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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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• (1235)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please.

We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today, Thursday, June 11, 2009, marks our 25th meeting.

[English]

We have two witnesses appearing today in connection with our ongoing study of human rights in Iran. One, who has not yet arrived but will do so shortly, is Houchang Hassan-Yari, professor of politics and economics at the Royal Military College of Canada. Also joining us, from beautiful Fort Lauderdale, is Victor Comras, an attorney.

Perhaps, Mr. Comras, because you are here and Professor Houchang is not, we'll start with you. If he arrives, we'll move from your testimony to his and then go to questions. If he hasn't arrived, we'll go directly to questions.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Victor Comras (Attorney, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I've been invited here today to talk to you about sanctions and their potential utility in dissuading Iran from policies that continue to challenge international peace and security. It's not just the nuclear issue at play here; there's also Iran's support for international terrorism, their interference in Lebanon and Iraq, their human rights abuses, and the growing tension between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims throughout the Middle East.

These are not new issues. They've been around for some time, and they make Iran's role in the Middle East a very dangerous one, which is one of the main reasons we really do need to worry about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. I don't think there can still be any doubt that Iran's current nuclear program, particularly its uranium enrichment program, is directed at establishing a nuclear arms capability. I believe that if Iran is allowed to succeed, and if North Korea is allowed to maintain its nuclear weapons program, the implications for international peace and security and for keeping any lid on future nuclear weapons proliferation are devastating. So I think the stakes here are very, very high.

I've long been an advocate of using well-considered targeted economic and political sanctions to dissuade Iran and North Korea from pursuing irresponsible nuclear programs. By "well-considered", I mean sanctions that are tailored to achieve specific objectives by having an impact on those individuals or entities and those segments of the leadership and population that are likely to influence the course of conduct in question. I believe the credible threat or use of sanctions offer our last best chance of convincing Iran and North Korea to change course without our having to engage in costly and dangerous military action. I do not believe that the current sanctions programs in place with regard to Iran meets this need or criterion. Let's be clear, the low-impact sanctions now on the table simply will not work.

The sanctions measures adopted so far by the Security Council are clearly insufficient to motivate Iran to change course. Rather, it seems to me they've conveyed the sense that the key countries continue to lack the political will necessary to face up to Iran's challenge to non-proliferation norms. And this signal has been received loud and clear by the Iranian regime, as well as by the regime in North Korea. Iran will only change course if and when its leadership is convinced that the international community will in fact take the steps necessary to seriously impact these leaders, the IRGC, and the companies and other entities that support them and the vulnerable sectors of the Iranian economy. Such an impact, I think the Iranian leaders would understand and know, would in turn seriously threaten the stability and durability of their regime.

Three years ago, when I began speaking about the possible use of sanctions against Iran, there was reason for optimism that stringent sanctions directed at Iran's economic vulnerabilities and at isolating Iran's mullah regime might well convince these leaders to change course. Frankly, I am much less optimistic today. Too much time has elapsed without any meaningful international response to the challenges posed by Iran, and too little time remains before Iran achieves nuclear weapons capability.

Iran has been pursuing the development of nuclear weapons now for many years, and the closer Iran approaches the nuclear capability threshold, the fewer options we have to deal with this dangerous situation. Iran's nuclear program was already an important matter of concern back in 2003, when the G-8 leaders agreed they would act together to dissuade Iran from pursuing an unmonitored uranium enrichment program. Unfortunately, nothing happened. Again, in 2006, at the G-8 summit chaired by Russia in St. Petersburg, they warned Iran that its continued intransigence would result in Security Council sanctions.

•(1240)

It took a little while longer to get those sanctions, but Iran took little heed of these G-8 warnings. Rather, they gambled that with the tight international oil market and America stuck in Iraq they would be protected from any effective international response. They calculated that the international community was not likely to risk cutting off the flow of Iranian oil. They figured they could count on China and Russia to hold up any effective UN action. They hardened their key nuclear facilities against possible missile strikes, and they concluded that the United States was not in a position to launch any sustained military operations to take down their facilities. This gamble seems to have paid off, at least so far.

The Security Council has already gone through three rounds of sanctions resolutions against Iran, but has in fact done little to pressure Iran for change. Further sanctions are now threatened, yet Iran appears to remain intransigent. They don't seem very concerned by new sanctions. Based on past experience, they figure they have little to worry about. The sanctions in place have not amounted to much. What do they do? They freeze the assets of 40 individuals, 35 entities associated with Iran's uranium enrichment and missile development programs, and they don't even include Ahmadinejad, Supreme Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, or any of the other ruling mullahs on this freeze list. The sanctions place a limited ban on shipping sensitive materials and technology to Iran. They call on countries to exercise "vigilance and restraint" when it comes to supplying Iran with sensitive dual-use items, and they curtail Iran's ability to market its own military equipment overseas. Finally, they warn the international community to be extraordinarily cautious when dealing with banks domiciled in Iran, particularly Bank Sepah, Bank Mellī, and Bank Saderat. While these sanctions may have complicated an already difficult economic situation in Iran, they are far from sufficient to pressure Iran to give up nuclear ambitions. Much harder sanctions, I think it's clear, would be needed for that.

In the past, the Security Council has shied away from imposing measures that might restrict investments or loans or financial and development assistance to Iran. Security Council members have declined to limit commercial ties with Iran. They've left Russia free to pursue a multi-billion-dollar trade promotion program with Iran and to service the Russian-built nuclear reactor. They've left on the table several major international oil and gas development deals, and they did nothing to dissuade China from pursuing its own large-scale sweetheart oil and gas arrangements, including a 25-year LP gas development and export contract that could be worth upwards of \$100 billion. These major projects completely undercut efforts to get Iran to change course. Iran will only change course if and when its leadership is convinced that the international community will actually take the steps necessary to have some impact on them, for they know and they fear that such an impact on their economy could seriously weaken their durability.

What are our options? There are five basic options that stare us in the face: we can wait and do nothing; we can seek to persuade Iran by engaging in a new direct dialogue with the Iranian regime; we can hope for, encourage, or foment regime change; we can put pressure on Iran by imposing increasingly stringent economic and political sanctions; or we can engage in the threat or use of force. None of

these are exclusive courses of action, and any combination is possible.

I don't think we can sit by idly and watch Iran thumb its nose at the rest of the world on this issue. Doing nothing now will only leave us with fewer options later. I don't think we can afford to wait until our choices are only taking military action or learning to cope with an even more dangerous and disruptive Iran.

What about engaging Iran in dialogue? The Obama administration has put this option squarely on the table, and there is some hope that the forthcoming Iranian election tomorrow may provide us with some new interlocutor, perhaps more rational than President Ahmadinejad. Yet dialogue without leverage could well prove unproductive and could risk providing the Iranian regime with sufficient latitude and time to advance and solidify their nuclear weapons capability.

•(1245)

President Obama has given Iran until the end of the year for some sign that they are actually willing to consider putting a hold on their enrichment and other nuclear programs related to weapons capabilities. That leaves only about six months. We need to be ready to act on additional measures quickly if such talks fail to pan out. Talking for talking's sake and without short-term benchmarks would simply leave open the door for Iran to pursue its goal unfettered by western constraints.

I have to admit that I'm not optimistic on this score. The Europeans tried dialogue with Iran for more than three years. They offered all sorts of carrots to convince Iran to suspend its enrichment program, but made no real progress. Europe certainly has more carrots, more leverage, and more influence with Iran these days than we do in the United States. Our agreeing to normalize relations with Iran or lift our own unilateral sanctions is not as precious to them as we would like to believe, and would not really buy us that much goodwill. They digested U.S. sanctions long ago, and we didn't get much from Iran the last time we lifted our Iran sanctions some two decades ago.

We will need to consider more leverage on Iran if we are going to make dialogue a useful course. This leverage can only come from increasing the international economic pressure on Iran now through clear signals to Iran that, as Mrs. Clinton recently put it, "crippling" international sanctions will be imposed, but that's not something we can be sure of. Certainly we in the United States can't do that alone. We have almost nothing left in our unilateral sanctions bag. This will require concerted action by the Security Council, or at least by our European, Canadian, and Japanese friends and allies.

Sanctions can be useful tools when crafted and used wisely and in conjunction with other measures aimed at specific results. Iran's economy is very fragile, and the current economic situation has already created internal opposition to the policies of an erratic Ahmadinejad. That makes Iran's economy quite susceptible to stringent sanctions.

Iran's mullahs must also be made to feel the pinch of these sanctions. So far they've really enjoyed a free ride. With the corruption running rampant throughout Iran's ruling circles, there's quite a bit of money outside of Iran that could be frozen if you went after the mullahs.

The Security Council's current sanction measures, as I said before, are not designed to disrupt or distress Iran's economy or its normal trade and business relations, and so far they do not penalize Iran's leaders in any way; rather, they've been directed only at hampering Iran's access to nuclear material and technology. I say "hampering" because I don't think they're going to stop it.

We need now to put in place the ability to impose sanctions that target economic vulnerabilities, the elements that can truly place the stress on them. These vulnerabilities include their fragile financial system, their energy sector, their transportation and communication sector, and their urban commercial class.

The U.S. Treasury Department has already initiated its own strategy to put additional stress on Iran's banking system. They've designated several key Iranian banks. They've convinced FATF to issue its own warnings concerning Iranian banks' illicit transactions. They've cut off U-turn transactions, thereby blocking Iran's ability to dollarize many of its transactions, and they've used our market leverage to get European bank and other boardrooms to think twice when they deal with Iran.

In the United States there's also a growing threat of divestment. Negative publicity and reputational risks exist for these European and other institutions that do business in Iran when they want to approach or build on a valuable U.S. market.

• (1250)

Now, though, it's time for us to convince our European friends and allies and Iran's other key economic and trade partners to join with us in targeting these kinds of measures effectively, even if we can't get a Security Council resolution that does it.

Europe remains Iran's most important trading partner. European countries export much more to Iran than they import, even counting the oil. European businesses and banks are crucial for Iran's fledgling middle class. European sanctions now, if formulated adeptly, could have a major impact on Iran's cities and on its commercial class, and this commercial class is critical to holding Iranian urban employment figures from plummeting further. This may well represent Iran's Achilles heel.

I believe that Russia and China are not in a position to substitute quickly or to reduce the impact such sanctions would have in an immediate fashion. And I am doubtful that they would seek to undercut these sanctions in any major way, if they were convinced that we were very serious about them.

The United States has already completely cut off its financial ties with Iran, and we've made it extremely difficult and expensive for Iran to process any transaction in U.S. dollars. Europe might well threaten to do the same with euro-based transactions. They could also cut off their export credit programs. With a daily consumption of 18 million gallons of gasoline, Iran now imports—surprisingly, it is an importer—180 million to 200 million gallons of gasoline per month. Rising petroleum prices have already caused civil unrest

there, and gasoline shortages could have a significant impact on their business activity. This is a point of stranglehold that ought to be used more effectively.

On the other hand, we see that Royal Dutch Shell is still serving in an advisory capacity to Iran on how to upgrade their refining capacities. This is the kind of activity that needs to be halted.

Europe, Japan, and Canada could also join the United States in cutting off Iran's access to high-tech items, including potential dual-use equipment and expertise. Together, we could put considerable pressure on the UAE, on Dubai, and the free port of Jebel Ali, which serves as a trans-shipment point for so many of the items that are not supposed to be shipped there.

Europe, Canada, and Japan might also consider joining with us in restricting access of Iranian ships to our ports, or refusing to insure or re-insure Iranian ships or cargoes, or increasing insurance premiums for Iranian merchandise or for ships carrying such merchandise. We could start imposing travel restrictions. We could cut off cultural, sporting, and scientific exchanges with Iran. These are examples of measures that could be threatened or taken to convince Iran that we mean business. These are the kinds of measures that give us our last, best chance of heading off a graver crisis just a few years down the road.

Of course, there is a human element here, one which your subcommittee is rightfully concerned with, for sanctions inevitably have an impact on the most vulnerable: the poor, the aged, the infirm, and the children. We must always be mindful of the unintended consequences of sanctions and how they best can be mitigated without defeating the ability of the sanctions to impact those targeted. But even understanding that there are unintended and unavoidable consequences, sanctions remain a much less costly approach, in terms of human tragedy and suffering, than military options and war.

I also fear the consequences and the human tragedy that might well occur from a nuclear-armed Iran led by Islamic fundamentalists all too willing to employ suicide bombing tactics and to sacrifice innocent lives, or from the likes of an Ahmadinejad, who seems to know no rational bounds.

Let's hope that sanity and responsibility finally do prevail in Iran and that at least some of these actions can be avoided.

Thank you for hearing me out, Mr. Chairman.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Comras. While you were giving your presentation, our other witness arrived.

Welcome, Professor Houchang Hassan-Yari. I wonder if we could ask you to give your presentation now.

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari (Professor and Head, Politics and Economics Department, Royal Military College of Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to be late. I came from Kingston earlier, so I was wandering in the central building.

My presentation is going to be in French, but I would be more than willing to entertain any questions in English.

I'm going to concentrate, basically, on the issue that I'm asked to do, human rights in Iran. If you are interested, I can react to what Mr. Comras mentioned, in terms of his ideas on how to influence the Iranian regime.

[*Translation*]

The issue of respect for human rights has always been a source of tension between the Iranian state and Iranian society. It has also always been linked to political arrests and has always shaped relations between the state and society. That is nothing new in Iran; it was going on before the revolution. It has been going on for hundreds of years.

If we look at the country's history, we can see, for example, that the constitutional revolution at the beginning of the 20th century was in fact an attempt to enforce human rights and to weaken the absolute power of the state so that people would be more involved in the decision-making process. The country was in the same boat in the 1950s. The conflict between the state and society focused on the participation of the people and respect for human rights. Things were similar in the 1960s, when people revolted and violence was used to suppress those revolts, which were aimed at improving people's living situations. It was the same in the 1970s until 1978-1979, when the revolution broke out. Ultimately, on February 12, 1979, the revolution known as the Islamic revolution was successful.

In other words, all of these events had one thing in common: Iranian society was seeking a better quality of life, specifically, the protection of human rights. That struggle has been going on since the 1979 revolution and has undergone some changes along the way, which we will come back to. So the goal is still to oppose the excesses of the government and to demand that Iranians receive a fairer share of resources.

In theory, the 1979 revolution was in response to the events of the past century. Specifically, its purpose was to restore respect and dignity to individuals and their communities. The three main slogans of the 1979 revolution—*independence, freedom and Islamic republic*—symbolized what Iranians were seeking. First, they were seeking independence, not only from foreign powers, but also from the government, which was repressing civil society. Second, they were seeking freedom of expression, of demonstration and so forth. And third, they were seeking an Islamic republic, where the legitimacy of the republic was granted by its people. Those three slogans more or less sum up what Iranian society has been seeking throughout its history.

In short, this attempt to improve living conditions, to enforce human rights and to take back the management of society was at the heart of the revolution, and still is today.

Generally speaking, the rights issue has two important parts. First, the individual aspect, whereby a person is granted rights under the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as the right to housing and education, or the right to express oneself freely without fear of repression.

● (1300)

Other rights were going to be enacted and set out by the law.

The second part has to do with collective rights, which I mentioned earlier. Those are the rights that individuals have within their community and that they enjoy beyond their individual rights. For example, religious minorities, be they Muslim or not, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian or other, now have representatives within the Iranian Parliament, in accordance with Iran's constitution. Those are collective rights.

In reality, despite what the constitution says, the interpretation of those same rights is, of course, up to the courts and individuals. As a result, interpretations are sometimes contradictory and seriously hinder people's use of those rights, even though they are set out in the Iranian constitution. I have identified a number of factors that may explain this anomaly.

First, there are no powerful institutions able to resist the pressure of political agents and, of course, interest groups. Iran in 2009 must be seen in the Iranian context. In other words, we must not expect that Canadian institutions will be imported by Iran and will run smoothly. It is a third world country that is struggling to solve its problems. One of its main problems, in my view, is precisely that weakness of its institutions. They are vulnerable.

There is also the non-separation of powers and the judiciary's financial dependence on the executive and legislative authorities. In a number of cases, we have seen that judges are under external pressure. They are, to some extent, forced to render decisions that are not necessarily consistent with their responsibilities. Even though the separation of powers exists on paper, it is not applied.

We also see interference by members of the executive authority in the legal system. For instance, the police, who should, in theory, be the agents of the legal system, often impose rules that are not necessarily set out in the law. In other words, the police is sometimes more powerful than the judges.

The manipulation of centres of power and interest is yet another phenomenon. People with power intervene to tip the scales in their favour. And then there is discrimination. In certain fields of employment and with respect to bank loans and other such areas, people are discriminated against. And, of course, that practice is openly criticized by the Iranian people.

The last factor is the weakness of civil society and non-governmental organizations in the face of an all-powerful government.

● (1305)

But beyond what I have just briefly presented, you must not think that Iranian society is a docile society that has resigned itself to the excesses of the government, if you will. On the contrary, it is a vibrant society. As you may know, approximately 75% of Iran's population is under 39 years of age. That is a vibrant population that is demanding its rights by holding student, women's and sometimes minority demonstrations, and so on.

If we take an overall look at Iranian society since 1979, we see that there has been some progress, despite the repression and everything we hear about in the news and in stories. That is a very encouraging picture of a society that is trying to return to the values of the revolution: independence, freedom and its role as a source of legitimacy.

Obviously, in no way does that mean that there is no repression. There is. If we compare the Iranian revolution of 1979 to 2009 to the most famous revolutions in history such as the Soviet revolution of 1917 in Russia and the French Revolution, often called the mother of all revolutions, to the situation in Nicaragua in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and to the events in the Philippines when Marcos left power, we can see that during the 30 years of the Iranian revolution, Iran has made great strides that the French and Russians did not achieve for more than 70 years.

We need only compare the situation today, including the state of human rights, with the excesses that immediately followed the revolution. That means that there is a constant struggle between civil society and those in power. In my view, those in power are backing down. In other words, they are yielding to the advancements of civil society. And that is why I am relatively optimistic about the evolution of Iranian society.

What can we do to improve the situation? I think that the international community, including Canada, has a role to play, but that role has to be balanced by the reality. We have to take into account the Iranian reality and what Iranians want.

Contrary to what many think, I believe the first and most important step is to engage Iran in a dialogue. Since Mr. Obama came to power, the Iranian regime and regime hardliners, in particular, have been on the defensive. Just listen to the remarks made by the supreme leader, Ahmadinejad and others. People who are not very familiar with Iranian society think that the leader wields 80% of the power, and the president, 20%, plain and simple.

• (1310)

There are easily at least 11 centres of power in Iran. In other words, power in Iran is not concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, Khamenei or Ahmadinejad. If you're interested, we could come back to this topic a little later.

Since President Obama's comments, there has been a subtle, implicit change in the discourse of Iranian leaders. That is why I say that they are on the defensive. When Mr. Bush was in office, I often said, while in Iran as well as to the Canadian and foreign media, that if the Americans were serious about bringing change to the country's government, they should engage in a dialogue with the Iranian regime.

By isolating the Iranian regime, you merely play into the hands of the most extremist factions in Iran. That is exactly what they want. Ahmadinejad's comments are not about Israel. He knows full well that he does not have the capability of wiping Israel off the world map. His views on the Holocaust have been denounced by many people in Iran. It is important to look at what the people in power are saying, including Khatami and Rafsanjani, instead of focusing solely on media reports. I urge you to read the comments that have been made and to take a look at what is happening in Iranian society. All

you need to do is watch the televised debates that have been taking place over the past few days in Iran. Without exception, the three—

The Chair: Since we need to leave the committee members some time for questions, I would ask you to please wrap up.

• (1315)

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: If you watch the debates, you will see that there are four candidates. The other three are critical of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy. They argue that Iran must not behave in this manner on the world stage. They denounce the extreme language used by Ahmadinejad. They repeatedly maintain that Iran is not seeking to become a nuclear power.

Several years ago, the media was reporting that Iran was set to have nuclear weapons within six months, a year or two years. So far, there is no indication that this has happened. I recall reading the reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The problem with Iran is that its leaders do not know how to speak to the international community in reassuring terms. What we are seeing today during the election campaign gives us a great deal of hope about Iran's future and its commitment to the international community.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Thank you to both our witnesses.

We have less time than we normally have for these sorts of things. We could barely fit in one round of seven-minute questions and one round of five-minute questions if everybody sticks very closely to those deadlines. I'm going to have to be quite firm this time on restricting both long questions and long answers. So I encourage everybody to be as concise as they can.

With that said, Mr. Cotler, would you like to lead off?

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would also like to join in thanking the witnesses.

My first question is to Mr. Comras. Your presentation understandably focused on the danger of the nuclear threat and the comprehensive set of sanctions that could target Iranian vulnerability. You also identified the various options, but focused on the importance of the comprehensive, strategic, targeted sanctions. Your presentation made no mention of the state-sanctioned incitement to genocide in Iran, and I understand that you didn't mention this because of your focus on the nuclear.

Regrettably, we have been witnessing—and we've heard this in witness testimony before this committee—a sustained, systematic, and widespread incitement that has engaged the various sectors of leadership in Iran, particularly Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. All this is being done in violation of the prohibition against direct and public incitement to genocide in the genocide convention and international law, and where state parties to the genocide convention and the international community have an obligation to prevent it.

Should we not be factoring in the genocidal together with the nuclear, since it is the incitement that is the context in which the nuclear acts itself out? In fact, if we are only concerned with the nuclear, we ought to be as concerned—if not more—that Pakistan has nuclear weapons as we are with Iran. It seems to me that you can't really abstract the genocidal from the nuclear. If you focus solely on the nuclear, as much of the international community has been doing, you end up—however inadvertently—sanitizing the genocidal. Yet in the genocidal you hear reference to wiping Israel off the map through one bomb. So that's where you get the convergence in the statements by Iranian leadership.

So should we not be factoring in the genocidal and seeking attending sanctions on the incitement, lest, however inadvertently, we sanitize the incitement by focusing on the nuclear?

Mr. Victor Comras: I couldn't agree with you more. Absolutely, within the context of Mr. Ahmadinejad's threat to wipe Israel off the map, one puts this great fear of the actual capability to do so with nuclear weapons. It is one critical aspect in determining why we cannot afford to allow Iran to achieve nuclear weapons capability. The risk is there to Israel, and I think it amplifies the whole context. You put that so very well.

There's even more to it in the disputes between fundamentalism of a Shia nature and fundamentalism of a Sunni nature that have historically conflicted. We know the tenets of the Wahabi and al-Qaeda policies that look at many of the Shi'ite community as apostate. They talk back and forth in apocalyptic terms. So this apocalyptic capability of a nuclear capability within Iran's hands is very dangerous from many perspectives.

One has to understand it's not just a question of non-proliferation; it's a question of the worst kind of risk that can destabilize a whole region and international peace.

• (1320)

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I'll turn it over to my colleague.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes (Brossard—La Prairie, Lib.): Why do you think Europe would have more leverage in discussions with Iran than Canada or the U.S., for example?

Mr. Victor Comras: Europe has considerable leverage because they are Iran's critical trading partner. In the United States we do about \$250 million in trade per year with Iran. Canada does about \$350 million. Compare that to about \$60 billion in cross-trade with Europe. Europe is Iran's major trading partner, and Europe's ability to impose the kinds of measures on that trade can have a major impact. That's why I put the stress on our European allies and the influence they can have on Iran if they choose to use it.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes: Would oil be the major acquisition?

Mr. Victor Comras: Oil is a significant part of the trade, but I'm talking pretty much about non-oil trade. Clearly, putting sanctions on Iran could have an impact on the oil trade, but I don't think that is the major element in the sanctions. Iran is so dependent on its oil that it won't choose to stop exporting. The question is the extent to which the international community and Europe might decide to impose limitations on Iran's ability to export oil.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Thi Lac, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): I'd like to thank the two witnesses for joining us this morning to share their views with us.

I would especially like to thank Dr. Hassan-Yari. The committee invited him here this morning to testify and he took time out from his very busy schedule to come.

Dr. Hassan-Yari, last week, you delivered a speech in which you claimed that the presidential elections were a turning point for Iran and where you asked the question: Is dialogue with Tehran possible? We know that tomorrow is election day in Iran.

My first question concerns the vulnerability of the institutions you spoke of earlier. What changes would the election of Mr. Hassan Moussavi bring about, considering the importance of Iran's religious council? As president, what kind of power would he wield in the face of the Supreme Leader?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: Thank you, Madam.

The power structure in Iran is extremely complex and I believe there is no other like it in the world. Briefly, within this structure, some officials are elected, while others are not. Elected officials share some powers, while unelected officials hold most of the power. It varies, depending on the individual personalities.

As far as electing a new president goes, if Moussavi were elected, the first thing we would see is a change of tone, something that I feel is quite important. Ahmadinejad's belligerent discourse on Israel, the Holocaust and other topics which has caused Iran tremendous harm on the international stage will be silenced. Moreover, this fact has not escaped the attention of other officials, including Khamenei.

We observed this during the eight years of Khatami's presidency. If you look at the position taken by Khamenei during this period of time, you will see marked differences in the views expressed before and after this period. In other words, despite the authority conferred upon him by the Constitution, Khamenei does not want to, or simply cannot say no to the elected president.

However, I do not expect to witness a total upheaval in the case of existing institutions, quite simply because that process takes time. For that reason, I stressed the fact that the Revolution lasted three decades.

Existing institutions are, however, in the process of adapting. Let me give you one example. The head of radio and television services, who is appointed by the Leader, decided to give Ahmadinejad 45 minutes of air time to respond to the accusations of other candidates. Because of street demonstrations and the denunciations of the other candidates, these 45 minutes of air time were reduced to 20 minutes, a rare occurrence in post-revolutionary Iran. The reason was that the Guardian Council, the members of which are not elected but who screen the candidates, was opposed to granting Ahmadinejad even one minute of air time. Yet, many people in Iran believe that the Council is responsible for putting Ahmadinejad in power. So then, it is possible for civil society to exert some pressure.

The country's institutions are admittedly weak. In some cases, these institutions are also vulnerable. As I see it, the people in charge of these institutions are also vulnerable. Therefore, it is a matter of finding a way to use the popular vote to advance the cause of human rights and civil society.

• (1325)

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: As it so happens, my second question concerns a subject that you just touched on, namely the values of the revolution.

The presidential election campaign has led to some huge demonstrations and resulted in an epic confrontation on Facebook. There have also been lively and fascinating televised debates. Clearly, the presidential campaign has aroused passions among Iranians as well as among Iranians living around the world.

Topics discussed included the economy, individual freedom and especially the image projected abroad by the Islamic Republic.

Despite the reported human rights violations that people are denouncing, is there in fact an opening for dialogue in Iran? Can you explain to us this rather paradoxical situation?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: You are quite right to point out the contradictions that exist in Iran.

When the terrorist attacks against the United States took place, the Iranians were the only ones in the entire Middle East region to protest and speak out against the attacks on the American people.

First of all, it means that the people and the country's leadership want two different things. That is an important point.

Secondly, I printed up a few photos of the protestors, in particular of women—you can take a look at them if you want—that prove that people are in fact taking part in public debates. That means that Iranian women, like women everywhere, want change.

That is why I stress that dialogue must be initiated with Iran and that the country must not be isolated, because the people you see in the photos will be the first to suffer from the country's isolation. Isolationist policies did not bring down the Iraqi regime. Sanctions only resulted in the death of Iraqi citizens, not in the demise of Saddam Hussein and his army. In the case of Iran, which can be compared to that of Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion, you have a society that is taking action and putting pressure on the government to make some changes.

You can view these photos on any Iranian blog or even on official Iranian government websites. According to our standards, these photos are harmless, but in the Iranian context, they are revolutionary.

In other words, Iranian society disagrees with the Iranian government on many different issues. You mentioned revolutionary values, the economy, freedoms and so forth. To my mind, a change is taking place. It's simply a matter of looking at Iranian society. For that reason, I strongly urge this subcommittee to take a good look at what is happening in Iranian society. Do not react to the inflammatory words of people like Ahmadinejad.

• (1330)

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Thank you very much, Mr. Comras, Dr. Hassan-Yari, for joining us today.

[English]

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to apologize to our guests. I was required to be in the House because I have a motion being put forward, so I'm playing a certain amount of catch-up.

I would start off my remarks by speaking to the fact that 30 years ago I was in Saudi Arabia for six months. If you look at your dates, you'll see that it was right around the time of the revolution. In Saudi Arabia, I made the mistake on a Friday of going down past the parking lot of the Great Mosque. Under sharia law, they administer the punishments on Fridays. I didn't observe it, but I was there within five minutes of a beheading. At the time I passed by, they were removing a man's hand. It gave me a very intense sense of the fundamentalism there. Then, of course, at that same time, they took the hostages in Iran.

What I'm leading up to, and why I want to address my remarks to you, Professor Yari, is that one of the things I'm hearing today, for one of the first times from one of our witnesses, is actually about engagement. I tend to be a person who favours engagement, so I lean that way automatically.

Various witnesses, in their testimony before us, talked about the engagement of youth and how so many are under 30 years of age. I have a couple of questions. First, do these young people understand the beginning of the revolution and how the clerics virtually stole that revolution?

Speaking of sanctions, we know that under the sanctions in Iraq, 500,000 children died. So I am certainly not on that page with anybody.

My final question for you, sir, would be this. When I was in Saudi Arabia, the United States was referred to as the "Great Satan", but Canada was not. It very clearly was not. Would the community in Iran still view us that way? In your opinion, would the work of this committee have an actual impact there?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: I thank you very much for your questions.

Obviously, we really have to denounce violence, whatever the source. So on the question of beheading and the other things that you made reference to in Saudi Arabia, they are not acceptable. Also not acceptable, for example, is the stoning of some people in Iran.

To answer your questions about youth and how they see the revolution, the revolutionaries, and how the revolution was hijacked and so forth, yes, they know about those issues. They also know about the fact that their parents made the revolution, but they say very clearly that they are looking for something else. It doesn't mean that they do not adhere to the revolution's values. They say what you're saying: we participated in the revolution for something else and we now have something different.

This is why, if you look at the universities, for example, or if you look at the blogs or even the newspapers, those that are not suppressed by censorship, one thing is absolutely clear, and that is change. I say this very often, and I say it in French, so I don't know if the English translation is as good as the French one:

● (1335)

[Translation]

the one constant in Iran is change.

[English]

The only constant in Iran is change.

[Translation]

For Iranians, the situation is unacceptable. Young people are highly educated and most have not experienced the revolution as such or visited other countries. Yet, if you speak to them, you sense that they are extremely open to the world. The example I gave you earlier of the vigils held to for the victims of the terrorist attacks against the United States, shows a certain shift between the people in power and the country's youth.

[English]

Iranian youth are looking for more opportunity—work, education, and so forth—and this is the source of hope, I believe, in Iran. This is why I started by saying that I see some real hope in Iran.

Farsi is one of the main languages used on the Internet. There are thousands of blogs originating in Iran, and the vast majority of them denounce the power and so forth. In other words, with any attack, or harm in any way to Iranian society, you will lose all that goodwill. I am absolutely sure about that. Because the Iranians are extremely nationalist. They are not chauvinists, but they are nationalists. They are defending their country, and whoever the attacker is, they are going to resist. And that would be the tragedy of this situation, because those sanctions, and so forth, are simply serving the most extreme elements in Iran. The Iranian young people are not looking for that kind of treatment.

As to how Iranians see the U.S. and Canada—and I do not exaggerate and I don't say it because I am here—for millions of Iranians, Canada is the dream land. Among the Iranians, when you talk to them, including those who are living here in Canada, they say that Canada is a kind of clean version of the U.S., meaning that in Canada you have everything the Americans have in terms of technological advancement and progress and so forth, but here we

don't have the same kinds of problems the Americans have. So for Iranians, Canada is very different from the U.S.

It's not that they hate the U.S. This is not the case at all. The Iranians do not do that. Make a distinction between the rhetoric of the revolution and the reality of the Iranian population. Talk to any Iranians, including many of those who are in the government—and I talk to a number of them—and you will see that in private they are looking for a visa to come to Canada or to send their kids to the U.S. That's the reality of Iran. So the rhetoric is something, but the reality is different.

Their view of Canada is a country that is peaceful—cold, obviously, but a peaceful place where you can go and live your life. It means they are not happy with the restrictions they have in their own country in terms of morality, and that's not in a bad sense concerning themselves, but I'm talking about the police intervention against women and young boys and so forth.

What they are looking for is to live in peace and harmony with everybody else. In the next few days, 1.2 million Iranians, those who just left secondary school, are going to pass what in Iran they call a *concours*. It's a kind of competition, an exam. They are going to write an exam in order to get into university.

Universities can accept about 10%, 11%, or a maximum of 12% of those people. So if you have 1.2 million people who want to go to university but they don't have a chance to go, you are talking about people who are looking for education and who are looking, in my view, for peace. That is the majority of them; I'm not talking about 100% of them. They are looking for peace, prosperity, and to live in harmony with the rest of the world. And this is precisely what you see these days in the Iranian streets and the denunciation of all kinds of excess, as I mentioned earlier, by a number of people in the Iranian leadership.

Thank you.

● (1340)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hiebert, please.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Comras, I appreciate your explanation and detailed list of possible sanctions that Canada or Japan or other countries could take against Iran. You also mentioned that the U.S. has basically exhausted its options when it comes to sanctions. They have done pretty much everything they could do. What impact are those sanctions having?

Mr. Victor Comras: I think the U.S. sanctions are having an impact. They're mostly having an impact in boardrooms in Europe and around the world, and causing a much greater caution with respect to Iran from the international financial community. That has had a significant impact, but it's an insufficient impact to realize the objectives we have of convincing the Iranian regime to put at least some halt to its movement towards nuclear weapons capability, towards its uranium enrichment program.

I think these measures serve as a good template for others to join in. If others do join in, that might bring us up to the threshold necessary to convince the Iranian regime that it has to comply with international norms.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: They're putting pressure on the leadership in Iran, but insufficient pressure in your perspective. Are they having an impact on the average Iranian? Is the average Iranian blaming the government for the imposition of these foreign sanctions and thus being motivated to try to change the regime?

Mr. Victor Comras: I don't think that's the case. I think most of the people in Iran recognize that it is the Iranian government's own failed economic policies that have caused most of the hardship in terms of unemployment and the downturn in the Iranian economy, as has the oil situation.

I think sanctions have not yet reached that threshold where they can be blamed for creating the economic difficulties Iran is facing. They're insufficient for that. U.S. sanctions have been around for so long now that, as I said, they've been digested. President Clinton reinstated a full range of sanctions in 1995. Since then, Iran has substituted in just about every respect for any way in which lack of American products and services has caused them any hardship. Unfortunately, they've also developed ways of circumventing the American sanctions. Hewlett Packard, for example, is still the favourite printer to be found in Iran. It's acquired through Dubai. Many other U.S. products still find their way to Iran through third-country intermediaries.

Again, I don't think the U.S. sanctions have had that impact.

● (1345)

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I appreciate your comment about the importance of having leverage in dialogue. You always need a plan B. But I begin to wonder, if the current sanctions haven't been effective—and they have been substantial, the U.S. is a large trading partner and it can have a tremendous impact on any country in the world—whether or not additional sanctions from smaller countries would move it to the tipping point where it would make that significant difference that the regime would change.

I'm also wondering if the electorate is not attributing their hardship to sanctions and whether additional sanctions would actually increase the likelihood of an uprising within the country.

I'll let you comment on those if you choose. Also, is there anything preventing Europe from proceeding with sanctions? Is it a lack of political will? Is there a reciprocal relationship that prevents them? What's the prevention on their side?

Mr. Victor Comras: I don't think there's anything that prevents Europe from imposing sanctions on Iran. I know that is a matter of continued debate and discussion within European circles. President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Brown have both indicated that sanctions may well be necessary against Iran, and have at times tried to convince their European partners to move ahead on sanctions.

There was a time in the last administration when it appeared European sanctions would actually be put in place. That was the time when the CIA report came out and was misunderstood internationally as saying that Iran was not in fact pursuing a nuclear weapons

capability. That undercut, at that moment, the political will on the part of many European leaders to move ahead. In fact, Europe's difficulty with sanctions is that they are also suffering from an economic recession and that sanctions always entail not only an effect on the recipient state but a foreclosing of business on the part of the European states. Some countries that are major partners with Iran in trade, such as Germany, Italy, and Austria, have been reluctant to force their own businesses to cut those relationships.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Very understandable.

We've talked a little bit about the youthful demographic in Iran. Some projections indicate that 70% of the population is less than 30, that nearly half the electorate that will be voting tomorrow is under 30. Do you anticipate that this youthful demographic will bring about a change in leadership, that perhaps it will be a form of quiet revolution as they begin to exert their influence, and have different expectations from those of their elders?

Mr. Victor Comras: I won't pretend to be an expert on the internal political dynamics of Iran. I'm always an optimist that the youth will bring about change, in time. Whether that will happen within my lifetime, I certainly can't say.

I am not optimistic that this election will mark a significant change in Iranian policies. I am doubtful that we will see anything new on the uranium enrichment program, any steps that are more forthcoming. We should wait for signals—and I hope that I'm wrong, but so far those signals are markedly lacking from both candidates—that they would be able or be willing to undertake a significant dialogue and to at least suspend their work on uranium enrichment or missile development.

● (1350)

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Mr. Hassan-Yari, I was a little bit surprised at your comment suggesting that the dialogue that the U.S. is currently engaging in with Iran is actually putting the leadership on the defensive. I hadn't heard that before. I was wondering if you could provide further proof or evidence of that, because in fact I see the exact opposite. My sense from all the testimony that we've heard is that, if anything, this pretense of dialogue is providing them a cover to continue their nuclear enrichment activities. It's simply buying them time to do what they would do otherwise, and they're playing foreign nations as fools in attempting to simply limit themselves to dialogue. What evidence can you provide us that this is actually putting them on the defensive?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: Thank you for the question.

When I talk about dialogue, obviously dialogue should have a framework, not just for the sake of talking to Iranians, but to establish a framework where you are looking for something and they are looking for something in order to advance the cause.

If you look at the discourse of the candidates—those three, again, putting Ahmadinejad aside, because we know what his position is—the three are talking about the necessity to talk to the international community about the nuclear issue. All of them, including Ahmadinejad, are in favour of mastering the technology. This is a right, they say: based on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, this is a right. Many people, including Mr. Obama, I believe.... On the way here I was reading the headline that Senator Kerry also is in favour of enrichment for Iran. It means there are rights, there are obligations.

What is absolutely important, really, is engaging Iranians in a very frank, very open—not clandestine, not as it has happened sometimes in the past—dialogue, where you air your concerns and you ask Iranians to put on the table whatever they have as sources of concerns, and you put yours. Then you talk based on those concerns.

I believe you asked if there is any trace or tangible evidence to show they are on the defensive. Yes, you can do that. You can easily find it. This is why it's really crucial to read what they say and what they do. If you look at the discourse of Khamenei's leaders during President Bush's time, whenever Bush said something positive—in rare moments, maybe—Khamenei immediately rejected any positive step that George Bush might have proposed. If you compare Khamenei's position to what Obama is talking about, you see that he is in a very uncomfortable position. For example, recently in the city of Mashhad, before the campaign got into this heated phase that we see, he was intervening. He was actually pre-empting what Obama was going to say in Cairo. He said that the words were good, because he had heard Obama before. He had heard the message he sent to the Iranians for the Iranian New Year. He said the words were good, they were pleasant, but they needed some action.

In other words, if you compare this with what he used to say about the American presidents prior to Obama, it was a simple refusal of any kind of dialogue with those people, because for him—as I mentioned earlier—he loved George Bush, he loved Reagan, he loved McCain when he said bomb, bomb, bomb, because that was really music to his ears.

So yes, you can see that if you look closely at what they say. They are clearly in a very difficult situation. You can see that.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

I allowed that round to go on basically long enough to take up both the seven minutes and the supplementary five, so I'm simply going to allow one final question, and that will go to Ms. Mendes.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Hassan-Yari, I have a question for you about the vulnerability of Iranian institutions.

First of all, why do you say that these institutions are vulnerable and what can be done to ensure that they are more respectful of the needs of the Iranian people?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: That is an excellent question. The country's institutions are indeed vulnerable. Remember that it took Canada several decades, if not several centuries perhaps to forge the

kind of institution that is reflected here in this room. Things were different initially.

The same can be said for France, the United States and all other countries. I'm not comparing everything, simply from the standpoint of structure. The situation is what it is. When I refer to the vulnerability of Iranian institutions, I'm referring for instance to the freely elected Parliament. Elections are considered free elections once candidates have been screened by the Guardian Council.

Yet, Parliament is not assuming its role, the one assigned to it by the people, which is to represent them. For example, with the sixth parliament, the reform parliament, came to power several years ago, either in 1997 or 1998, its first act was to revise the law respecting the media. Parliament wanted to abolish censorship and eliminate pressures on reporters and the media. The very day that Parliament began discussing the legislation, Leader Khamenei wrote a letter that was read immediately by one of the current candidates, Mr. Karoubi, who was the speaker of the Parliament at the time. The letter was very clear. Khamenei asked Parliament in a briefly worded letter to suspend the debate. And Parliament complied with the request. That decision went against the Iranian constitution. Mr. Karoubi maintained that because a State order had been issued, the debate must be suspended. And the debate was suspended, even though members were none too pleased about it. This issue has continued to haunt Mr. Karoubi during the current election campaign. Therefore, certain individuals in Parliament are vulnerable because they put a stop to a completely democratic and legitimate movement.

• (1400)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes: Regarding the case of Canadian photographer Kazemi who was assassinated in an Iranian prison, do you feel that the vulnerable state of legal institutions, including the courts, is responsible in some way for the guilty parties having acted with impunity and for the Iranian state's failure to punish the guilty party for an offence committed against a Canadian citizen? Does the vulnerability of your institutions extend that far?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: Iran does not recognize dual citizenship. I am a Canadian and an Iranian. As soon as I set foot on Iranian soil, I am no longer a Canadian. That is why Ms. Kazemi was considered under Iranian law to be an Iranian citizen, not a Canadian. I'm very happy that you asked that question because it illustrates what I have been trying to say, namely that power is not in the hands of any one person, but rather is shared.

Ms. Kazemi's assassination was investigated by the government of then President Khatami. I also used the word "assassination" when I was in Tehran. President Khatami set up a commission of inquiry which found that Ms. Kazemi had been killed while in prison and that someone was responsible for her death. The government in power at the time called upon the judiciary to find the guilty party.

The executive did its job and turned the report over to another authority so that it could do its job. It failed for the simple reason that the person charged with or suspected of having committed the crime was Mr. Mortazavi, a young judge who had expressed an interest in pursuing his studies in Canada. Apparently, he was the person who was going to be charged, or dragged before the courts. It seems that he had the Leader's ear or support and his arrest could ultimately have called into question the Leader's authority.

Do you understand what I'm trying to say? In Iran, there are red lines that no one can cross. This was one such red line. Any Iranian, whether or not he supports the regime, will tell you that what President Khatami did clearly proves my contention that institutions are vulnerable. The good news is that because the power structure is heterogeneous, not homogenous, it denounces its actions from within. Obviously, President Khatami was not in a position to bring Ms. Kazemi back to life. However, her death did not go unnoticed. [English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Sweet has just signalled to me that he'd like to ask one question. Can we seek the indulgence of the committee in allowing that?

Go ahead, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We had an opportunity to hear Professor Hassan-Yari's opinion of Mr. Comras's testimony vis-à-vis sanctions. I thought that to finish up Mr. Comras could give us some insight into his opinion regarding Mr. Hassan-Yari's testimony, which was counter to what Mr. Comras testified would be effective.

Mr. Victor Comras: Thank you.

From what I've heard, the thesis has been put forth that in dealing with the serious problems we are facing with respect to Iran—its threats to international peace and security, its government's threats against the state of Israel, and its nuclear weapons development program—we should rely solely on the goodwill of the Iranian people to put limitations on the Iranian government to ensure that either it doesn't proceed along any of these lines, or if it does develop nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons capability, the goodwill of the people of Iran will act as a sufficient constraint on the government to stop it from ever posing these threats to international peace and security. Frankly, I don't buy that thesis.

Sanctions aren't meant to hurt people; sanctions are meant to influence government policies. Sometimes people are hurt, and that is an unintended, and sometimes very tragic, consequence. Someone cited the 500,000 children who died in Iraq. A number of children did die in Iraq. They didn't die because of the sanctions; they died

because of the acts of Saddam Hussein and the way in which he responded to the sanctions. The Ahtisaari report ensured that all humanitarian goods, foodstuffs, civilian items, and medical equipment were always available to Iraq. It was Iraq who chose not to buy them with the funds available to it under the oil-for-food program, but rather to build palaces, to re-arm itself surreptitiously, and to re-fortify a number of its concerns. So sanctions aren't really the cause. It was the way in which Saddam Hussein responded to them, I think, that was the cause.

But sanctions do cause harm. They put pressure on people; they put pressure on institutions. They need to be wisely applied, and they can be wisely applied to affect those entities and individuals who are the key supporters, the financial supporters, of this regime. At the same time, they can be used to help convince the people on the street that the regime is not acting in their interest and that they need to do more.

I think the situation in Iran is a little closer to the situation we saw in Serbia than it is to the situation we saw in Iraq. In Serbia we had a leader, Mr. Milosevic, but we had also certain democratic institutions and people in Serbia who were affected very harshly by the sanctions and who in turn were motivated by those sanctions to dispose of Mr. Milosevic and to turn him over to The Hague.

I think the pressure from the people and the threat to the regime itself that will come from that—by targeting the regime itself and by instituting further pressure on the part of the people against that regime—may well create enough of a risk factor for the regime that it will recognize it needs to change its policies. I don't think we have time to wait until the long term, when we see this new generation of Iranian youth—and maybe the next one—come to maturity and eventually influence the situation. By then, too many drastic situations and crises may have developed.

Thank you.

● (1405)

The Chair: Thank you to both of our witnesses. We're very grateful that you took the time to meet with us, especially on short notice. I think you've really assisted us in our hearings.

The meeting is now adjourned.

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