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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

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

We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today, November 22, 2011, we hold our ninth meeting.

[English]

I'll just observe that we have a sufficiently large quorum for the purpose of receiving testimony. We actually do not have a sufficiently large quorum for purposes of dealing with motions. That is relevant to any attempt to deal with a motion, so we'll hold off on that for a minute, if you don't mind.

I'll mention to members of the subcommittee that we are televised today. As I always remind people in moments like this, it's best to look your best and not do anything you don't want permanently recorded.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Chair, four people denote a quorum. I had conversations with everybody regarding Dr. Jalal and her visit. If you wanted to—

The Chair: Just hang on a second. We're about to answer your question, Mr. Sweet.

Seeing as you're going to have unanimous consent, why don't we just wait a couple of minutes? Ève is going to arrive, and then we'll be all set to go. Would that be good?

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, that's totally fine. I just didn't want to interrupt the testimony. I will go to your leadership.

The Chair: All right.

What I was about to say is that today with us we have a guest who's been here a number of times before. Reverend El Shafie is the president and the founder of One Free World International.

You're always a friend to this committee. We're glad to see you here, Reverend El Shafie. I would encourage you to begin your testimony, please.

The Reverend Majed El Shafie (Founder and President, One Free World International): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I would like to thank all of you for having me here. It's always a pleasure to see all of you again.

Today I will be discussing with you the human rights situation in Egypt and Iraq. I will also touch briefly on the situation of minorities in Iran.

Let's start with Egypt. After the so-called Arab Spring—and I have no idea who started calling it Arab Spring—the world very slowly but surely started to discover that Arab Spring is nothing but a cold deadly winter for the minorities. The situation in Egypt, especially for the Christian minority and the rest of the minorities, is that, as we speak, since the start of the Egyptian revolution on January 25, we have seen and our sources have monitored 12 major attacks against the Christian community in Egypt. When I say 12 major incidents, that doesn't mean that is all the incidents there have been. Our resources indicate that there have been over 36 attacks, but the 12 major attacks were those that were big enough to make it into the media, into the news.

One of the major attacks I will be discussing today was that on a peaceful demonstration on October 9, 2011, which is known as the massacre of Maspero. Before I speak about the massacre of Maspero and what's happened in Maspero, I want to backtrack a little bit.

On September 30 in Aswan province, 20 imams in the mosques around Christian areas made a violent call to attack the Christians there. Three thousand Muslim extremists attacked the Christian villages and towns in the province of Aswan. That happened September 30. After these attacks the Christians were upset, so they came out in a peaceful demonstration on October 9. I just want to be clear that it was a peaceful demonstration on October 9. The Egyptian army faced the demonstrators with live ammunition, and with armed cars drove over the people, killing them. These pictures show some of the footage of the victims of Maspero.

• (1310)

The Chair: One moment, please, Reverend.

Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): It's impossible for us to see them from here. It's not something I really want to look at, but could you pass them around, please?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely.

The Chair: We'll get someone to do that for you. Just remain there, and we'll have someone take care of that.

Thank you.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I want to warn all of you that some of the pictures are very graphic, so if you don't have the heart for it don't look at them.

After this attack, over 27 Christians were killed in these peaceful demonstrations. Over 300 were injured. Some of the injured couldn't go to another hospital because the hospitals in the area rejected them, except one hospital, the Coptic hospital. This is the truth and the reality. The police attacked the Coptic hospital after that and arrested some of the injured out of that hospital. This is only one of the major attacks.

To mark the 40-day anniversary of the Maspero massacre, the Christians again went on a peaceful demonstration. They were attacked again in Shoubra and in Cairo. That was to mark the 40-day anniversary of the Maspero attack.

On October 16, 2011, after the Maspero attack, a 17-year-old student by the name of Ayman Nabil Labib was wearing a cross. His teacher requested that he remove the cross. When he refused to remove the cross, the teacher and the students attacked him. They beat him to death. That happened as well after the Maspero attack on October 16.

Some of these incidents you will find in our Egyptian report that will be given to you, and I'm sure it's being translated right now into French as well.

When we speak about Iraq and the situation in Iraq, two months ago I visited Iraq. I visited Baghdad. I was accompanied by one MP, Mr. John Weston, of Vancouver. I was accompanied as well, as part of my delegation, by Senator Don Meredith, and I was accompanied by Mr. Robiah Elias from the Iraqi community, and Martin Himel, from the Canadian media.

Two months ago I visited the Iraqi capital and I had a meeting with the high officials in Iraq, such as the Deputy Prime Minister, the Vice-President of Iraq, the President of the Iraqi Parliament, the Iraqi Minister of Human Rights. I will say that if there is a minister of human rights in any country, that means they have no human rights at all, and they are using the minister more or less to cover up the situation there. As well, we met with the environment minister of Iraq.

When we speak about the minority in Iraq, let's start with the Christians. More than half of the Christian Iraqi community were forced to leave their country or were killed. Here we are facing the beginning of a genocide. This is not simply regular ethnic cleansing; this is the beginning of a genocide in Iraq.

We visited one of the churches, Our Lady of Salvation. As an example, last October five terrorists entered Our Lady of Salvation Church. They attacked the church and killed over 54 Christian worshippers, including the priest.

Mr. Chair, I have here with me some of the bullets that were taken from the church and from the victims. Some of them still have the blood of the innocents on them.

Ladies and gentlemen, for four hours the terrorists were killing the Christians without any interference from the Iraqi police—for four complete hours. After that, when the Iraqi police entered the church, they did not aid the people or help the people. They immediately

started to collect the money and the gold from the victims, instead of helping them. This happened in Iraq last October.

It is not only the Christians in Iraq who are facing persecution, it is also the Sabians and the Mandaeans. More than 90% of the Sabians and the Mandaeans were killed in Iraq. The population of the Sabians and the Mandaeans in Iraq was about 50,000 to 60,000 in the year 2003. In the year 2010, the population was between 3,500 and 7,000.

• (1315)

As well, besides this, you find the Yazidi, and they are facing persecution in Iraq. Of course, in the Baha'i community in Iraq and in Egypt there are a total of 2,000 people in each country. Their dilemma is that they are facing persecution. They cannot have any identification cards, so they are not recognized by their governments in Egypt or Iraq. That means they cannot get married. They cannot divorce. They cannot bury their dead. They cannot buy properties. And that's what we are facing

The solution.... We can read the report that was prepared by One Free World International. And once again, we have two reports, one about Egypt and one about Iraq, both of them in the English language. They were sent to the clerk. I think that some of it is still in translation. If any of you want these copies in English, I already have them. I assume that they are being translated into French as of now.

There are many solutions to this dilemma that we're facing, such as confronting this government in the international fora, such as supporting the refugees and opening Canadian doors for immigration to welcome these refugees in the camps, such as encouraging on the ground of Iraq and Egypt the programs that are protecting women's rights and the minority rights. But the recommendation I want to focus on the most right now is tying our aid and our international trade to the improvement of human rights in these countries. I'm not saying cut it. I'm saying tie the aid and the international trade to the improvement of human rights in these countries. What I mean by that is if a country has disrespected the minority or women's rights, we can use the aid and the international trade to increase it or decrease it. It depends on how they are respecting these rights.

For example, there is over \$2 billion of international trade between Canada and Iraq—over \$2 billion. Between the years 2003 and 2010 the Canadian government has given \$300 million in aid to Iraq. I have no record of where they spent the \$300 million. I tried to go on the Department of Foreign Affairs website. I tried to go everywhere. I don't know where the \$300 million was spent in Iraq.

Even in Egypt, the aid to Egypt is around \$18 million and there is over \$900 million in international trade between Canada and Egypt. I have no record as well of where the \$18 million went.

Lawrence Cannon used to be our foreign affairs minister. He went to Egypt and spoke about Canada wanting to give \$11 million in the next five years to encourage the revolution in Egypt. With all due respect, I don't know how he can encourage a government that is killing the innocent.

In the year 2009 this was the first time that the Egyptian government attacked the Christians straight on, head on. Usually they will use extremist groups. They will use extremist groups and they will hide behind it. But for the first time, actually, the Egyptian army attacked the Christian community head on just because they went on a peaceful demonstration.

We have to connect our aid and our international trade today to the improvement of human rights in these countries. Once we do this there will be improvement, because these governments want the money. I don't believe in giving any government a blank cheque. With all due respect, this is the Canadian people's money. This is not the Canadian government's money; this is the Canadian people's money. I don't think we should give them any of this aid, any of this international trade, until we see an improvement in human rights, and it should be connected with this.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity. I will take your questions and answers.

Mr. Chair, if you can give me the closing two minutes, I would appreciate that. Thank you.

• (1320)

The Chair: We will make sure, Reverend, that you have a couple of minutes left to wrap up after we've gone through our round of questions.

I do appreciate, by the way, your being as timely as you have.

Perhaps, Mr. Sweet, I could turn to you first.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for being able to clear this motion off.

I think all members are in agreement that the subcommittee invite Dr. Massouda Jalal and her associates to appear before the subcommittee to discuss the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan. The meeting would take place to coincide with Dr. Jalal's travel to Canada.

The Chair: That's a motion. Is there any discussion on that? Do we have agreement on that?

An hon. member: I'll be supporting it.

The Chair: Okay. In that case, that's been passed unanimously.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Sweet, you also have the floor for questions to start with. Please fire away. You have six minutes.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

And I want to thank Reverend Majed El Shafie for being here with us.

I also want to draw to the attention of the committee that our former colleague is here, Mario Silva, who we've all worked with. We appreciate the fact that he spoke at the interfaith breakfast this morning and did a very good job, as well.

Reverend El Shafie, your birthplace is Egypt, right?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: That's correct.

Mr. David Sweet: Do you still have family there?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: Are they safe?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I don't have a relationship with my family because they disowned me once I converted from Islam to Christianity when I was 18 years old.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

On that note, the history of Christian persecution in Egypt is well documented. Yet in this uprising they stood shoulder to shoulder with other protesters to bring in change. So they had expectations.

Could you explain to this committee what the expectations were and how the Christian community at large—Coptic, as well—feels today with the situation spiralling out of control as it is?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: The expectation was freedom, freedom of religion. Mr. Sweet, we are not here to speak against Muslims; we are here because of the persecution of the Christian minorities. I am here because I'm against the extremists, wherever they are.

When the revolution started on January 25, the Christian community stood side by side with the Muslim community fighting the dictator regime, and the expectation was that our rights would be protected and we'd be able to live with freedom of religion. You cannot build democracy without freedom of religion. Freedom of religion is the foundation of democracy. Without it, there is no democracy; it's as simple as that. The reality here is that if you took their faith from men or women, they'd have nothing remaining to believe in.

When the uprising started, everybody called it—especially the media in the west, and I believe the Americans started it—Arab Spring. What Arab Spring? What Arab Spring? The reality is that when you take out a dictatorship like Mubarak—and I am completely agreeing with taking out Mubarak as a leader, because he was a dictator and he committed many crimes against humanity—you create a political vacuum. The political vacuum can only be occupied by the most organized group there. Sadly, the most organized group there, besides the army, is the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization. I need to make it clear that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization.

When you have a society like the Egyptian society, 30% to 40% of the Egyptian society is illiterate. They don't know how to write or read their own name, so how do they read a constitution? Even if you reform the constitution, how do they read it? They don't know how to write or read their own name.

So democracy cannot be built between day and night. Democracy has to be step by step.

The reality on the ground right now is that an organization like the Muslim Brotherhood is using this political vacuum to start to control the country. I am sorry to say, Mr. Sweet, that on February 6 Lawrence Cannon, our former Minister of Foreign Affairs, welcomed a talk between the Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood. This was on the record of CTV on February 6. This was a press conference that he did, and he welcomed talks between the Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood as an opposition.

The Muslim Brotherhood is the foundation of al-Qaeda and the foundation of Hamas. Basically, their doctrine has built this other organization that we see here today. A Muslim Brotherhood leader today indicated that they will never accept a Christian president or a woman president. Where is the human right? Where is the human right in dealing with a group like this, who disagree with a woman leader or a Christian leader?

The truth and the reality is that democracy without education dies. Education is the oxygen for democracy. What we are seeing today is not an Arab Spring; it's a cold, deadly winter.

Thank you, sir.

• (1325)

Mr. David Sweet: I'd love to stay on Egypt, but because we're talking about the two subjects.... And by the way, Reverend, I agree with you that freedom of religion is at the apex of all. If you have freedom of religion, you have freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech.

The Iraqi Christians lived in relative peace in Iraq up until a few years ago. Could you explain quickly to the committee what's changed there now in Iraq?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: What's changed right now? Iraq lived in a peaceful atmosphere, more or less, during Saddam Hussein. After Saddam Hussein was taken out after the American invasion, the majority of the Shi'as started to take over the Iraqi government, because they are the majority. They founded an organization called Jaysh Al-Mahdi, the Mahdi army. They started to take over the government. Now they try to upgrade them to be part of the Iraqi regime. What has happened is that the Sunnis and the Shi'as, the two main groups in Iraq, had militias and they started to attack the Christians from both sides, and the Iraqi government did not stop them. They didn't do anything to stop them.

I have a case in the year 2006 of a gentleman by the name of Ahtra Kyriakos, who was kidnapped, shot, and tortured by the Jaysh Al-Mahdi. Nobody was arrested; there was no justice. Most of the attacks on the Christian community or the Bahá'is or the Sabians and Mandaean go unpunished. The Christian community and the other minorities don't carry weapons. They don't have militias, so they have no way to protect themselves, their teachings, and their religion.

So what we see right now is the militias attacking the Christian community, trying to get rid of them from Iraq. And with all due respect, if I may say—Irwin, I'm sure that you are with me—this has happened before to the Jewish Iraqi community. So when the people say maybe this will never happen to the Christians, this has happened before to the Jewish community in Iraq. They were forced to leave Iraq, especially in Farhud—if you remember the massacre of Farhud, where 182 Jewish Iraqis were killed. We have one of the victims, actually, one of the survivors here. One of the survivors of this massacre is here. So this has happened before and it's happening again to the Christians.

The Chair: Thank you. That ends that round.

I actually misspoke earlier when I said it was six minutes each. Math will dictate that with six people here and 30 minutes, we

actually have five minutes each. I do apologize for that. Of course on top of that, we want to have a closing statement.

Mr. Marston, please.

• (1330)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Does that mean Mr. Sweet owes us 30 seconds?

The Chair: We may extract it from our other Conservative MP at a later time in this proceeding.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Reverend El Shafie, it's nice to see you again.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: A pleasure, sir.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It was a pleasure speaking to your conference recently on rebuilding Iraq.

We watch our television news every night. We're seeing the people of Egypt coming back to try to guarantee what they thought they had in the spring. Because they took the figurehead or the so-called leader Mubarak out and removed him does not mean they took the system out. It has been there for so long. Your story is very concerning.

One of the things I'm very cautious of is use of the word "genocide", because as we all know that means to wipe out an entire population. Certainly the massacre you described in the church—and when I visited you, you gave me a piece of the church where the 54 people were slaughtered—there's no other word for it. Those pictures from that church, are they from—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: They were from the Maspero attack, from the Egyptian attack.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I suspect that either case would have been very similar in the outcome, because it is so horrific.

One of the questions I have is on the Muslim Brotherhood. You called them a terrorist group. Where did they receive that designation? Is there actually a country that has declared them a terrorist group, or is it just based on their action as you perceive it?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Both. They are a terrorist group in most of the Middle East. In most of the Arab countries they call them that. However, the fact that Egypt calls them a terrorist group doesn't mean anything to me, because they would call us a terrorist group as well, an organization like One Free World International.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, I was thinking in terms of Canada or the United States or Great Britain.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: No. In the United States and Great Britain.... Most of the free world calls them that. However, this is not my measurement. My measurement is their action with regard—

Mr. Wayne Marston: No, I understand your position, and anybody handling the pictures of what has occurred would feel the same way. I was just looking to see if internationally the community had responded by designating that group. The description you've given, when you say it was escalated.... The first attack was by individuals, and then it became the system or the military or the police in the attack.

Is there any evidence at all of anybody being arrested, charged, or put before a court for any of the crimes in those two situations?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Not as far as I'm aware. And actually, in the Maspero massacre a lot of the Christians were arrested, and some of them are still in prison right now. So the victims themselves were arrested.

In the Church of Our Lady of Salvation, the five terrorists who entered the church blew themselves up in the end, so there was nobody to arrest; they died in the attack as well.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Now, to allow us to keep this straight—we do have a viewing audience—that particular event took place in Iraq.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: That's correct.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I just wanted to clarify for the record, because we're going back and forth between Iraq and Egypt, and the situations are terribly similar.

Going back to Egypt for a moment, because that's your homeland originally, to what extent is the discrimination based on religion? How pervasive is that? You said that right now it seems that the Coptic Christians are in the sights, so to speak, and you referred to the Jewish situation before. So any Christian in that country would not feel safe and would be definitely discriminated against?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Definitely the majority will not feel safe, and will feel that there is discrimination around them. Now, there are degrees of persecution and discrimination. It could be somebody insulting you in the street just because you have a cross, or it could be getting fired from your work, or it could be a physical or emotional attack, or it could even be to the degree of imprisonment.

Mr. Wayne Marston: When you describe all of those, that citizen-to-citizen type of thing, or employer to employee.... You've talked about the state, and the state via the military in that one instance attacked people directly.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: On October 9, yes.

• (1335)

Mr. Wayne Marston: So within the administration of the state, if you went to get a passport or anything, there's total built-in discrimination there as well, in Egypt?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes. In many of the areas, the answer is yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: For years Egypt had been held up as the ideal. It's far from the ideal as I hear it.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: It's very far from the ideal.

I just want to bring one point to your attention with regard to the people who were arrested and the justice system. After the massacre of Maspero, there was a lot of international pressure on the army to start an international investigation. What the army did is they appointed their own counsel to start the investigation. So the army is investigating itself.

You tell me, do you think that will be a fair investigation?

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's what we hear in a lot of situations. Sri Lanka is one that comes to mind.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely.

The Chair: We're actually out of time on this round. Sorry.

Mr. Hiebert is next, and Professor Cotler is on deck.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): It's good to see you again, Reverend El Shafie. You've always been an excellent witness before this committee, enlightening us as to what's happening around the world. I appreciate your testimony today.

I just wanted to draw your attention and the attention of those who are listening to the statement by our Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Baird, after what transpired in Egypt. In part, he said, representing the Government of Canada, that freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and a vital building block for healthy democracies, that people of faith must be able to practise and worship in peace and security, and that religious extremism has no place in modern society and in the new Egypt.

Speaking of the new Egypt, there was a witness before the foreign affairs committee about a month ago, who chose to remain unnamed, who made the following statement, and I quote:

I'm not too sure we can describe what's happening in the Arab world as the Arab Spring. I would call it Islam Spring. And we have to pay attention to that, because spreading from Tunisia, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, and all around that area, they're all adopting sharia law.

You have a history or a background as a native Egyptian. Sharia law has been promoted within Egypt more recently as a future constitutional amendment. We've heard testimony before our committee recently about that. I'm just wondering if you could enlighten us as to what impact, if it were to be adopted, that would have on religious freedom in Egypt.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: In my opinion, it would be a disaster. I will explain to you why. I am a very firm believer in the separation between religion and the state. It doesn't matter what religion. When you mix them together, that's when you basically put... If the sharia becomes the law, the source of the Egyptian constitution, you will end up with a lot of persecution happening to the minorities: Christians, Baha-'is, and others. You will end up with a lot of violations of women's rights. The women will be forced to wear Islamic dress and so on and so forth. Her work will be affected, as well as the way her husband treats her, in addition to the relationship of the husband, wife, and children. In the end, I believe that the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel will be affected. That's a problem, because it will put the whole region in a war.

I'm not saying the people who want to live by sharia law are bad people. Let them live by the sharia law. That's fine. I am a Christian man. I live in my home as a Christian man. I go to my church as a Christian. That's just my home. I live as a Christian man at home, I go to my church, and I worship the same way. It's not about the debate on religion. It's about freedom of religion.

The separation between the state and religion is extremely important. Don't mix them together. That's my point of view.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: With the downfall of Mubarak, and now the public protests calling for the downfall of the interim military government, I'm wondering if you could tell us what would happen. Who do you think would replace the interim military government if the protesters were to get their way?

•(1340)

Rev. Majed El Shafie: My fear is that a big part of it will be from the Muslim Brotherhood. They are the most organized group. I am sure there would be an opposition. I'm sure there would be a secular party that would take part in the election. But I have a feeling that the majority will be from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Turning to Iraq, in your opinion, who's primarily responsible for the attacks on Christians in Iraq? What motivates these attacks?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: The attacks are not only on Christians, it's the Christians and the rest of the minorities. What motivates these attacks is the fact that they are different and the fact that they consider them as infidels or a person who is different in belief or religion from them. What mostly motivates this as well is partly the agenda of emptying the Middle East of other minorities. Basically, it is to kick them out of the land.

Christian roots in Iraq and Egypt go back way before Islam. Right now we are seeing that people are leaving. The people are forced to leave. The lack of protection we are seeing from the government is really alarming. It is alarming that we are not seeing the government protect them or do anything to support them. In my opinion, the fact that they come from different beliefs and the fact that they want to basically control them is mainly the reason for their persecution.

Also, another important part is that Christianity in Iraq is seen as the American religion and the religion of the west. They consider them as cooperators, or traitors. This is also another element that adds to the reasons for their persecution, because they are Christians like the western religion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cotler, please.

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

I'm pleased that reference was made to what occurred in Iraq in 1941, the Farhud massacre. It is now the 70th anniversary of it, and it has gone largely unacknowledged, so I'm pleased that reference was made to it.

The question I want to put has to do with a particular individual who emerged as a kind of symbol of the Egyptian Arab Spring. I'm referring to Michael Nabil, a 26-year-old blogger who spoke so hopefully about the Egyptian Arab Spring in Tahrir Square, in his statement in which he mentions that the army and the people are "of one hand"; in other words, the army and the people are working together. He then witnessed the suppression by the army of civilians and protesters and the like and then said that the army and the people are no longer of one hand.

For that he was illegally tried, convicted, and sentenced to a three-year imprisonment. As we are meeting here today, he is in the 91st day of a hunger strike. His life is hanging by a thread.

Do you regard his case as a symbol of the failure of the Egyptian Arab Spring? Also, do you believe that the fact that he happens to be a Christian Copt who supported the normalization of relations between Israel and Egypt contributed in any way to his conviction and imprisonment, in this situation in which he finds himself today?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely. I am completely in agreement with you.

Actually, there are two bloggers who are in prison right now just because they criticized the military council. You have Michael Nabil and you have as well Alaa Abd El Fattah. Both of them criticized the military council and ended up in prison just for criticizing.

Where are the principles of the resolution? Where is the democracy? Where is the freedom of speech? Absolutely, they are symbolic.

As long as Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who is the head of the military council, is in power in Egypt, I don't think this will change at all.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I have to leave.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We turn now to Ms. Grewal, please.

•(1345)

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, chair, and thank you, Reverend El Shafie, for your time and your presentation.

I have three very small questions. My first one is, could you tell us how religious discrimination affects the daily lives and activities of the Coptic Christians in Egypt?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: In my Egyptian report you will find more examples of attacks. Some are examples of major attacks, and some of them are small attacks. But let's speak about examples that are happening. Some of them are actually from here in Toronto, and we needed to prove them.

One of the gentlemen, by the name of Magdi Youssef, had a library and he had a Muslim worker in the library. Somehow, the Muslim worker got hold of a book about Christianity and started to read it. His family thought that Magdi Youssef had tried to convert the gentleman, and he had not. His shop was burned, he was poisoned, the authorities arrested him, and he was tortured. He escaped to Canada, and after that, the case.... You will find his story on CTV, because we took his story from there.

To live daily in fear or with day-by-day harassment.... You will be able to identify most of the Christians in Egypt, because there is a tattooed cross on their hands, or they are wearing a cross. Even the national identity card of Egypt has to say whether you are Muslim or Christian. So it's easy to monitor them, easy to know who is who. When this harassment happens, it can affect their job, their daily life.... It can affect many things.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Why would the Iranian government see Christian groups as a threat to the regime?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Are we talking about Iran?

One of the major things that happened when we were in Iraq and we confronted the Iraqi government.... As I said, I was accompanied by one MP and one senator, both of them from the Conservative Party. I sent an invitation to the Liberals and the NDP to accompany us as well.

When we discussed the matter with the Iraqi regime and confronted them with all of this evidence—and we had a recommendation to the Iraqi government and we raised all the subjects we are speaking about right now.... I am not the kind of human rights activist who is in hiding; I will be right in your face and tell you: here are the facts. We sat down with them, and they said that these facts are true. They admitted it. The vice-president of Iraq admitted that this situation is happening.

The problem with the Iraqi regime is that they will blame the old regime for these attacks, or will blame Syria and Saudi Arabia. But when it comes to Iran, they wouldn't speak about Iran, because most of them....

Now, I know for a fact, madam, and I cannot indicate where my sources are, that before they appoint an Iraqi minister, Iran has to approve it first.

The sad reality that we are facing right now is that if we do not interfere immediately, if Canada.... One of our recommendations is that Canada reopen our Canadian embassy in Baghdad. We have no embassy; we have no voice in Iraq. If Canada does not open the embassy in Iraq and unless more countries interfere, Iran will take Iraq.

Iran already has a strong influence in Iraq, and Jaysh al-Mahdi, which is loyal to Iran, is one of the major organizations persecuting the Christians today.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Chair, do I have some more time left?

The Chair: You do.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: What evidence is there to suggest that evangelical Christians face a higher degree of persecution than other Christian groups?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I will disagree with this. I believe that all groups of Christians face persecution; I wouldn't say one group more than another. I would disagree with that. All Christian groups are facing, I would say, equal persecution; I wouldn't say there are different levels.

• (1350)

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Pécelet, the floor is yours, please

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Thank you very much for being with us here today.

My first question is about Iran. We know that Canada has decided, yesterday, to apply new sanctions against Iran. I would like to know if you believe there will be consequences for the situation of religious minorities in Iran. Do you believe this will affect the government's position? Do you have any comments on this?

[English]

Rev. Majed El Shafie: There have been sanctions placed on Iran for as long as I can remember. I don't think that new sanctions will make a dramatic change.

Of course, I support the sanctions on Iran, because it keeps choking them, more or less, and it's better than a war. If you ask me, it's better than sending troops and starting a war.

Here is the problem with Iran....

I'm sorry.

Ms. Ève Pécelet: No, no; it's fine, if you have....

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Here is the problem with Iran. When we are speaking about Iran, 99% of the time we are speaking about their nuclear program. We do not speak about their human rights record that much, and I don't know why.

In Iran right now, more than 120 Christians were arrested in a crackdown over Christmas and New Year's 2010-2011. More than 200 were arrested in January 2010 and February 2011.

One of the more highlighted situations is that of Pastor Youcef, the pastor who is right now facing the death penalty in Iran.

When we talk about other minorities, such as the Bahá'í in Iran, on October 11 seven teachers were attacked and arrested in Iran. In August 2004, 500 Bahá'ís were arrested; 13 Bahá'ís in February 2010; 200 were killed from the Bahá'í leadership, mostly through execution, from 1978 through to 1998.

Here, when we talk about the Jewish community in Iran as well, you may remember that in 2000, 13 members of the Jewish community were arrested in Iran on charges that they were cooperators with Israel and Mossad.

So I don't think new sanctions will change dramatically the situation in Iran; however, I support sanctions because they are keeping them under pressure.

[Translation]

Ms. Ève Pécelet: My next questions relate as much to Iraq as to Iran and Egypt. They are about discrimination in law.

Discrimination can be exercised not only through violence, but also directly through the law, for example, before the courts. What is being done to sanction discrimination?

Is the problem not precisely due to the fact that Christian minorities are not equal before the law, which means that the recourse to the judicial system is not available? Knowing very well from the outset that their problems will not necessarily be dealt with or not dealt with fairly by a court of law as they would in Canada, minorities will not file a complaint. I would like to hear your comments on this.

[English]

Rev. Majed El Shafie: When you look at most of the laws in Egypt or in Iraq, it's an issue that's gone on for a very long time. In my report on Iraq and Egypt, we discuss the legal parts, one after another.

There are two problems when it comes to the legal system in Iraq and in Egypt and even Iran. Number one, they always say that Islam is "the" source of legislation and the constitution. I would prefer that they say "a" source, rather than "the" source. There's a big difference. But they say "the source", so you make it a religious situation here.

Number two is the law itself. When you read the Iraqi constitution, it is written very well. It's not that bad. The same with the Egyptian constitution. You will find problems in it, but it's good in comparison. The problem is not the law; the problem is the enforcement of this law. So when the government closes their eyes, or justice does not take place, justice delayed is justice denied.

Ms. Ève Péclet: Do I still have...?

• (1355)

[Translation]

The Chair: You have one minute remaining.

[English]

Ms. Ève Péclet: One minute.

[Translation]

In Egypt, there will be an election that will make the government democratically legitimate. We can compare this with what happened in Tunisia, where the Islamist party was democratically elected. We know that a majority of the people do not agree at all with this. We are positively biased due to the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood will be democratically elected by the people.

In your view, how will the situation of Christians be impacted by the fact that the government will be democratically elected but nevertheless be a religious government, as we are seeing right now in Tunisia?

[English]

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I believe the impact will be very negative on the minority and on the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. For the first time we saw the Egyptian ambassador running away from his home in Cairo, from the embassy, just a month ago. We can see the preparation.

I agree with you that if the Muslim Brotherhood is elected, it would be elected democratically. Here is the dilemma, and I explained this previously. Most of the Egyptian population is illiterate; they don't even know how to write their own names. They will choose a religion automatically. When more than half of them are under the poverty line because of the corruption of the previous regime, people are hungry. When the Muslim Brotherhood says they will open a shop for them, they'll give them a business, they'll bring them the solution right now, they will automatically elect them because they want the result right now. They don't want results five, ten, or twenty years from now. No, the people are tired now, so they need results now.

The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood will be chosen democratically doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. On this occasion, the people have influence. Most of their finances come from countries like Saudi Arabia; there are big countries supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. That's how I feel the election will go in Egypt this coming month.

The Chair: Thank you.

That brings the questions to an end. We said at the beginning we'd leave a few minutes for Reverend El Shafie to make a concluding remark, and I invite him to do so now.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, respected members of Parliament, I thank you so much for having me here. Since 2006 I have been coming here and I've developed a wonderful relationship and friendship with most of you, if not all of you.

Today I want to tell you that sometimes I get discouraged. Sometimes I wonder if, despite my coming here and presenting evidence, we ever will see results on the ground. I have confidence and trust in our country, Canada. I have confidence and trust in our system. I believe Canada is the conscience of our world and defender of human rights. Canada can take a step forward and lead, be a voice for the voiceless, as has always been.

If you look behind me, those people who came all the way from Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, and some even further, some of them from the Egyptian community, some of them from the Iraqi community, some of them from a Canadian community—these people care about what's happening there. Our people are dying. I wake up every morning and I don't know if I'm doing enough or not.

Just two days ago I testified in front of the American Congress. The House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights held a hearing on the religious freedom issue. It was chaired by Chris Smith. I almost cried because I didn't see anybody moving to help those people. We're just leaving them behind, and they are my brothers and sisters in the Lord. It's the reality, whoever they are.

I used to be one of them. I used to be a prisoner in Egypt, and I know the pain. Even now I wake up in the night with the screaming in my ears of the victims. Even now when I take off my jacket you can see the scars on my body. I am unable to leave them behind and I'm begging you to take action. This is not the time for diplomacy, this is not the time for talk; this is the time for action. It's time to go back to our ministers, our governments, or our opposition and tell them to push a little bit. Tell them to bring the ambassador here so that we can talk with him. Tell them to connect aid with international trade and improvement of human rights. There are many recommendations. We are not just pointing fingers; we have a direction.

In the end, the only thing that I know from all my years of work is that there are people of faith facing persecution, but they're still smiling. They are in a deep dark night, but they still have the candle of hope. Our enemy has a very strong army, strong weapons, but we have the Lord Almighty. Believe me when I tell you that after every night there is a new morning and a new day, after every storm there is sunshine, and after every persecution there is victory in His name. Believe me when I tell you they can always kill the dreamer but no one can kill the dream. I will keep coming until the end, and I know that I will win.

Thank you.

• (1400)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Reverend El Shafie.

I have a couple of housekeeping items to take care of before I dismiss the subcommittee. The first thing to mention is that our next meeting on Thursday takes place not in this room but downstairs in Room 112 in the north corridor. We have two potential witnesses, one confirmed and one possible. It will be again on the same subject matter, the study on Copts in Iraq and Iran.

Another item I want to mention is that we have a former member and friend of this committee here today, Mario Silva, who spoke this morning very eloquently at a breakfast on Parliament Hill.

It's good to see you, Mario. I'm always glad to see that you're so involved in human rights. Thanks very much.

Okay, everybody, we are adjourned.

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