think that Chinese influence in the region is not all that bad. The region wants as many different international power players as they can get. Many of the countries of the region are very nervous about the possibility of some sort of future Russian aggression, and they are actively seeking large, wealthy states to be involved. That includes China. We're seeing Kazakstan, and if you look at the Caucasus, Georgia, reaching out to the Gulf states. They view this as also a way to enhance their security by just raising the costs to Russia of any sort of intervention like the one they've seen in Ukraine.

I think that China is not doing it out of its own desire to help the area of central Asia. It's doing it to help keep its own country stable. I think it does have some positive impacts in that it does provide an extra layer of assurance to the central Asian governments that at least one larger power is involved.

● (0910)

Hon. John McKay: You used the word “misguided” with respect to Chinese labourers. Could you expand that concept?

I know they like to bring them in by the boatload. They do all the work and then leave. What resentments is that fuelling?

Mr. Paul Stronski: Even in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan over the years there have been some protests and socio-economic grievances aired—even in a place like Turkmenistan, which is a totalitarian state—about the fact that Chinese labourers are getting better jobs and Chinese labourers are getting better money. The local labourers are having delays in when they're being paid. Very often when these local people complain they lose their jobs. That's one part of the resentment.

These states reacquired their sovereignty 25 years ago. With so much investment coming in, there was a very big concern over the sale of land. Land was confiscated from the Kazakhs and from the Uzbeks during the Soviet era. A lot of this land has be given back to the sovereign states, privatized. There is concern about these countries “losing” or selling out their natural resources, their land, and the like. Some of this fuels some of the nationalist tendencies, some of the populous tendencies we've seen elsewhere. It's just playing out a little differently here.

Another reason that China is involved is that they're trying to also export their excess infrastructure industries and excess labour. They have huge populations in China that need to be employed, and this is one way they can do it. They've already built up China as much...so they're now doing this outside, and it's pretty close. It's right next door. It's not as difficult to get there as it is to get to Africa or Latin America.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thanks, Mr. McKay.

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

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Stronski, thank you for your very interesting presentation.

You spoke about Russia's efforts to discredit democratic systems and the rule of law. On that note, during another presentation, the committee learned of the situation related to these issues in Central Asia, a region where things aren't very rosy.

We also know that Ukraine is facing many challenges, in particular when it comes to corruption.

Can you elaborate on this?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Stronski: Yes, I would agree.

Much of the political systems of these countries is highly tied up with schemes of corruption. I think there's a very good article in this week's *New Yorker* about corruption in Azerbaijan. It's tied to the Trump administration and people tied to President Trump. It gives a very good insight into how closely governance and economic power are linked in this era, how in the early post-Soviet era they were very much courting privatization, and how the legal system is very often used for economic ends, not as a fair court system. These are huge problems.

There is really only one country of the former Soviet Union besides the Baltic states that has really started to address the corruption problem, and that's Georgia. It has gone a long way. Everything from getting health care to dealing with the traffic police, depending on what country you're in, is all tied to bribes. Georgia is the sole exception to that. There are other places that have started, but have just not been as successful.

Ukraine right now is struggling, and it's struggling deeply. I sadly think that it is not making this transition very easily. The corruption schemes, the power of the oligarchs, and the economic power of the president himself are very troubling, and it's very troubling for the ability of Ukraine to get beyond....

Georgia was successful in one way. Because it was a very small country, it is a much more ethnically unified country. For all the talk about Saakashvili, the former president of Georgia, being democratic, though he was democratic and built the transition, he could also at times rule with an iron thumb. He pushed some of these reforms through with an iron thumb, and I think that in bigger, more complicated societies that is much more difficult to do.

I think many of these countries are unnerved about the democracy and rule of law systems that western governments give, and the transparency and journalist assistance that western governments give, because this threatens to open up a can of worms and expose how the political system is closely tied with corrupt schemes. I think that is one reason they view any sort of popular movement, whether or not it's assisted by the west—which it rarely is—as a threat to their security.

This is what makes it so difficult to push the human rights, rule of law reforms and to do that type of assistance. There are very brave people in the population doing that, but the audience of people who are really willing to implement it is very small, and they face an uphill battle, even in countries that have made a direct decision to turn to the west, like Ukraine has.

I think this is something that we're going to struggle with. I'm happy to take any other questions if you have any follow-up.

● (0915)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I have another question.

You mentioned that, in the Central Asian countries, the events in Ukraine were described as Russian aggression. According to other experts who have appeared before us, this fear of aggression is often somewhat exaggerated in the Baltic countries to ensure internal cohesion.

How legitimate is this fear of Russian aggression in the Central Asian countries? Is there any real possibility of Russian aggression?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Stronski: I think it depends on the country. I would agree with the assessment that in the Baltics the fear of aggression is exaggerated. It does help to unify the countries and it does help—or tries—to unify NATO. At least for now, NATO remains a very strong organization. As long as NATO still remains strong and still shows its support for the far eastern flank of NATO, I think the Russians will realize that NATO membership does mean something. I think the Baltic states and Poland are in much better shape than some of the other former Soviet states.

On the plus side for other states in the former Soviet Union, as one of the previous members said, Russia is stretched thin militarily. It is in Ukraine and it is in Syria, so its ability to do something again is questionable, but I think that in certain places there is a greater threat. Small countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are pretty much are in Russia's pocket economically, so I don't see any huge switch. The transition in Uzbekistan so far has been going very smoothly, so I don't see that as a huge place....

The one place I'm a little concerned about is Kazakhstan. It shares a very long border with Russia. It does have a Russian-speaking population in the north. This is a country that has a very close alliance with Russia, and it's one that's very nervous. The people are nervous. When you go there, you hear concerns about the way in which the country is presented in the Russian media. If you watch Russian media, you can see that they talk about the threat, about the possibility of extremism coming right up to the Russian border. I'm not sure they would replicate the situation the same way that they did in Ukraine to defend Russian interests, but Kazakhstan also has uranium banks. It has a whole bunch of things that you want to make sure never get into the hands of terrorists.

I think that if there's ever an indication that Kazakhstan might look unstable, or if it's pivoting too close to the west, that's a time when Russia might do something and just to go in. I'm very impressed with mid-level Kazak government officials. Kazakhstan has invested a lot of money in sending its government officials for education to places such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, the United States, and the U.K. When you meet these people, you find that they might be at the deputy minister level, and they really kind of “get it” the way that we would get it.

I think Russia is probably very terrified that one of these people would gain a lot of power. Kazakhstan, given the long border and given the Russian media narrative that it is possibly a place that could be unstable, I think is a place to be concerned about as well.

● (0920)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much. That's all the time we have for that question.

We're going to move over to Mr. Saini.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Good morning, Mr. Stronski.

My question is geopolitical in nature. If we look at the three major influences in that part of the world, central Asia, we're talking about Russia, China, and the United States. Right now, there's some talk that there is going to be a grand bargain between the United States and Russia, and one of the elements of that grand bargain will be that Russia will maintain its "near abroad" or spheres of influence.

You mentioned this in your opening remarks. If we look at Turkmenistan, which has adopted a position of permanent neutrality, and if we look at Kyrgyzstan, we see both countries have now tilted towards China, for different reasons. Turkmenistan has done so because, as you mentioned, if you look at the remittances, you see that they have now dropped by half. One third of their GDP depends on remittances from Russia, so obviously China now is playing a bigger part. As you know, Turkmenistan was a hermit kingdom for many years, and now China has moved in to develop some of their natural gas fields.

To me, if the west recuses itself from that area, the two main players are going to be China and Russia. Russia, outside of military influence, has very limited influence. If China has a larger influence, especially with their one belt, one road initiative, will there ever be a flashpoint? Going forward, there has to be some point at which China and Russia may have a conflict. If Russia can offer only a military sort of mechanism, and if China is offering an economic mechanism, somewhere those worlds are going to collide.

Where and how do you see that falling out in the future?

Mr. Paul Stronski: I think that's the big question.

When you look at the U.S. policy in the region in the 1990s and 2000s it was all about trying to unleash the energy resources and get them flowing toward Europe [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): We've lost you for one second. We have to get our audio back.

Keep talking but we're still waiting to get your audio. We can see you but we just can't hear you.

There we go. You're back.

Mr. Paul Stronski: While our policies from the 1990s were to get all the central Asian energy resources flowing toward the west, China did it much more efficiently. All of Turkmenistan's and much of Uzbekistan's gas is flowing to China.

I do think there are frictions already in the relationship. When you speak to senior officials there is friction over whether things are going to be done bilaterally between the states of central Asia and China, or whether everything is supposed to go the way Russia wants through the Eurasian Union. This is a region where the leaders are very good at playing various global powers off one another. They will tell Russia, yes, we will do it through the Eurasian Union but instead they will go ahead and cut deals directly with the Chinese. I think this is building up Russian resentment. The problem is that the two countries right now almost have a condominium relationship whereby China is becoming the economic player and Russia is continuing its security. So far that seems to be working but the long-term question is whether China will feel a need to develop its own security infrastructure.

● (0925)

I think they might because when we had the problems in Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz government asked the CSTO to come in to help put down the ethnic violence in 2010, Russia stood on the sidelines.

The biggest question and the concern China has is whether Russia is the reliable security partner. If it isn't, is China going to do something about that? If China ever takes that role of trying to have a greater security role in the region that's when you have the friction between the two countries. China invests billions and billions of dollars so they'll need to protect that at some point.

Mr. Raj Saini: I want to follow up on that.

I see the development of China as a ring around that area because if you look at each country, directly or indirectly, China has a huge involvement. Of a more serious nature is Chinese involvement in Russia. Ever since the sanctions of 2014 China has provided a vehicle for credit and financial transactions. Also, Russia signed a huge deal to supply China with oil and gas for a long-term contract. For me, eventually Russia will be weakened in a different way as opposed to China.

China, right now, through its more economic creep that's going on in that region.... I don't see how Russia's going to maintain anything in that area when it has nothing to offer. Even militarily, if the region is more developed economically, the military question will recede on its own. Eventually, what is Russia's role going to be there?

Mr. Paul Stronski: I think you put the big question there. Russia has been a little disappointed with Chinese assistance after the sanctions because there was a pivot to China, but from what I'm told the terms of the gas deal they signed were very bad for Russia and that stoked some anger among some Russian officials.

I also understand that commercial banks in China and in Hong Kong have refused to be a lender because they are afraid of getting caught up in U.S. sanctions, and they value their ability to do transactions in the United States more than in Russia. They are getting financing, but it's coming more from the government and state banks than from the commercial banks. I think there are already people in Russia who see Russia on the losing end of this bargain, and they see the growing power. China has pretty much swallowed up Turkmenistan at this point, and there's not a whole lot Russia can do about it.

I think Russia is just keen to keep these countries in its orbit through whatever means it has. Many of these are symbolic at this point. The Eurasian Union is really not a functional union anything like the European Union. I don't think it ever will be. All of the states in the Eurasian Union are not very happy being in the Eurasian Union. They were strong-armed into being there, and they also played Putin's weak hand after Crimea and western sanctions by, both President Nazarbayev and President Lukashenko, trying to strip much political stuff out of the agreement. It's a very empty agreement.

The Russians are also trying to weaken the Shanghai Cooperation Organization by expanding it to include Pakistan and India. They are doing whatever they can to try to weaken Chinese influence in a way that doesn't look like they are, but I do think Russia recognizes that they are in a losing battle right now.

I think it's even the cultural power. One thing throughout the region that strikes me is how about 20 years ago you heard a lot more Russian, and now you see Confucius centres in the major cities, at the major universities. This is happening not just in places like Kyrgyzstan, but it's happening in Armenia and it's happening in Kazakhstan. These places are close Russian allies and dependencies, and I think that says a lot about their desire to make sure they have options, not just Russia. But Russia, I think, is on the losing end of this battle.

● (0930)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much.

We're now going to start our next round. We're going to start with Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Stronski, for your remarks this morning.

At this critical juncture in global politics, your insight is very much needed. As we're well aware, the challenges for states in central Asia have been striking a political and economic balance between their engagement with Russia and the western states.

Given Russia's mounting aggression in European areas and the western powers putting sanctions in, how do you envision the future of central Asia with the western world, or the rest of the world?

Mr. Paul Stronski: One thing that is clear whenever I go to central Asia is that they want to be connected to the west, maybe not Turkmenistan, which is its own separate category, but even post-Karimov Uzbekistan is reaching out to the west.

We've seen countries that have had bad relationships with the west. I can see it from Washington. For example, Kurdistan is one of them, and they are now suddenly trying to make sure the west doesn't forget about them. The message coming out of this region is that they don't want us to leave them. They don't want to be stuck between China and Russia. The message they're hearing back, though, is a message where we make sometimes strong statements about Georgia or Ukraine, but we're not necessarily following them up with any security guarantee.

They see a U.S. president who questions the fundamental alliances and they ask themselves, "If the President of the United States can question NATO, what does that mean for a partner like Kazakhstan?"

Many of these countries are looking to the west. They see a European Union that is in disarray and they're looking at other countries in the west. Canada is one of them. I think Canada has a role and it's one they would like to play. You see these countries often looking at Japan and South Korea, which are very active economically in the region. As they see Europe and the United States turn inward on themselves, they are now hoping for countries that have not been as in front of the west as places they would like to increase engagement with.

From a Canadian perspective, I think there's probably a longing in the region for a greater presence or a greater focus on central Asia. You also hear that the Nordics are another area that the central Asians are focusing on. They clearly want to have a relationship with the west. They want the economic engagement and some of the countries are more than willing to meet us half-way, at least on the governance issue.

Kurdistan is struggling to do it. Kazakhstan talks a great talk. They have great plans. All they need to do is implement them. The other countries are really very much regressing. Uzbekistan, however, is also opening up a little bit and doing some interesting things right now, but it's still too early to see where that is going to go.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: What I hear is that the relationship with central Asia is strengthening; that's the way you see it. As they're maintaining their close relationship with Russia, would they be able to strengthen their relationship with the western world?

● (0935)

Mr. Paul Stronski: That depends. None of these countries want to follow the path of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova of signing official agreements with the west and having an official partnership as we see in the European Union association agreements. They're perfectly willing to increase bilateral trade talks, and some of them are willing to increase security co-operation, but they don't want to have it on the front lines and on the front pages.

Anything that can be done quietly, these countries are very willing to do. They just don't want to be asked. I think when we look back over what happened in 2013 and 2014, the European Union made a big mistake in trying to have everyone sign onto a document on the same day. As long as they have political cover for whatever they do, I think that's something they want.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: In your view, Mr. Trump's idea of lifting sanctions on Russia, how real is that threat?

Mr. Paul Stronski: I think it depends. There seems to be a strong desire among many people on his team to somehow improve the relationship with Russia, and the former national security adviser Flynn is gone because he evidently was talking about that too soon.

I do think that some of the information that's come out about the ties between the Trump campaign and various Russian officials, which seems to come out every day, makes it a little more difficult for Mr. Trump to do this, so at least we're seeing a delay. But the idea that he can get rid of all the sanctions very easily is misguided on his part and on Russia's part.

The Russians want all sanctions gone. That includes the Magnitsky sanctions, which were mandated by Congress. They cannot be revoked by the president. Our UN ambassador has said the ones on Crimea will not be revoked, so it's just the others. I think there would be a lot of push-back in the United States and an attempt by Congress to try to codify them in legislation, which would complicate any sort of deal that Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin try to make. I think if he tries, it will be a messy process for him.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

We'll finish up with Mr. Aboultaif. Welcome to the committee, sir.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Good morning, Mr. Stronski, and thank you very much for your insight this morning.

I would like to start my question by seeing if you agree to some assumptions that I want to discuss this morning. They are that we're still in the Cold War; the Soviet Union hasn't been dissolved, it still continues; Russia is more aggressive than the old Soviet Union; and our plan and influence in some of the regimes in the world through promoting democracy, human rights, and freedom has failed.

Do you agree with all that?

Mr. Paul Stronski: I'm not sure if I would agree that the Soviet Union has not dissolved. We now have 15 independent states that actually have their own separate identifies, that are very keen on defending those identities and defending their sovereignty, and they have institutionalized entire post-Soviet governments. So I think there are certain mindsets that still linger and the Kremlin certainly would like to reintegrate as much of it as it can, but I think many of these political leaders are resistant. I think we saw that in the push-back to the Eurasian Union and the concerns that have been raised over some of Russia's aggressive behaviour.

Moscow might not recognize that, but I do think it will be difficult to fully reintegrate any sort of Soviet.... Russia is extremely aggressive right now. It is taking advantage of vacuums around the world, taking advantage of people being distracted. I think no one was really looking at Ukraine until Crimea happened, and Russia is wanting to push back at the west wherever it can. The negative influence it had in the United States might not have caused Trump to win, but it certainly helped. It certainly hurt former secretary Clinton, and I think we see that replayed in Europe. We're seeing these tactics, which were more reserved for their immediate neighbourhood, going elsewhere. I think that all western states, Canada included, need to firm up their resilience to this type of pressure.

Are we in a cold war? The Cold War had very strict ideologies. We don't have the same sort of ideology today, but we are in a very dangerous situation. We have a Russian government that is very anti-American, very anti-western, and if you come down here, you have half of the U.S. population that is as vehemently anti-Russian as it ever has been, and that was not the case just a few years ago.

I don't see the ideologies, but I do see the animosities growing. I also see the mechanisms that tried to keep the international playing field stable, and tried to keep the NATO member militaries and Warsaw Pact militaries from having an unintended conflict, have broken down, so I'm very worried about when ships get buzzed, or flights, you know, when fighters get too close to each other.

Has promotion of democracy failed? I think it has failed in some places. I think in Russia it doesn't look very good. In parts of central Asia it does not look very good. Ukraine is struggling, but it has a free press and it has people who are willing to take to the streets. I think in Georgia it has been successful. I think in Moldova it has had its ups and downs but has been more or less successful. I think a place like Armenia, which is very closely tied to Russia, does have a somewhat free press and it is more democratic. It's not a democracy, but it is more democratic than other places in the region.

I don't think it can be a total success, but I do think when you look at assistance, we need to figure out the type of assistance that will be useful. In places like Georgia, Ukraine, even Armenia, or Kyrgyzstan, where it has been a little bit more successful, that is still very important to do. But I also think in places like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where people are really being pushed into poverty, there are things we can do to improve human security, which is also tied to human rights. That could be basic education, health care, vaccines, or food security assistance, all of which will help people who are really struggling in environments where our assistance in democracy and promoting the rule of law has been more difficult.

● (0940)

I also think countries that have decided they wanted to join the OSCE council of Europe need to be held accountable for that decision, and if they continue on their path—Azerbaijan is not living up to a lot of it—I think there should be consequences for their membership in these organizations.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): That's all the time we have.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Mr. Stronski, thank you very much for your time as you join us from Washington with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. We appreciate the feedback today. If you think of anything else that you think that we should have, then please, by all means, send it to the committee clerk. That would be great.

Thank you very much.

We're going to suspend while we get set up for our next panel.

● (0940)

(Pause)

● (0950)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Good morning and welcome.

Rand Sukhaita, welcome. It's great to have you here. As we look at your bio, I think all the members are really looking forward to hearing what you've been doing, what your involvement has been with Syria, how you've been helping women, and just doing a whole bunch of things. We are certainly looking forward to your testimony.

The way it normally works around here is that we'll give you 10 minutes or so to give us your opening testimony, and then we'll go around the room asking questions about maybe something you said or something that you haven't said that people could follow up on.

Elana Wright, welcome as well. It's good to have you here.

We'll let you get started, and then we'll go around with questions.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita (Director, Turkey, Darna Centres): Thank you.

Good morning, all. I would like to start by thanking Development and Peace, who invited me here to Canada to share my story and to talk about the work that I do in the Darna centres in Syria, which serve the vulnerable Syrian families who have chosen to stay in Syria as the war continues.

I would also like to thank the committee for inviting me here today.

I am Rand Sukhaita, a woman from Syria. I'm a pharmacist and a mother. I'm from northern Syria, from a small city called Idlib. I fled to Turkey almost four years ago with my small family. Before this, I moved between cities, trying to find a safe one in which to give birth to my baby. The first year in Turkey was the hardest, because I didn't know whether I would be able to go back to Syria soon or have to stay there. I was following the news every day. It took me one year to realize I wasn't going back to Syria soon.

I then decided to think of the Syrian people who were left behind, who are facing every day all kinds of struggles, from displacement to bombing and shelling, to chemical weapons from the regime and his allies, to the extremists who destroyed all the villages' valuables and interfered in their personal freedom. In spite of all this, they are still trying to make a better life and a better future. They are struggling for their freedom and dignity. This relates to the Darna centres' mission, which is to construct a society that lives with dignity.

We have three centres in Syria, one in the south and two in northern Syria, in Aleppo and Idlib. Unfortunately, we closed our centre in Aleppo after the evacuation happened in December.

Darna means “our home” in Arabic, which is the main goal for the centres. Besides access to services, the centres provide a safe space for families and individuals, so they can rebuild their social networks —lost through displacement—and find a sense of belonging to a community again. All of our centres apply an open door policy, so that anyone from the community can come to access the service. Our staff can provide service or refer them to any other service provider in the area. That is why the centres are not operated as a stand-alone service but as part of a holistic approach that seeks resilience for the community.

The centres provide vocational training, English, computer, and business courses, as well as sewing workshops for women. Women there are trained to sew clothes so they can find a job in the local labour market. From the lessons learned from our work, we know that it's important to couple skills development and income generation programs with psychosocial support and protection programs in order to enable women to overcome the trauma they have experienced in war and adopt to their new role. In addition, we have to link the skills development training with local labour markets so that they have job opportunities afterwards.

Syrian women are more vulnerable to discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion than their male counterparts due to social cultural norms present in the region. Many have found themselves for the first time ever as the sole breadwinner for their family, given the death or incapacitation of or separation from the primary male earners. Yet those who have found themselves in this situation also tend to lack the skills, capacity, and confidence to procure income-generating work. This often puts women in an impossible position of having to provide for themselves and their families.

We know that when women generate an income, they make better decisions with their income. Their priority will be mainly to provide education for their children and to have access to the community. That's why we should start working with women and listen to them if we want to achieve peace. We should include women in each step of the process.

● (0955)

It's very important to work to empower women so they can deal with their new role. At the same time, we should be preparing their community—husbands and families—to accept them in their new role, and to accept that they can go out of their home, work and generate income, make better decisions, and support their families. This is the main challenge we're facing now inside Syria in some areas. Even though I believe that war is the worst thing that can happen to human beings, it's a real opportunity for real change.

After the revolution, I started to see women acting differently. They worked in organizing the demonstrations, in field hospitals, as teachers, and even in civil defence. They documented human rights abuses. They were arrested and kidnapped. They worked in media. Here, I'd like to give an example of what happened in Aleppo during the evacuation. The only activist who raised what was happening in Aleppo was a woman called Lina al-Shami.

Let me tell you about Hannan, who is married and is the mother of three children. She has had to support her family on her own ever since her husband suffered a stroke that left him partially paralysed. She recently took an 11-week sewing course offered in one of our centres. She says, “Through the training course, I personally evolved a lot as a person. I am no longer Hannan the shy, but Hannan the responsible woman who provides for her family. I have more confidence in myself. Even my husband looks at me differently. I did not imagine that one day in my life I would be in that place! Today, I dream of teaching sewing or running a learning centre.”

The Syrians need us to share their stories and show their daily bravery in facing this crisis. They need us to believe in them, invest in them, and build their capacity to strengthen Syrian civil society so that it can develop new leaders in order to make the change. We need to directly support Syrian organizations, to invest in Syria, and to build its capacity to make real change with less short-term intervention, and more resilience-based approaches.

Let's think about the civilians who are facing the extremist groups in some areas. How can they do this without our support if they are left alone without any tools to do so? How will the next generation be able to resist without access to education? We should know that only the Syrians themselves will be able to build their country again. Any solution that doesn't include them will not be successful.

Believe me when I say that are a lot of Syrian women who struggle daily for their lives and their dignity and for a better future, and they provide role models for how women can be and should be. This week, as we celebrate International Women's Day, I would like to remember the thousands of women who faced death under torture and the thousands of women who have been disappeared.

Thank you.

● (1000)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much.

Just to my colleagues, I have seven people on the list, and it's supposed to be six minutes per round. l let people go a little longer as they tried to build their case. To get everyone in, if we could try to work towards the six minutes, that would be fantastic.

We'll start with Mr. Kent, and then we'll move through the list.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you both for being with us today.

I'd like to speak to something I hear in the time I occasionally spend with our standing committee on immigration. We've heard increasingly about problems with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' non-recognition of internally displaced persons as certified refugees. We've heard it in the context of the Yazidis and other religious minorities in the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq, where they're very much unsupported either by the Government of Iraq or by the Kurdish autonomous region, and they're in a terrible state. Is there a similar situation with regard to religious minorities for IDP populations within Syria?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: If I understand you well, it is the same for minority groups as for the majority. Most of the Syrian people have faced this forced displacement. Most of them have moved to live in other cities in northern Syria and in the middle, as well as the majority who are Muslims maybe.

Hon. Peter Kent: With regard to the minorities, we've heard anecdotes many times that the humanitarian staff in many IDP camp situations in Iraq have not fairly shared resources, humanitarian supplies and medicine, with the minorities. I'm wondering whether that's the case in Syria.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Yes, this is the case in most of the camps, even in the Kurdish-controlled or the regime-controlled area, and it's very different from the liberated area.

Hon. Peter Kent: Could you speak to the situation of the almost five million registered Syrian refugees outside Syria, in Turkey, in Jordan...?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Since I am a refugee and I'm in Turkey, maybe I can explain our situation in Turkey, but I can't give you the full picture of the refugees. I just know the general picture.

Hon. Peter Kent: No, please give your experience.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: I've been living in Turkey for four years. Most of the Syrian refugees in Turkey lived in urban areas. Nobody knows the camp, and no local or international organization can work within the camp. It's totally served by the government. Most of the Syrians have entered Turkey illegally without their formal papers, and they have temporary card protection, which gives them access to medical services and education. But still they face discrimination, for sure, in these facilities, and still there is a language barrier. Until now we in Turkey lived in separate communities because very few Syrians can speak Turkish, and the opposite.

Until now most Syrians work illegally for less than minimum wage and for long hours, more than eight hours per day, and sometimes without any day off, especially the children and youth over 11 years old. Last year the government allowed the Syrians to get a work permit, but still not all Syrians get it. Most of the humanitarian workers like me have the work permit, and it gives me opportunities so I can move easily in Turkey. But most of the others who have this daily work, they don't. To have the work permit, you should pay taxes and they're very high. That's why most of the job providers don't apply for their employees to do so.

The temporary protection cardholders cannot move from one city to another without permission from the government. They can access the services in the city they live in, not in another city. Even in Turkey most of the Syrians have also been moving within the cities seeking job opportunities, and this adds more challenges for them.

● (1005)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you very much.

Thanks, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Now we're going to move over to Mr. Lefebvre.

Welcome to the committee. We're glad to have you here today, and we'll turn it over to you.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): It's my pleasure to be here. Thank you so much.

Thank you so much for being here this morning and sharing your story.

I'll continue in the same direction with respect to refugees in neighbouring countries and your experience in Turkey.

You said a lot of people are moving around to find jobs and opportunities. I'd like to know the challenges that poses for women. Can you also please explain the challenges for women who may have lost their husbands, or maybe they have passed away, in finding jobs in their situation, and what that entails for women who are refugees in the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: My personal view is that it's harder for women to find jobs. I can say, like here, there are two levels of women. There are women who are educated and have the skills to find jobs. There are a lot of organizations working internationally and locally, Turkish and Syrian organizations working in Turkey. They provide some job opportunities, but just for women who are educated and have the skills; they can speak English and work on computers. The other level is of women who lack these skills, and it's very hard for them to find jobs. That's why the percentages of child labour, child soldiers, and rape were very high during the previous two years—because women couldn't find jobs. They sent their children or youth to work in factories, or in the streets, or in some Turkish shops, but with very low incomes.

That's why it's very important to support the Syrian organizations that are working with women. From our experience and also from the experiences of other NGOs working in Lebanon and Turkey, supporting those women, giving them the skills, and accompanying that with income generation in small grants—in Syria we do small grants—allows women after their training to have a very small amount to start their own businesses. Some of them have opened gyms. Some of them have opened patisseries. Some of them have started selling embroidery tools. It's helped them to have even a small income after training for three months on how to do it.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Who provides these resources to these women, these organizations? Can you please expand on that?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: How can we provide it?

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Who right now is helping these organizations, from your experience?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: For what we are doing, we started our centres inside Syria with support from Development and Peace. After we knew the real needs and what to do next, we wrote a proposal and sent it to a lot of international NGOs—most of them were INGOs because it always gets through to them. The proposal was about how we would like to have this program, we will target these kinds of women, and this is the impact we want to have in the community. Our funding is mainly from councils and from INGOs.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: This is your experience in Turkey, right? You're doing this—

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: No, even inside Syria. Most of the organizations now that are in Turkey work inside Syria. They even have teams inside Syria, as we do. We have teams inside Syria. We have people who can go and come back. It's harder at this time to go and come back, but yes.

● (1010)

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: How many, do you think? What is your estimate of these organizations, like yours, that exist within Syria right now trying to assist?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: How many organizations are working in Turkey?

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Like yours, that have that direct ground.... Obviously, you're from the area. You know the area inside out because that's where you're from. You know the population. You know the communities.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Yes, there are a lot of organizations working there, but not a lot of them are taking the middle side—I don't know what that is in English.

A voice: Neutral.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Neutral. There are a lot of for-profit companies that are working there, also. They have offices in Turkey, and they also work inside Syria.

I believe—I don't know, but the last time I was reading statistics, about five months ago—there are 600 organizations. As I mentioned, most of them are following some parties, and they have political views. That's not the thing that we need, I think, during this coming period in Syria.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much.

Madame Laverdière, I turn it over to you.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Sukhaita, thank you for your very interesting presentation.

You said that only Syrians themselves can rebuild their future. I think that's a very important point.

I found another point particularly relevant. You showed that work for women and mothers affected child labour, for example. When mothers receive help with earning an income, fewer young children work.

Do we know approximately how many children are in intensive labour situations?

I have a second question to ask you afterward, so some time must be set aside.

[*English*]

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Thank you.

Actually, I did a lot of statistics recently but nothing comes to mind now in terms of an exact number. I can assure you that through a very simple search on the Internet you can find some statistics.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I think you had planned to travel to the United States to present the work being done by your organization. Do you still intend to do so?

[*English*]

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Yes, actually I was invited by an organization called IWPR, Institute for War & Peace Reporting. Each year they have Syrian women go to the United States to meet the organizations there and the people who are making decisions.

This year they cancelled it. I was supposed to go and I had my agenda, but they cancelled it at the last moment because of Trump's new decision. They told me that they could help me to get my visa, and they cancelled it. They said they would try to find women who have other nationalities so they could invite them, but after that it was cancelled.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: This situation is really very sad.

In this committee, we almost all believe in the importance of funding grassroots organizations.

In terms of funding, are you currently facing many challenges?

[*English*]

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: For sure, I have a lot of challenges with this.

First, until now, funding went through different organizations. We have funding from the EU but it goes through Expertise France, and through us. It's not cost-efficient. It is the same with UN agencies. They take a lot of overhead, and that means the money that gets to the people is less.

Second, we don't have long-term projects. For example, we apply for a new program and we have staff. We train them and they start to do well. Then, after six months, the funds end. We cannot keep our good staff, the trained and experienced ones, because they try to find other work. The real impact on the people is not what we do. Until now, we haven't been funded for more than one year. That was the longest one. You need two months of preparation, recruitment, and training, so we keep struggling to build our capacity, to make our administrative charts, and to focus more on our policies, gender policies, and financial policies and procedures. We struggle to have funds so the program won't end. That may be one of our main challenges.

● (1015)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much.

We'll go over to Mr. McKay.

Hon. John McKay: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to take a big political risk right now and compliment a woman on her jacket. I think it's quite smart.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Thank you.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I concur.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: It's made by a group of Syrian women in Turkey, actually.

Hon. John McKay: There you are. Is that as a result of the Darna centres?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: They do this, sure, but this one is not. It's made by a group of Syrian refugee women. My mother got involved with them, and she was training them. They try to.... I'm doing marketing for them.

Hon. John McKay: You're succeeding. It looks terrific.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Thank you.

Hon. John McKay: Syria is a pretty complicated country even at the best of times, even when there is peace. For the last century, pretty well, the Alawites have kind of kept everything under control by a really brutal regime of political oppression. Yet the war has pretty well displaced everybody: Alawites, Christians, Druze, Kurds, Sunnis, Shia, or whatever the particular group is.

You've been forced out. You are in a Turkish refugee camp. How do all of those tensions that normally exist in Syria play out in a refugee camp for you?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Actually, I didn't come from a refugee camp. I have good experience dealing with refugees in Turkey. I was a volunteer with a lot of organizations doing this. Yes, there is tension between people from different political and religious views, and here I'd like to mention that we didn't face this before. The conflict made it. We faced it for the first time after the war. Before, when I was in university, I didn't know. We went to the same university. We went to the same schools. We lived somehow in one community, but after the war it has been worse. That's why the safe space that the centre provides is very important.

I would like to give you an example. One of our programs is called peace education, which is psychosocial support for children and youth. Children just adopt their parents' view, for example, if they are with the opposition of the regime, children just have it ready and they adopt it. A lot of tension happens among the children in the centre.

From the first time they came to the centre, we had a very big white paper, and they set the rules of this room. They said that we should respect each other, that we are all Syrians, that we all need a better future for our country, and that there is no political discussion in this room. Then, when they played in teams, our team was able to make them one team so that they would feel themselves together.

What you've mentioned is a huge challenge now. That's why it's very important to also have these psychosocial programs with all types—children, youth, women, and men. That's why it's very important to support these safe spaces.

● (1020)

Hon. John McKay: That's an interesting initiative, and I wish you all success. However, President Assad does have his supporters. Certainly, he has his supporters among minority groups. How do people who are in those minority groups survive on a daily or yearly basis in the situations where they are displaced to Turkey, Lebanon, or Jordan? Do those conflicts work themselves out one way or another, other than the programs that you are suggesting? I compliment you on your initiative.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Actually, personally I don't believe that Assad supports the minority.

One of my friends, Marcell Shehwaro, is an activist, and she was Aleppian. She was arrested because she was participating in the demonstration. She participated in the demonstration in my city, Idlib. She held the microphone. She's Christian. In my city, most are Muslim, and conservative also. She said that Assad didn't protect her. He arrested her. He killed her mother at one of the checkpoints.

This is the picture he's trying to market, but I don't think this is the reality. Even the Christians are displaced. As you mentioned, most of them came here to Canada and to Europe illegally in small boats. If they felt safe, they would have stayed. But they don't feel safe.

I would like to say that the conflict, for sure, affected every area it was in. I consider that most of the areas in Syria have now been affected, starting with Damascus, which was facing no water for one month. Last month there was no water and no electricity, and that led to no school. So, no, I can't consider one area in Syria safe. It affected everybody. Since there is an ISIS, and Jabhat al-Nusra and extremists, it's helped him to market the picture this way.

I hope I was clear because my English is bad.

Hon. John McKay: That was good. Nice job.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): We're going to move to Ms. O'Connell.

Welcome to the committee, as well. The floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you for the work you're doing.

My questions actually are around something you said in your opening statement about preparing the community for these changes, whether they are in Turkey, as you are, or one day getting to return to Syria, which I think most Syrians hope for. With the work your centre is doing, as I said, this comment really struck me, preparing the community for these changes.

As more women enter the workforce, or become the sole breadwinner, how will the men's mentality change whether they're now in Turkey or some other country that is relatively safe, or when they return? I wonder how that dynamic will change. I think we've seen instances where this has happened, where there, then, can be an increase in sexual violence toward women or abuse toward women because of this new role in society. Has your centre looked into this? What's the type of work? Were there any statistics showing this uptake in violence against women in a lot of instances because of their new societal role or head-of-family type of role?

● (1025)

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Actually what you've said is totally right because for most of the women their role in their families, yes, it changed. Since we support women and most organizations are saying that we should support women who lost their breadwinner and they are now taking more roles, that reflects badly on their men.

When we started working in Syria, we just wanted the women to go out of their homes. That's why we sometimes went to their husbands and described what they will...and that's why we started with sewing workshops because it's more familiar for them. We cannot start with computer skills because they feel it is strange and wonder why they should learn this. That's why we go to their family and describe to their husband that it's like a safe space and there are women only, and we also provide the kindergarten so they don't have the challenge if they have babies of where to put them. That takes much effort just to convince them to go out from their homes, and we know that. When they would try it, they wanted to learn more.

I can give an example. We have a PSS or protection session with women. One man came and said that he was stressed from work and he had a lot of personal challenges in his life, and he yelled at his daughter and wife. After one year, he thought it was very silly to go to this session and wondered what we were doing there. After a year, he yelled at his daughter and she told him, no, you should not do this; you're not respecting children's rights. Then he did the same to his wife, and she told him, you're abusing me. So he came to the session and told us that maybe the wrong is with him because he was stressed and this was not the right way to deal with it. He said, maybe he should take those sessions. He didn't, but he admitted it at least.

This is what we should prepare the community for, because in some of the liberated areas even the military groups that are also controlling the area didn't expect that a woman can go out and go to work and earn money, and when she earned money, she had a decision in her family. This is the kind of power that we need.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you very much.

Following up on that, in the liberated areas or again in communities where Syrians have had to leave Syria, you mentioned in your opening statement the example of the situation where the husband had a heart attack and couldn't work. I wonder too if at your centre and in the work you are doing if you're also looking at.... We've seen this in other conflicts or frankly in changes around the world at different points in time, that as conflicts end women are now used to this new independence and this education and this workforce and like it, but then there becomes growing resentments around lack of employment, when men want to re-enter the workforce and there are only so many jobs.

Is there work being done.... I recognize there's a lot to do right now as the conflict is ongoing. I recognize that, but I wonder about the long-term thinking of what those impacts will be as there's limited employment and women continue to grow in society and have that independence and that education within society. I think in some of the testimony and the information in the brief, women were making serious strides forward and now with the conflict, it's complicated things obviously.

Are you looking at that longer term vision too on that overall resentment in the workforce and then how women continue to get educated and have these independent financial lives?

● (1030)

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Yes, you're right.

Until now we couldn't. For all our programs, I could not consider it. Even if we invested a lot in it and we thought it would be a type of income generation, it's not sustainable as long as there is no security. We don't know. Maybe we will wake up tomorrow and see our centre being like what happened in Aleppo, with people evacuated from it or with it destroyed from bombing and shelling. Until now, even though we always ask for long-term projects, it has not been safe. It's threatened. As long as there is no solution and there are no safe areas in all of Syria, we won't be able to make it sustainable or to think of the future in maybe a better way.

Also, this is the about needs of the Syrian civil society. We are new in this field. Before 2011, there was no civil society organization. Most of the Syrians are learning from their mistakes. That's what happened to us. Even our curriculum has been changed sometimes, because we made mistakes and we learned. Maybe this is also the kind of support we need. We don't need just financial support; we also need capacity building. Maybe other NGOs or governments that are aware of other conflicts happening in the world can support us in how to do gender policy equality, how to study the incomes.... With Development and Peace, we're trying to make this workshop go from non-profit to profit so the ladies can sell their products.

It's totally new. We need that experience to help us to think of better ways. Unfortunately, most of the training we get is how to write our proposal, how to do that.... There is no training on what our goals should be, on how we can make change, on how we can effect it. Maybe this is the kind of capacity we need.

Ms. Elana Wright (Education Material Officer, Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, Darna Centres): If I could add to that from the Canadian NGO perspective at Development and Peace, the Canadian government has been very generous and just last week announced new and very generous funding for Syria and the neighbouring countries, but on the development side there has been very little coming through.

We have very few projects to support these women who are empowering themselves and learning to make a living, but we also need them to get involved in civil society to become local leaders. We need them to rebuild Syria later. We know—all of you who have participated in this study know—that if women are empowered it's going to create a less violent society, a less patriarchal society, and a more peaceful society. We know that is the key to this, so we need to have both the short-term humanitarian approach and also the longer-term view.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much.

We're going to turn it over to you, Ziad, for six minutes.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: [*Member speaks in Arabic*]

Elana, welcome this morning.

I'd like to focus on the children's education. Human development is the biggest issue that Syria is going to continue to face going forward, and for decades, not just for the next few years. On the education side, based on what you know and what you've experienced, are the Syrian children getting enough education to catch up with what they missed so far? How far behind are we in that area?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: The main problem with education inside Syria is that after they finish, they don't have a certificate that they can use for applying to any university in the world. I'm talking about the liberated area here.

In the regime area, yes—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: The lack of a state—

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: There is no formal certificate, so after finishing high school they can apply for any university. No university accepts Syrians. The funny thing is now even some countries don't accept any Syrian certificates because there are a lot of fake ones. After high school what can they do? This is what the women, what their mothers told us, “Why should we send them to school if they stop when they are 15 or 20?” This is the main problem.

Most of the education that's provided in Lebanon and Turkey is informal education so that leads again to the first problem, which is that there's no approved certificate or something to continue their education. Most of the children inside Syria and also in Turkey drop out of school. They have been out of school for four or five years and there aren't catch-up or remedial classes to help them to enrol in the government school. In Turkey the language barrier is an added challenge.

The law in turn leads to fewer children enrolled in school because they are working, especially youth inside Syria. They don't have anything to do. They simply go to fight with military groups because it gives them a sense that they are in power. Also sometimes children and youth are given money to join them.

● (1035)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: I was in Lebanon in December. We visited some of the areas where there are Syrian camps. I asked about the education they are getting. So far, based on what I know from Lebanon, and I'm from there, I'm comfortable about the education they're getting at least within the Lebanese educational system, which remains overall the best or at least the most acceptable to give a proper education.

I also have some information about Jordan, but my concern is about Turkey. Is the government providing the Turkish curriculum for education? I'm talking K to 12, K to 9, and those small children who need the most development. Do you know what type of curriculum is being provided? How satisfied are you, if you were to assess for your own children, with the education they're getting now?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: As I mentioned the Syrian refugees in Turkey don't have refugee status. That's why they have been dealt with as guests for more than four years.

Now in Turkey we have this temporary education centre. There are the Turkish school buildings and after they finish at 2 p.m., the Syrians come to these centres and use them until 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. They use the Syrian curriculum, but again it's not approved.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: By the regime...? Are you talking post-war?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: The regime had some additions, with the Syrian coalition, and the interim government made some additions to it with everything related to the regime. You can see it in each picture, on each page, in any subject.

They made some additions to the curriculum and they provided it for four years in this temporary education centre, but now they have a new plan to include all the Syrian children in the Turkish school. The plan has a timeline from now to four years. They are providing Turkish courses and they started with some grades and they will move to others. Hopefully it will be fine after that.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): We're going to finish with Mr. Saini.

Mr. Raj Saini: Thank you very much for coming here today. I am also a pharmacist by profession. My questions are going to be health related.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Don't ask me anything about pharmacy.

Mr. Raj Saini: No, I won't ask you anything about drugs. I've forgotten too, so I won't put you on the spot that way.

You talk about trying to do all these things, and I commend you for all of your work. One of the things that is also very important, especially for women and girls, is health. Economics is one viewpoint, and changing the stigmas and the social norms is another viewpoint, but in terms of food or health, which are the necessities, what's the situation on the ground there? Maybe we can just concentrate on the health, because I think you'd have a very concise way of explaining it.

● (1040)

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Because we're not working in health and there are medical organizations that specialize in these issues, they should work more than we do. I don't have examples from the field. I can give you my personal general view.

In Syria, as most of you know, the hospitals were targeted. Before people evacuated from Aleppo, there were no hospitals operating in any of the liberated areas. They are all out of service, so there is a need. I know that women who have come to our centre have asked for hygiene kits. We still do awareness sessions specialized for women, and our social worker is trying to do awareness sessions about their rights. I don't know what it is in English—the maternity....

Ms. Elana Wright: Do you mean maternal health?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Yes, maternal health and how they can support their young girls in this.

It's the same situation in Turkey, but in Turkey, they can access the governmental hospitals with this temporary protection card without paying anything. It's free.

Mr. Raj Saini: With the situation that's there, you must also have to deal with a lot of people who are going through trauma. How do you deal with that? You're trying to provide an opportunity for economic empowerment and independence, but you're also dealing with families that in some cases have lost family members, have seen tragic events, or have passed through very tragic circumstances.

Basically, as you say, you're providing a safe space, but it involves so much more. How do you deal with that on an ongoing basis?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Actually we have specialists who are able to identify some cases and maybe give them more support, but we also refer them. Sometimes you can't do everything by yourself and we should co-operate. There are a lot of organizations inside Syria and in Turkey that are specialized. They have psychiatrists and mental health centres. We coordinate with them and do referrals and they can also follow up. In a lot of cases, we don't know the names or the causes.

Mr. Raj Saini: Are there adequate resources? I'm sure that a lot of the Syrian professionals, prior to the circumstances of the last four or five years especially in Aleppo, must have already left. How do you provide...?

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: This is the other challenge and especially in the health and trauma or psychosocial support field. It's very hard to find people who are trained and specialized still inside Syria.

Before when the borders were open, it was very easy for them to go to Turkey and get training for one month or two months and then follow-up sessions, and they could go to Syria and implement that. Now it's getting harder, with the border closed, to get our staff from inside and train them. Other organizations, a lot of specialized organizations, have specialists and they do training for people inside Syria to do so. Also they provide training for our staff on how to identify some cases and they come and follow up.

Mr. Raj Saini: Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much for being here today and for giving us an update on what you're doing with your work and what's happening there on the front line. We do appreciate it.

That's all we have for today, ladies and gentlemen.

Ms. Rand Sukhaita: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): The meeting is adjourned.