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Chair

Mr. Bernard Patry

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•(1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.):
With your permission, we're going to start.

[Translation]

Welcome to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

[English]

This is meeting number 44. Orders of the day are pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), a study on relations with countries of the Muslim world.

As a witness this afternoon we have Mr. Terry M. Rempel, senior researcher from the BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights.

Welcome, Mr. Rempel.

I understand you have some introductory remarks. Please, the floor is yours. Go ahead.

Mr. Terry Rempel (Senior Researcher, BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights): Thank you for the opportunity to be here today in front of the committee. This is my first opportunity in front of a committee, so you'll have to excuse me if I don't quite understand all of the procedures, etc.

I would like to give you a brief background of the BADIL Resource Center. I then have a few short comments related to, first of all, the current situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, some concerns in relation to the immediate future and the upcoming disengagement plan, and then some specific comments on refugees, which is really the focus, the mandate, of the centre where I have been a researcher for the past seven years.

I have some brief information to give you a context for my remarks.

BADIL Resource Center is a non-governmental organization registered with the Palestinian Authority. It was established in 1998, based on recommendations of what were called popular refugee conferences that were held in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and among internally displaced Palestinians, mostly in the Galilee area inside the State of Israel.

These popular refugee conferences were primarily a response by refugees, mostly unregistered refugees residing in camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who were concerned about the approach taken to the refugee issue in the Oslo peace negotiations. They were

particularly concerned about the framework for crafting durable solutions for refugees, which is generally applied worldwide.

I'm referring to the three options that refugees are generally provided with in terms of durable solutions, those being voluntary repatriation, integration into the host country, and third-country resettlement. These sets of parameters and the rights contained therein were not part of the Oslo negotiations.

In essence, refugees held these conferences to identify an agenda to set out the concerns they had and a mechanism to bring their concerns to the Palestinian leadership and internationally, to establish a network among refugees in the occupied territories, as well as those in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere. It was the aim of working towards a solution for their plight that was consistent with international law, human rights, and relevant UN resolutions.

One of the recommendations of the conferences was the establishment of a centre that would assist refugees in further clarifying issues of concern to them. The BADIL Resource Center was set up in 1998, with a specific mandate to assist the refugee community in this way.

I've been with the BADIL Resource Center since 1998. I'm originally from Alberta, but I have been based in the occupied territories on a long-term basis since 1998, and on and off since the first Gulf War.

I'd like to address a few remarks on the current situation and then move on to some remarks about refugees and Canada's role in relation to the Middle East peace process and the refugee file in particular.

I'm sure you're well aware of the fact that the current period is seen by many as a moment of opportunity to advance the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on a political level. Some of the things that people point to, of course, are the elections in the occupied territories, which resulted in the election of President Mahmoud Abbas, the municipal elections, the upcoming elections for the legislative council, and the planned disengagement from the Gaza Strip at some point this year.

•(1310)

Unfortunately, I think in the attempt to support a positive process forward, there are some developments on the ground, so to speak, that are pointing in the opposite direction and are giving rise to some concerns that in fact the process may stall, if not collapse, once again. Some of these remarks and analysis are increasingly, one is finding, in the Israeli press as well, the concern being that the situation on the ground may lead to a third uprising, in the words of some commentators.

I will just list briefly what those are to table them; I don't want to go into a discussion of them. They would be the ongoing construction of the wall or barrier inside the West Bank and, related to that, some of the development plans that are being put in place right now to try to support and improve the socio-economic conditions of the civilian population in the occupied territories. I think there is a very thin line between projects that may actually support development and projects that end up supporting the regime that is in place for the wall, for the barrier itself.

As there has not been a great deal of attention paid to this, I can give you an example just to clarify the issue. A small village, for example, can no longer access a girls' school for that village because of the route of the barrier, the wall. Therefore, in order to deal with that situation, one builds a school in that village. Now normally, in terms of a normal national development plan, there would not be a necessity for a school in that village, but because of the route of the wall and the inability of school children to access their school in a different village or town, a school is built in that village. The question has to be asked: is the construction of that school, which is a necessity, of course, for children to have access to education, supporting the regime associated with the wall or barrier? And if so, what other measures could be taken rather than building that school in that particular place in order not to support the ongoing construction or entrenchment of this wall and its related regime?

Second is frustration over the release of prisoners, although recently there has been a second number of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons who are supposed to be released. But still, it's small in terms of the overall prisoner population. This issue affects most Palestinian households, because most Palestinian families either have someone from their family or know someone who has been or is currently in an Israeli prison.

Third are ongoing restrictions on freedom of movement, which continues to be a very grave problem.

In relation to the Gaza disengagement plan, if this plan goes forward this year, one of the main concerns that I think has to be looked at very seriously is what will happen the day after.

A lot of attention is being focused on the implementation of the plan itself. Many people, including John Dugard, the UN Commission on Human Rights special rapporteur for the Palestinian territories, and even the Israeli government itself with its legal advisers, have concluded that as long as the State of Israel exercises control over the land borders, air space, sea, and coastal areas of the Gaza Strip, the area will continue to be, for all intents and purposes, occupied territory. Serious concern has to be raised about what that

actually means in terms of the development of the Gaza Strip and the ongoing grave economic situation inside the Gaza Strip.

•(1315)

Secondly, another related issue that is not given so much attention internationally, although it's certainly something that is in the press on a regular basis inside Israel itself, is the related plan to develop the Negev area, where some of the settler population from the Gaza Strip will be moved to. There is grave concern that this will affect the Bedouin population in this area. There's concern being expressed as well in terms of the Israeli government, because they see the Bedouin population becoming increasingly "nationalized", as it's referred to, in terms of their identity. People have had outstanding land claims for many decades now, and there's concern that these land claims may be extinguished as part of a development plan that would see the relocation of settlers from the Gaza Strip to the Negev. So it's an offshoot or a development related to the disengagement plan, but it doesn't have immediate implications for inside the occupied Palestinian territories themselves.

Moving on quickly here to the issue of refugees, which is really the mandate of BADIL Resource Center, we continue to see several concerns in relation to resolving the refugee issue. To put it in context, it's estimated that, today, the number of refugees from 1948, including their descendants, total more than five million persons, of whom approximately 4.2 million are registered to receive assistance from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA.

There are some major gaps in terms of addressing this issue, and although no final-status negotiations currently are going on, a number of measures could be taken to build foundations for eventually addressing the situation of, and their solution for, Palestine refugees when final-status negotiations do at some point come up. These include, first of all, institutional gaps that are related to the particular or unique character of the Palestinian refugee problem.

To explain that very briefly, in terms of refugees worldwide, the UNHCR is generally the international agency that is responsible for the protection of, and the search for durable solutions for, refugees.

A separate institutional regime was established in 1948 and 1949 to respond to the situation of Palestinian refugees, because at that time the UNHCR did not exist. That special regime had two mechanisms. One was the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, which was responsible for the protection of, and search for durable solutions for, Palestine refugees, in addition to a search of or to resolve all outstanding issues of the conflict. That institution today is largely defunct. It continues to exist in name. It files an annual report at the United Nations that consists of about half a page basically saying it has nothing new to report.

The second agency is UNRWA, which was set up to provide assistance. As you all know, UNRWA still continues to exist, and Canada is continuing to be one of the primary or main funders, continuing to support UNRWA's work.

The fact that the UNCCP no longer exists and the UNHCR regards itself as not having a mandate for Palestine refugees means there's no international agency responsible to either protect Palestinian refugees or search for durable solutions.

•(1320)

So you have this institutional gap, which is not currently being addressed at any point in the UN system, and it is necessary in relation to the current status of Palestinian refugees in different areas of exile. For example, in Lebanon, where their situation is more severe, there is no international agency that has a mandate to intervene with state parties. Secondly, it is necessary in relation to the search for and implementation of durable solutions. Now, in the current instance, there are no final-status negotiations ongoing. This could be an opportunity to actually work on this issue, but nothing is currently happening.

Secondly, in relation to the issue of refugees, one of the main concerns is the fact that refugees themselves have been excluded from the process of finding a solution. They have been largely studied in terms of their socio-economic situation, but not consulted in terms of the kinds of solutions they would envision to their situation.

Thirdly—unrelated—there hasn't been and there continues to be a lack of public discussion on the issue. I think this was one of the main failures of the Oslo process in the 1990s, until the final-status negotiations in 2000-01, which contributed to the failure of the process on refugees.

In addition to the exclusion of this framework for a durable solution, which I mentioned, because the refugee issue was left for final-status negotiations, the assumption was that you left the most difficult issues to the end in order to build trust, and then you dealt with the difficult issues. The problem was this meant that no one was talking about the issue. It remained a taboo, and when the time came for parties to discuss the issue, there was no common understanding of the issue, no common language to discuss the issue, and this continues to be the case. It continues to be largely taboo.

Finally, perhaps I can just turn to some remarks in terms of Canada's role. In light of the recent visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, I think there are some positive contributions that came out in terms of the meeting, but I think there are some things that could be built on, possibly.

First of all, I think the human rights training and judicial reform is a very important initiative, but I think it needs to be extended beyond the issue of human rights and the Palestinian judiciary—training, for example, in the role of human rights in resolving the conflict itself and specifically refugees. One of the things you'll notice from the Oslo process in fact is a complete absence of human rights references in the interim agreements themselves. There is an absence of any kind of mechanism to monitor the implementation of human rights and to provide a set of guidelines for both parties, but also for the international community to monitor implementation of the agreements. So in addition to judicial reform, I think a positive contribution could be an expansion to look at the role in terms of training of negotiators in the role of human rights.

At the regional level, one of the things that is missing in terms of structure and gaps is the absence of any kind of regional refugee mechanism convention, and also a mechanism that would monitor implementation of such a convention. Regardless of how one envisions a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, the solution will

involve regional responses. Some refugees may choose to return, some refugees would like to stay in their host countries, and some would perhaps like third-country resettlement. Currently there is a complete lack of sufficient infrastructure to handle these types of regional responses to the Palestinian refugee case.

Secondly, on the issue of elections and Canada's support for the upcoming elections and monitors in July, one of the things to think about, I believe, is what kinds of processes can be put in place to involve refugees themselves in the whole process of building democracy in a democratic state of Palestine.

•(1325)

The legislative elections are only for those Palestinians who are currently resident in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is less than half of the Palestinian people. In other words, half of the Palestinian people do not have a process in which they can vote for and participate in the democratic process and building of a democratic Palestinian state.

There is the Palestinian National Council of the PLO. Unfortunately, current circumstances in-house do not allow for elections to this body, which could in effect be representative of the larger Palestinian community. So I think it's one thing to keep in mind in terms of building democracy and having elections. Elections are important, but we have to ask the question of who is included and who is excluded from these elections that are happening in the occupied territories.

Finally, I have just a reference to the issue outside the region—that is, the status of Palestinian refugees who are asylum seekers. In addition to the unique regime that was set up for protection and crafting of durable solutions for Palestinians, Palestinian refugees also have a unique status under the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees. This particular status is found in article 1D of the convention.

Over the past three years we have been conducting an investigation and writing a handbook on the interpretation of article 1D in approximately 33 states outside of the Arab world, and we have found at least eight different interpretations of this particular article. Some states, countries, do not actually include article 1D in their domestic refugee law, Canada and the United States being two of those states. In any case, the common result of all these different interpretations is that it is almost impossible for Palestinian refugees who are in search of protection to acquire refugee status under the convention. It would be a positive contribution, I think, to re-examine this whole issue of the refugee convention and the particular status of Palestinians, particularly because there is no immediate, durable solution for this particular group of refugees in the immediate future.

I will conclude with that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rempel. Now we'll go to questions and answers.

We'll start with Mr. Day. We have half an hour. We'll go for about five or six minutes each.

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks, Terry, for your good presentation.

I met with President Abbas on Friday. I think a lot of us are sharing some optimism. I put some questions to him that he responded to not defensively at all. He recognized there were problems. I talked about the ongoing incitement of hatred through the public broadcasting system in the Palestinian areas, and I talked about the ongoing daily missile attacks from Gaza into Israel and also what Hamas is doing, what we're hearing, in terms of organizing on the ground. He was very open about that, not defensive. He said he recognized those problems were there and really wanted to do what he could to resolve them.

There's something I haven't been able to understand. The surrounding land base of Arab Muslim countries around Israel is literally almost 100 times the size of Israel. Israel has absorbed about 1 million refugees, now having a population of roughly 6 million. That's gigantic. Percentage-wise, we couldn't even fathom that in Canada, bringing in that many refugees. Do you think there's any possibility of the surrounding Arab Muslim countries also doing their bit, and maybe say why they haven't to date?

I know Jordan is the only one of those countries that accepts Palestinians as citizens. As I understand it, in the camps in Lebanon, they number about 400,000, but they can't even go to school or work outside the camps. Do you see that changing in countries surrounding Israel, that attitude, so that could be part of the solution? I know there are other things, as you've mentioned, that need to be addressed, but do you see that changing over time?

• (1330)

Mr. Terry Rempel: Thanks for the question.

The short answer is yes, but to put some meat around the answer, if you look at it historically you find a situation, for example, in the early fifties where countries like Syria and Jordan indicated to the UN that they would be willing to resettle refugees, but the key issue was that it should be a voluntary choice. For that choice to be voluntary, all of the options needed to be on the table, so that if refugees chose not to go back to their place of origin inside the current state of Israel, then some countries in the region would be willing to resettle Palestinian refugees in their territory.

The situation is particularly unique in Lebanon, for their own internal issues of population imbalance, with the Christians and the Muslims, although I think even Lebanon might, in a situation where refugees themselves were given an actual choice, be willing to resettle some Palestinian refugees. For example, although the decision was informed by certain sectarian interests in Lebanon, you have had 30,000, by some estimates, to upwards of 60,000 Palestinian refugees who are Christian who have been given Lebanese citizenship.

But the key issue, of course, is the issue of choice, and this is what I believe makes it so difficult for Arab states to offer resettlement, when there is not a recognition from the State of Israel—which is regarded as the country of origin, so to speak, since these refugees are originally from the territory of former Palestine that Israel was a successor state to. As long as that option of return is not on the table, politically it is very difficult for Arab states to offer resettlement.

I think there is something in the meantime that could be done. There's a general consensus among refugees themselves. For a long time there was a basic position that they didn't want to develop the camps and improve the living conditions in the camps, because it would lead to de facto resettlement. In the meantime, I think a consensus has developed that improving their living conditions and having basic housing standards that are at an adequate level does not negate any of their claims as refugees in relation to final-status issues. That's why I mentioned the whole issue of a regional refugee infrastructure that would deal with the refugee situation at a regional level. I think quite a bit of work could be done on this to improve the situation, at least of refugees, until there is a point when final-status negotiations resume and an agreement sets out the terms of durable solutions for refugees.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lalonde, the floor is yours.

Ms. Francine Lalonde (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you very much for being here today. I'm sure that some of us will have to call on your expertise again. You will leave your business cards, I trust.

My first question is perhaps the most difficult of all my questions. Do Palestinian refugees really expect to return to their parents' land? I know some who do expect just that, but it seems to me that there are many others who do not expect that.

Secondly, I have read the book written by Charles Enderlin—who has been in living in Israel for 20 years and who is himself Israeli—on the Oslo Accords. In his view, if we had been as well prepared in Oslo as in Tabah, if Bill Clinton had really taken the negotiations seriously, those negotiations could have yielded a positive result. Therefore, he believes that the refugee issue could be solved fairly quickly. What do you think?

Thirdly, Canada chairs the Refugee Working Group, but the group has not done anything for a number of years because the two parties do not meet. Do you think there is anything to be done there?

• (1335)

[*English*]

Mr. Terry Rempel: On the question of whether refugees expect to return, this is a really difficult question. Obviously, one of Israel's primary concerns is the issue of demography and what would happen if there would be a large-scale return of refugees to Israel. There have been over the past decade numerous opinion polls that have been conducted among refugees precisely to try to determine how many would choose to return and how many would choose not to.

The problem with this is that the whole notion of choice and someone's decision on whether to return or not is very complex. There are many variables that go into it, from the package itself—what's being offered to refugees as part of a return or resettlement process—to the decision of family members or of one's larger community, to the current situation inside their host country or inside their country of origin, and many other different issues. Unfortunately, opinion polls can't take into account these issues.

Often what has happened is that refugees regard these opinion polls in the context of there not being any peace agreement on the table and no final-status negotiations. They see it as something that could potentially be used politically against them if they say they don't want to return. It's very difficult to actually determine whether these polls describe an actual choice that a refugee is going to make or a response to the current political situation in which the poll is being conducted. I think you will find that people will make all types of different choices, but the problem is we don't know exactly how many will choose what.

Secondly, on the issue of Taba and Oslo, I think one of the great tragedies of what happened in 2000-01 was the conclusion that because the talks in Camp David and Taba were not successful, this meant an end to the process. In fact, when refugees themselves confronted the Palestinian leadership and said this is what they'd like out of a peace agreement.... I remember, for example, a popular statement that went out from one of the refugee organizations, sent directly to former Chairman Arafat, that basically said if you don't come back without the right of return, don't come back at all.

That was interpreted by many as saying that either it's this particular process or it's finished. It was never meant.... If you talked to people who were involved in drafting that statement, they'd say it was simply saying, okay, let's reach for what we can today, and if we feel that we can't reach a good agreement, we'll continue to work at it, but let's not throw the process away. Unfortunately, that's what happened. The process collapsed and we are where we are today.

Perhaps, given some additional time and especially consultation with the refugee community itself, which felt from the very beginning of Oslo that they were not part of the process, if some more work could have been built on Taba bringing the refugees in, consulting, and then going back to talks, I think—whether or not it could have been a final-status agreement—we could have certainly made another step forward.

In terms of Canada's role in the multilaterals and the refugee working group, there has been concern expressed in the region that Canada has become much less visible in the last three to four years on the refugee file. I think there would be an interest or an openness. I mean, there's a limited amount that one can do in the context of not having negotiations.

• (1340)

The refugee community felt it was important for Canada to be consulting with the community, to ensure that the refugee issue remains visible. One of the big failures of Oslo was that it continued to be a taboo issue. As long as it's not discussed officially or at a grassroots level, it remains a taboo issue. I think there is a role to play in continuing to be visible in the region and continuing to have meetings in the camps with refugee leadership, with UNRWA and others.

The Chair: Merci.

Ms. Beaumier.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.): Thank you, Terry, for coming today. You mentioned that there was no mandate for the UN to search for a durable solution for the Palestinian refugees. Do you have any idea why that would be? Are there other

groups of refugees who have not been given the right of return? How has this been solved?

With the wall being built, and even with the withdrawal out of Gaza, what is going to happen if there is not an equitable settlement on the West Bank? Even with a withdrawal from Gaza, I can't see that there will be many Palestinians with a great deal of sympathy for those in the West Bank. With what has happened in Hebron, many of us could understand this sense of futility among the Palestinians. I haven't been in the Middle East for a couple of years, but the last time I was there the sense of hopelessness and anger at seeing foreigners come and go when nothing ever changes was increasing. Has that been turned around since Abbas?

With respect to Syria, I'm wondering if in the long term the Syrians don't look at the Palestinians as a buffer for some sort of a border there. I was there with Madame Lalonde, and a member of the parliament there told us that the ultimate goal for him and his party was the reclaiming of Judea and Samaria. I don't say this represents all of the parliamentarians. I wonder, however, if there isn't a sense of paranoia on both sides between Syria and Israel.

Mr. Terry Rempel: Thank you.

On the question of the UN's not having a mandate to search for durable solutions, that mandate lay primarily or solely with this UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, which was established in 1948 under General Assembly Resolution 194. In 1952 the UNCCP's mandate was reduced significantly because it was felt it could not advance political negotiations among the parties further, and it was given the sole primary task of establishing a database of property claims for Arabs and Jews in Palestine as a result of the conflict, which it completed in 1964. But since 1952 it worked solely on that issue and did not deal any longer with the search for durable solutions, apart from a short-lived mission in 1960 by Joseph Johnson from the Carnegie Foundation, who attempted once more under Kennedy's administration to find a solution and was not able to.

Under the particular regime set up with the 1951 refugee convention I mentioned earlier, there is a clause—it's article 1D—that says in its second part that if for any reason protection or assistance ceases to the group of refugees to which this article applies—and it's only Palestinians—then the refugee convention should apply, and by inference also UNHCR's mandate should be activated in the search for durable solutions.

That has never been done. There are two reasons. First of all, UNHCR has a particular statute—this is rather technical—that is not the same as article 1D. Article 1D in the refugee convention has two parts: this first part, which excluded Palestinian refugees; and the second part, which I just mentioned, which included them if one of these agencies ceased to exist. But UNHCR's statute only includes the first part. It includes the exclusion or the suspension clause, but not the inclusion one. This is the technical legal problem.

Secondly, it was a political problem, because UNHCR is also, like UNRWA, dependent on voluntary donations, and in the context of the pressures UNHCR is under as a UN body, why would they want to take on a whole other caseload of refugees—some five million people—in addition to their existing mandate?

Then thirdly there are the sensitivities in the Arab world. UNHCR has been perceived in the Arab world, because of its original purpose, as an agency with a primary mandate to resettle refugees, not to facilitate return. So there has been resistance by Arab states to a role played by UNHCR. That is the issue of mandate.

I know there is a discussion going on inside the UN, but it's mostly related to the protection aspect of the gap and not the "search for a durable solution" aspect of the gap.

Other refugees not given a right of return...? I think one has to distinguish between what is recognized and the issue of implementation, because they are two very different things. If one looked at peace agreements, for example, from the end of the Cold War to date that involved conflicts where there were large flows of refugees, although the language differs, in each of those agreements—and you can list 10 or 12 different peace agreements involving major refugee cases that recognized the right of refugees to return to their homes of origin based on voluntariness, and also the issue of property and housing restitution, and they also provided solutions for those who were choosing not to, for whatever reasons, exercise their right of return—one would see that the implementation issue is quite different, because you have all kinds of levels of good and not so good and bad implementation on the issue of right of return. It's very difficult. It's recognized by UNHCR as one of the most difficult solutions to implement.

● (1345)

On the wall, the situation in the West Bank, yes, my sense is that the level of frustration is growing in the West Bank, and it could potentially get worse and not better in the period after the disengagement plan, because there is a great fear among people that it will be disengagement and that will be it. The situation with this wall is creating a pressure-cooker situation for people again.

I think John Dugard's comments on the wall were quite astute, because one of the primary reasons for the construction of the wall, from Israel's point of view, has been security. This is a security barrier, and that's what they call it. Dugard has made the point, and Israel has said, that attacks on Israeli civilians have reduced by some 80% since the construction of the barrier began in 2002. Dugard's point is that if attacks have been reduced by this amount, there's no credible evidence why the wall could not have been constructed on the Green Line itself and achieved the same results. His conclusion, therefore, is that because of the location of the wall, and the inclusion of large settlement blocks between the wall and the Green Line, or the 1949 armistice lines, and the location of major water resources and fertile land in this area, it is in effect an attempt to annex additional land from the West Bank.

As a result of this, you are having new forms of displacement inside the West Bank. People are being displaced, some by the actual construction of the wall and some because of its associated regime. People can't get permits, they can't remain in areas, or it becomes too frustrating to get to work, etc., they can't find employment, health access, all these issues. And there's also the issue of Jerusalem itself.

This is maybe a personal response, but I am by nature an optimistic person, and after seven years in the occupied territories I remain optimistic, but in this current situation the writing on the wall does not look good in terms of the political situation. I fear what will

happen is a similar situation as in 2003, when Mr. Abbas was prime minister for a short period of time, and the situation on the ground basically undercut his credibility because he was not able to show results from engaging in a political process.

● (1350)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Rempel, for coming today.

Certainly it's always good to hear about some of the issues in probably the most volatile part of the world. Every day, it seems, when you turn the television on, you still see news coming out of Israel and news in regard to the Palestinian question.

I remember a number of years ago I was in Israel and met with a number of Arab Palestinian leaders, in fact, went out to Jericho and met with Ehud Barak. I'll never forget what he said. He started out speaking to our delegation, and he said, "Israel wants peace". Actually it was not Ehud Barak—

Mr. Terry Rempel: Saeb Erekat.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Yes, Erekat. It wasn't Ehud Barak. But anyway, Erekat said, "Israel wants peace", and he said, "Please understand that Palestinians want peace". He listed a couple of things, and then he said, "The problem is Israel and Palestine want the same things as well". I think he said it so vividly because of those...you've talked about Jerusalem and you've talked about a number of other issues.

The wall was an issue that I was going to ask a question about. You said that terrorist attacks or suicide bombings have been diminished by 80%? Is that correct?

Mr. Terry Rempel: Yes, Israel has stated it's 80%, at least in one of the reports I read.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: So it would be a success then?

Ms. Francine Lalonde: There are other causes.

Mr. Terry Rempel: It will be in terms of Israel's position, but the problem is there are other side effects that end up undercutting the political—

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Yes, it undermines certain political things but also those who are responsible for monitoring human rights in the UN system in the occupied territories, those such as OCHA, are raising is whether the same result could be achieved by locating the wall on the Green Line itself. There's nothing physically that prevents the construction of the wall on the Green Line. Constructing it on the Green Line would reduce the impact significantly in terms of land confiscation, displacement of persons as a result of the wall's construction, issues of access, and freedom of movement.

● (1355)

Mr. Terry Rempel: I think the question that not only Palestinians but also those who are responsible for monitoring human rights in the UN system in the occupied territories, those such as OCHA, are raising is whether the same result could be achieved by locating the wall on the Green Line itself. There's nothing physically that prevents the construction of the wall on the Green Line. Constructing it on the Green Line would reduce the impact significantly in terms of land confiscation, displacement of persons as a result of the wall's construction, issues of access, and freedom of movement.

So that's the question people are raising. I think the PLO and the Palestinian Authority have said, okay, if it's an issue of constructing the wall, let's do it, but at least let's do it on the Green Line in order to minimize the negative impact it's having both on people's personal lives and on the political process itself.

Mr. Stockwell Day: Hopefully one day the boundary issues will all be settled. We can always be optimistic about that.

From what I understand, too, on the wall construction, in a number of places where it takes a curve or a twist, that's where the actual sniper lines are; that's where civilian traffic is really exposed. I'm not saying that's the case everywhere there's an unexplainable departure from an existing boundary line, but in many of those situations it's actually security-oriented to prevent the previous sight lines for either mortar fire or sniper fire.

The Chair: This is your last question.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Yes, these are the last couple of questions.

When we think of refugees, many of us think of different things. What are these refugees doing now? You talk about all of these displaced individuals, but what are they doing now? We think of refugees in Sudan or refugees in Chad and some of those areas, and we think of these people wandering, living in tents, with no food, and nobody to look after them. What are the conditions, and how are these refugees looked after?

You also talked about article 1D. Article 1D is the right of asylum, the right to return? Is that right?

Mr. Terry Rempel: No. It defines who a refugee is. Most refugees fall under article 1A in terms of their asylum claims. Article 1D was inserted into the convention to address the specific nature of Palestinian refugees.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: And you said that for Canada and the United States, it's not part of our policy or it's not part of our refugee law?

Mr. Terry Rempel: The convention is, of course, part of Canada's refugee and asylum law, but article 1D is not incorporated specifically.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Why?

Mr. Terry Rempel: I'm not sure of the history of why this was not incorporated into the law. The United States and a few countries in Europe—Switzerland, for example—have not incorporated it, but I don't know the exact reason.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Lalonde, you will have the opportunity to ask one last question before we conclude.

Ms. Francine Lalonde: So why do you keep hoping, in spite of everything?

[*English*]

Mr. Terry Rempel: What gives me hope? I'll give one example. The conventional wisdom today says the parties are further apart than they have ever been on the main issues, the substantive issues of the conflict, since the beginning of the second Palestinian uprising. Yet one sees on the refugee issue...and this is difficult to explain; perhaps it is because of the situation.

For example, for the first time in seven years we as an institution now have institutional partners on the Israeli side, among Israeli Jews, who are working on the refugee issue, the refugee file. They're educating Israeli society about the refugee issue and trying to create a base where one can have a discussion about the issue and have common language to talk about it. One of the things they're doing is taking Israelis on visits to village sites of Palestinian refugees, with a refugee, to talk about village life before the war in 1948 and what happened. Then, inevitably, they talk about potential solutions.

What it basically does is break down the issue, take it away from rhetoric and emotions, and get down to some substantive issues, because there are legitimate concerns on both sides that have to be addressed in terms of resolving this issue. For Israelis, whose concern is security, if they see the potential for a large number of refugees coming back, it's a legitimate concern, as in any other refugee case.

But there's lots of experience in terms of resolving refugee issues around the world. For example, how do you deal with issues of security? Some may be concerned, in the context of a refugee returning, that they're living in a Palestinian home in West Jerusalem that is the home of a refugee, and they're fearful of being turfed out of their house and becoming homeless. That's a legitimate concern, but there are ways to address those issues.

Now, by breaking down the issue, setting aside the discussion of law for a minute and the right of return, and setting aside the emotions attached to this issue on both sides, one can break it down into all kinds of different component parts and begin to have a substantive discussion. It's not to say you're going to reach an agreement or convince large numbers of people on either side, but it's something that's never been tried before and it's happening now. So that's an area. I think no one knows how far that will go, but it's something new in terms of the process, something that hasn't happened before.

• (1400)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Rempel, thank you for coming here today.

[*English*]

We'll keep your enthusiasm and your optimism.

Merci encore une fois.

The meeting is over.

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