



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 030 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, March 29, 2012

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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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• (1310)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Today is March 29, 2012. This is the 30th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

Today we continue looking at the human rights situation in Iran. We have with us Ms. Sheryl Saperia, Canadian director of policy for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

We'll turn things over to you and give you some time to talk. When you're finished, we'll go to questions as we always do.

Please begin.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia (Director of Policy, Canada, Foundation for Defense of Democracies): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

As you know, all four aspects of the Iranian threat are intrinsically linked. A regime that seeks nuclear weapons capability is rightly perceived as exceptionally dangerous when it is simultaneously implicated in human rights violations within its borders, support for and direct involvement in terrorism outside its borders, and issuing genocidal statements of intent with regard to other sovereign countries.

If we are serious about confronting this fourfold Iranian threat, it is my belief that we must focus on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC. The IRGC is at the epicentre of the Iranian regime. It is a dominant security, political, and economic force within the country. It is in charge of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missiles program. It owes its loyalty and affords powerful support to the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who would be the ultimate decision-maker behind an attempted genocide within Israel or anywhere else.

The IRGC is also responsible for the violent suppression of Iranian protesters in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections. The IRGC has been labelled by some as the world's most deadly terrorist organization. It is this terrorism element of the fourfold threat posed by Iran, and specifically by the IRGC, that I would like to focus on in my remarks today.

Canada has already imposed sanctions on various IRGC branches and individuals under the Special Economic Measures Act. This is

important. However, we need to be using every peaceful tool during this critical time when economic and diplomatic measures are being leveraged in the hopes of obviating the need for a military strike.

One crucial measure that we have not yet employed is the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist entity in Canada.

Canada's sanctions have been in response to the IAEA's November 2011 assessment of Iran's illicit nuclear program; in other words, these sanctions relate to Iran's nuclear activity. However, the IRGC is a terrorist organization and should be listed as such. Even if Iran were to cease its illegal nuclear program tomorrow, this does not alter the fact that the Iranian government has traditionally allocated a nine-digit figure in its budget for international terrorism that is channelled through the IRGC. The IRGC has been involved in terrorist attacks around the world, including recent attempted attacks in Thailand, India, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. It has also provided assistance to the Taliban and al-Qaeda in killing Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. Moreover, the IRGC has offered critical support in the form of financing and training to groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which are listed entities in Canada. Indeed, Hezbollah has been referred to as a wholly owned Iranian subsidiary. It makes no sense to list Hezbollah but not the IRGC.

Let me identify for you five reasons why listing the IRGC as a terrorist entity is sound Canadian policy.

First, it is a measure that can be implemented quickly and unilaterally. If, according to subsection 83.05(1) of the Criminal Code, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness has reasonable grounds to believe that

(a) the entity has knowingly carried out, attempted to carry out, participated in or facilitated a terrorist activity; or

(b) the entity is knowingly acting on behalf of, at the direction of or in association with an entity referred to in paragraph (a)

then the minister can make a recommendation to the Governor in Council to place the entity on the list. This test, as applied to the IRGC, should be easily met.

The entity has been involved directly in terrorist activity, such as the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people, and the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community centre in Argentina, which killed 85 people. It has also acted in association with entities that have carried out terrorist activity, including Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Second, listing the IRGC has support among Canadians as well as western allies. The U.S. listed the IRGC as a whole in 2007, while other countries, such as the Netherlands and Britain, have urged the European Union to add the IRGC to its list of terrorist organizations. If Canada were to lead on this issue, other countries, perhaps benefiting from political cover from precedent by a country that is not the United States, may be more likely to follow its example, resulting in further isolation of the Iranian regime and increased pressure on companies around the world to limit their dealings with the IRGC.

• (1315)

Third, the measure, especially when employed in tandem with multiple countries, could greatly weaken the IRGC economically. This is because a terrorist designation renders it illegal for Canadian individuals and companies to have any financial dealings with the listed entity. Given the fact that the IRGC has serious commercial interests—indeed, it is a multi-billion dollar conglomerate—it would surely be detrimentally impacted by the legally imposed curtailment of business dealings with companies and financial institutions in Canada.

Fourth, listing the IRGC in its entirety is more comprehensive than current sanctions in terms of the targeted parties and the severity of the penalties. A breach of the Criminal Code provisions, for instance, can lead to a fine of up to \$100,000 and imprisonment for up to 10 years, compared to a fine of up to \$25,000 and imprisonment for up to five years for a breach of SEMA sanctions. But listing the IRGC as a whole should be complemented with efforts by western governments to identify and designate IRGC front companies and individual leaders as well.

Finally, listing the IRGC has tremendous symbolic implications. The decision not to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization promotes a culture of impunity. The IRGC is the spine of the Iranian regime, and Canada must not countenance any interaction with the organization. Listing the entity diminishes its own legitimacy as well as that of the Iranian establishment. It also provides important moral support to Iranian dissidents who may feel isolated and alone in their efforts to effect change within the country.

I understand there may be some concerns regarding the listing of the IRGC, which we can discuss in greater detail during the question period.

For instance, there is a concern that some IRGC members are conscripted and that a blanket designation would unfairly penalize those individuals. There may also be reservations about designating a state agency, in contrast to a rogue organization, as a terrorist entity. Some European policy-makers have been reluctant to target the entire IRGC because it may have some legitimate business endeavours.

Honourable members, I hope you will give me the opportunity to rebut each of these arguments. I would also be pleased to explain how listing the IRGC can enhance the effectiveness of some recently passed legislation, the Justice for Victims of Terrorism Act.

In conclusion, designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization is an important measure that Canada should implement in order to further counter the Iranian threat. First and foremost, it's appropriate

to list the IRGC because the entity is a terrorist organization. Second, listing makes an important statement about the organization's and the regime's lack of legitimacy; the Iranian regime does not like to be embarrassed on the world stage, and this is a further way to isolate them diplomatically. Third, a terrorist designation can help to weaken the entity financially. This will impede not only the IRGC's ability to conduct and sponsor terror attacks, but also its ability to engage in other nefarious activities, such as nuclear weapons proliferation and human rights violations.

Thank you.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If we are careful to police ourselves, I think we'll have six minutes for each round of questions.

Let's start with Mr. Hiebert.

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

Thank you, Ms. Saperia, for an excellent presentation.

You've invited us to give you more time to elaborate on your thoughts about the opposition to listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization. That opposition relates to conscription, the IRGC being a state agency, and its potentially legitimate businesses. I want to give you that time right now. Then, if you have any time left over, I'll probably have some more questions.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Thank you.

Let me focus first on conscription because, based on my own discussions with individuals in government, I understand that this seems to be a really significant concern. Let me tell you why I think this is a weak argument.

First of all, under SEMA, the Special Economic Measures Act, there are several entire branches of the IRGC that are designated as entities with which Canadians are prohibited from having certain dealings. So it seems to me illogical and inconsistent for the conscription argument to be used as an excuse not to list the IRGC as a terrorist entity, but irrelevant to designating entire branches of the IRGC under SEMA. But let's move on from that.

We need to clarify what conscription means in the context of joining the IRGC. It is true that Iranians are conscripted to perform military service, but they have a choice as to whether or not to join the IRGC. So while service in the IRGC may promise better pay—and other perks, for sure—as well as a chance to serve the revolution for those who ideologically buy into that, Iranians ultimately choose whether to join the IRGC. So conscription refers to mandatory military service generally, not to joining the IRGC specifically. Indeed, based on what I've read, retention levels in the IRGC among conscripts are quite low. In other words, it's proof that there is no gun to their heads at all.

So again, when a conscript is called forward to complete his or her military service, he can choose if he wants to serve in the IRGC or the regular armed forces. Many do want to serve in the IRGC, as I've said, because there are some perks, but this choice may be completely disregarded by recruitment officers, especially when their political background is suspect.

The whole philosophy is to enrol people who are devoted to the regime. Those who are up for a draft may express the wish to spend their service period in the IRGC, but they would have to go through a very rigorous test, and many are rejected. That, to me, is the strongest argument as to why conscription just doesn't stick here. Military service is mandatory; joining the IRGC, specifically, is not. In fact, people are turned away.

Moreover, every IRGC member, including those who are performing their compulsory military service, do have to swear a particular oath of loyalty to the ruler—in other words, to the Supreme Leader—and this indicates the doctrinal, ideological, and fanatical nature of joining the IRGC. Given the fact that nobody is forced to join the IRGC, the willingness to take this oath is important.

I want to make two more points about conscription, and then we can move on. Ultimately, the IRGC is the pillar of the Iranian regime, so failing to list the IRGC because some individuals may be conscripted—which they're not, but if they were—is essentially equivalent to exempting the SS from punishment because some Germans were forced into the core service also.

Finally, the only effective way of weakening the IRGC is to target their vast commercial empire. This means that we have to list the IRGC as a whole in order to achieve that objective.

I hope that covers conscription fairly comprehensively. Let me move on to this argument about a state agency versus a non-state actor. If I'm taking too much time, you can let me know, and I'll be pleased to—

The Chair: You still have about two minutes left.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Two minutes—got it.

Does it count if I talk extra quickly? Will that be...?

The Chair: No, but you're very good at it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Coming back to the agency, if you have any time left, I wonder if you could highlight for us what IRGC ties might exist to companies operating in Canada.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: In terms of a state agency, the reason that fears are unfounded about the idea of listing a state agency as a terrorist entity in Canada is that, first of all, the Criminal Code, in which the provisions for the listing process are set out, does not prevent cabinet from designating a state agency. The language in the Criminal Code uses the word “entity”, which is extremely broad.

So there is nothing in the legal language itself to preclude the IRGC from being listed. Some may contend that IRGC actions are undertaken in the context of their official duties as a state military force, and therefore might fall outside the scope of the definition of terrorist activity, but this too is a flawed argument, because many of

these activities run afoul of international law and therefore still come under the definition of “terrorist”, which is within the Criminal Code.

Another reason is that the IRGC is a powerful, independent, and wealthy institution with a very unusual mandate: to protect the ideals of the Islamic revolution. It's not to secure the country or its borders. There already is a conventional military force, called the Artesh. We are not advocating that the Artesh be listed here.

So from this perspective, banning the IRGC is actually not much different from banning a non-state actor, because it is not a conventional military force.

Finally, with regard to the Justice for Victims of Terrorism Act, which was recently passed as part of Bill C-10, this bill will allow victims of terror to file civil lawsuits against local and state sponsors of terror. In part, with regard to suits against state sponsors, this will require the government to create a list of foreign states that it designates as sponsors of terror.

So I want to ask: if the government is prepared to label a foreign state as a terror sponsor, why in the world would it balk at designating an agency of that state as a terrorist organization?

That covers the state agency. Do you want me to move on to—
● (1325)

The Chair: Unfortunately, what I really want you to do—I hate to do this—is stop, because it is now Mr. Marston's turn to ask you a question. Then we'll let you get back to answering...

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

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

I travelled one time with this young woman. She can pack a lot of information into a short period of time, and we appreciate that.

A number of people in different places have expressed some of the concerns that you've tried to address here about conscription and that, and the fact that young people, whose egos are a little more open, when they get the opportunity to be in a group like the IRGC see that as an elevation within their society. It's not necessarily that they're complete ideologues who have bought into everything.

I would ask you one direct question. Are you aware of any other state agencies that have been added to the terrorist list?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: No. There haven't been.

Mr. Wayne Marston: So this would be a first.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Correct. That's why I did feel it was valid to address this particular issue of listing a state agency.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Yes.

I hate the term “devil's advocate”, but I have to play it a little bit here. You talked in your presentation about different attacks around the world that have taken place, and that this group was responsible for them. What evidence was there of that complicity?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Let me back up for one second, because I'm actually going to rethink my answer to your question about whether any terrorist entities are state agencies.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Okay.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: The answer is that actually there are, because Hamas and Hezbollah both play political roles, very legitimate political roles, within their country. So it is not the case that this would be unprecedented.

With regard to your second question, about the actual evidence, there were very concrete cases and investigations. I'd be happy to provide that information to you after the fact. Certainly with regard to the direct involvement of Iranian and IRGC officials in the Argentinian terrorist attacks, that is very well documented.

As I said, I'd be happy to provide you with further information.

Mr. Wayne Marston: If you could just give us the point of reference, we could check it out ourselves. It's not that I doubt the information in any way; I think it's just fairer to look at it like that, because we are being asked to look at this in a different fashion from in the past.

It is very clear that the leadership in Iran has talked for years about the wiping out of Israel. There's no doubt, and nobody's denying that fact. With the attack on the pro-democracy people in the country, as we heard in testimony here, there are as many as one being hanged about every eight hours. There's a terrible thing happening there.

Some people have stated that a lot of the words pointed at Israel are actually intended as a distraction, as opposed to reality, away from what they're doing to their own people. I certainly think that had they the opportunity, they would certainly attack Israel. The question, though, when you're dealing with nuclear weapons, is that dropping a bomb on Jerusalem, or dropping a bomb in that part of the world, would destroy an awful lot of Arab people as well, Palestinians as well, so it's that whole thing about....

Do you see any way that it is a distraction from what they're doing to their people?

• (1330)

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: In terms of threats, with regard to Israel...?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Israel, in particular, yes.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: There's no doubt that part of this just does have to do with internal politics. However, I think, from lessons looking at what has often befallen the Jewish people, that when somebody does threaten to kill you, you do have to take that seriously. That's not to say that you immediately pre-empt this with severe military strikes, but it does mean that you have to spend a little bit of time investigating whether there is some truth. Ideologically, both in terms of their past efforts, as well with regard to sponsoring terrorist groups that are very busy trying to do damage within Israel, there is good reason to believe that they would be serious.

If you're asking whether they would be prepared to launch some sort of nuclear strike and then risk very severe retaliation, there is a question about that. This really goes into the discussion of are they rational or aren't they rational.

Mr. Wayne Marston: We had that discussion in the sixties with my generation, between the U.S. and Russia.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: What I've basically come to conclude is that, first of all, there are some within the Iranian leadership—this must be said—who do subscribe to a very apocalyptic strain of a Shiite theology, and it does increase the likelihood that they might initiate a nuclear attack, even if retaliation would be devastating to their country. There have been leaders whose quotes I can provide for you that say, “Whatever ultimate damage is caused to Israel is more important than whatever less damage is caused to Iran.” However—

Mr. Wayne Marston: We called it mutually assured destruction, MAD, at the time.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Correct. Although in this case, the numbers are in Iran's favour. In any event, what I'd like to focus on is that ultimately, even if Iran does not become nuclear-armed but is simply nuclear-capable, I still believe that this is an extremely dangerous situation.

The Iranian regime aspires to alter the regional and even global order of power to its advantage. So nuclear weapons, even capability, can form a protective shield around the Iranian regime and further embolden it to continue and intensify its belligerent activities towards that goal. What you've seen already are assassination attempts of foreign government officials, supportive terrorist groups around the world, fomenting violence in countries to weaken government's dislikes and then propping up murderous regimes like Assad's regime in Syria—

The Chair: I hate to do this again, but we're out of time once more.

We'll go to Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm very grateful that Ms. Saperia is with us today and very grateful for the previous work that she's done to assure that people who are victims of terrorism actually have some kind of legal avenue for rebuttal and recompense for their pain.

Just to go back to Mr. Marston's round of questioning, I was just looking to make sure, but if it was not Khomeini, it was somebody of that class in Iran, who said that not only would they wipe Israel off the map but if it cost a few million Muslims lives, it would be a reasonable investment in order to rid the world of Israel. That's the kind of regime that we're dealing with. Certainly, I said yesterday when we had Dr. Ottolenghi here that along with those people that loathe this regime in Iran, I'm right up there with them.

I do want to mention something. On a direct question to Dr. Ottolenghi yesterday regarding the IRGC and conscription.... There is a case where conscripts are going in the IRGC and I'm concerned, because of the nature of the evil regime that they are, that there's a lot more that are less dedicated to the regime than we might be lead to believe because of their viciousness. Dr. Ottolenghi mentioned that they serve two years in there, so there is some concern.

I have absolutely no love lost for this regime at all. My concern would be for innocent people having the tag of a terrorist on their head, who were simply terrified by this very regime, their family was terrified, and they're in there on the fear of losing their own life or the lives of loved ones.

I'll just give you an opportunity to speak. I know that you have, but that, I believe, is the one major concern in regard to this regime, Ahmadinejad's regime.

• (1335)

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: No, I do understand your concern, and I think it's a good one. Again, based on my own research of what conscription means here, there are conscripts who are serving in the IRGC, but they are choosing to serve in the IRGC. So yes, they will get better pay, and they will probably get better perks as a result of serving in the IRGC, but ultimately there is no gun to their head. They do make this choice for themselves, and there does need to be a consequence for that.

Now, having said that, I will say that the lowly conscripted, especially the ones who are only going to spend a couple of years there, are not going to rise up in the ranks particularly far, and they're not going to be as impacted by any sorts of sanctions that western countries are going to impose. It's going to be the guys who stick around for decades who are going to rise up. They're also the ones who are going to be enriched financially from it and who then will also—ideally—suffer the most as a result of sanctions.

Again, this is not to be unsympathetic to truly nasty domestic circumstances, but I think every human being is born with challenges depending on where they live, and we hope that we all will make the best decisions we can within those circumstances. So short of being forced to serve in the IRGC, which they are not, I do not believe that your concern is enough to not list them as a terrorist organization.

Mr. David Sweet: You don't believe that there would be a substantial number who, for the sake of being able to atone for past sins for which their family may pay a high price in punishment from this regime, would serve in the IRGC?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: No, because there are other ways of performing military service.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

I asked Dr. Ottolenghi this question. I just want to ask you the same question with the hope that maybe you have some different access to intelligence on the ground. One of the things that has been of concern is that because of the control of this regime, the Iranian people themselves.... Again, Mr. Chair, I will reassert that when we talk about the evil regime, we're talking about Ahmadinejad and that regime, and not the innocent people of Iran. There's always this capability of them demonizing Israel and demonizing the west and taking the focus away from their evil deeds.

I'm wondering if the average person on the ground in Iran is getting more and more aware of the nature of this through the repression of the Green Movement, and is becoming aware of the magnitude of influence and the participation that Iran has with what's going on in Syria right now, where thousands and thousands of lives

are being lost, and of course, tens of thousands more there are being injured.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: First of all, I trust Dr. Ottolenghi to have fairly good intelligence on this. I believe he said that they do have some access to media, but not everyone necessarily gets plugged in. Certainly in terms of the country's own media, it's very, very heavily censored.

What is interesting to me is that when Iranians have been interviewed, they are not blaming the west in general for their hardship. They are blaming the government. This is despite the fact that often a few feet away there is somebody watching them, because that is actually one of the roles the IRGC plays—to make sure that no one gets away with internally opposing the revolutionary regime there.

I do find that very interesting. In my mind, in terms of what's happening in Syria, even geographically I think it's probably too close for them to not have some sense of what is happening. I obviously do not support at all Iran's propping up of Assad's regime there in Syria, but what I do think is interesting is how, as a result, it's impacting other Muslims' perceptions of the legitimacy of the Iranian regime. I point, for example, to the tension that has now been created between Hamas and Iran as a result of Iran's support for Assad.

• (1340)

The Chair: Unfortunately, you are out of time, Mr. Sweet.

Before we go to Professor Cotler, I just want to make an observation. I went to the Internet and took a peek, and the organization that strikes me as having structural similarities and as being a parallel military organization to the Revolutionary Guard is the SS in Germany. I just looked at this. They had some conscripts as well, although it wasn't the majority of their membership.

The point I'd make in drawing the parallel is that the underlying criminality of an organization does not mean that after the fact you can't separate out those individuals who were involved and who were there against their own will. That seems to be a relevant point here when we talk about the conscription issue. I don't think it should be necessarily central to the discussion of the organization's criminality.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: No, I think that's a very fair point. I think that point would be legitimate even if people were forced into the IRGC, which, again, it is my understanding that they are not. Your point is very well taken.

The Chair: Mr. Cotler, go ahead, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I just want to say, Mr. Chairman, that you've saved me the need to make that point, and you made it better than I would have. I'm glad you made that intervention. It's an important point.

I also want to join in commending the witness for a very comprehensive and compelling presentation on this issue.

As someone who has advocated for the listing of the IRGC as a terrorist group for some years now, this will help to buttress my case, and it might be the tipping point for getting the government to do this.

I want to say that I think Minister Baird is somebody who has an appreciation of the issues here, particularly with regard to Iran. He may be very responsive to the arguments you made today.

On the matter of other state agencies attached to the terrorist list, it is interesting because Hamas is not only a state agency, it is actually the government in Gaza. Hezbollah is not only a state agency, it is part of the government of Lebanon. So we have put both of them on the terrorist list, and they are even, as I've said, representative state bodies.

I have two questions.

One has to do—and you made some reference to it—with the evidence of Iranian complicity in the current Syrian assault. There has been reference to Iranian involvement in surveillance methods, intelligence gathering, coercive interrogation, and indeed, even in torture. Is there specific evidence of the footprints of the IRGC in Syria? That's question number one.

The second question is on your reference to the bombing of the Jewish community centre of the AMIA in 1994 in which there was clear evidence of Iranian implication in that bombing, in the judgment of the Argentinian judiciary, Interpol arrest warrants, etc. But you mentioned the 1992 attack, and I'm not aware that there's yet been evidence of the IRGC regarding that attack.

I wonder if you could respond to both of those questions.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: On the first question, with regard to the Iranian footprint in Syria, yes, there has been concrete evidence, including evidence of IRGC leaders flying to Syria and being present to organize government forces there. I would be happy to provide the committee with some written documentation afterward.

In fact, Iran has been further sanctioned by the U.S. and others with regard to its proven support for Syria, and it continues to ship weapons as well. That has been documented.

In terms of the Argentinian events, both of them in the 1990s, again, I do have some information specifically about Iranian and IRGC involvement. I would be happy to provide you with that in written form afterwards.

• (1345)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: You still have time. Are you done?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Yes, I have to get somewhere else and that's why.

The Chair: All right.

We'll go back to the Conservatives again. No, I'm sorry, we won't. We'll go to the New Democrats.

Mr. Marston is dividing his time with Madam Pécelet.

We'll do that, and then we'll go back to the Conservatives.

Mr. Marston, please go ahead.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll always take the opportunity when it's there.

One of the things we're talking about under today's orders of the day is the human rights situation in Iran. We're tending to look outward quite a bit. I'm very concerned about the kinds of repression that have been levelled against their own people. That's why in the last round I was talking a little about that and about the executions.

In the past, we've used containment to try to influence repressive governments into change. That was done with North Korea and with China, as I recall. When we're considering the impact of our actions and how they can benefit the Iranian people, how do you feel about that concept of containment?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: You mean containment as opposed to preventing them from acquiring any sort of nuclear weapons capability in the first place?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Yes, in this regard we're talking solely about the interior of Iran itself in terms of the implication of the harm they're doing to their own people, and the fact that containment could possibly persuade them to not be as aggressive with their own people.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Oh. Actually, in that case, I don't think I do understand your question.

My discussion of containment has to do with the distinction between how far to allow Iran to go in terms of its nuclear weapons capability—whether we're going to allow them to get there and then contain them to ensure that they do not use those weapons—and not in the context of human rights violations.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, containment, in our view, is not the containment of their aggression outwards but strong sanctions against them, travel prohibitions to people of the IRGC, and things of that nature—as much as we can ramp up to put the strongest possible international pressure on them, to isolate them, to make it very clear to them that what they're doing internally is not acceptable.

It's very clear that when they talk about genocide, about destroying Israel, that's not acceptable, but the study we're looking at here is more internal. I'm just trying to steer it a little bit that way, so I thought I'd ask you, then, your view of using containment of that nature.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Yes, I'm certainly in favour of focusing on the regime's human rights violations as additional grounds for diplomatic isolation, for sanctions. As I said, one of my concerns with regard to the current SEMA sanctions that Canada has imposed is that they're solely focused on Iran's nuclear activity. That is a very legitimate concern, but as this committee has determined, Iran does pose this fourfold threat. I think it is important to be looking at solutions that address each one of those threats and that are grounded in how seriously we take those.

I believe Dr. Ottolenghi had specific policy recommendations in terms of dealing with the regime's human rights violations. I totally support those.

I would say, again, that I don't want to take away your focus, which I know is human rights, but my focus happens to be the terrorism element. I would say that listing the IRGC does, once again, help to address the human rights violations as well, because you are weakening the same entity that is responsible for all the internal repression.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I'll turn this over to Mademoiselle Péclet.

Ms. Ève Péclet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Thank you very much.

Have you ever been in Iran?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: No.

Ms. Ève Péclet: Okay. I'm sorry to go back to the conscription thing, but you were talking about people maybe being forced in. You said that, according to your opinion, you think they were not.

Have you ever spoken with a representative of those people—

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: It's not according to my opinion, it's according to the research I've done. My research is secondary, but their research might be primary, interviewing Iranians directly or being in Iran.

But I take your point. I would love to go to Iran if it weren't so dangerous for Canadians to be there now.

It's a good question. Again, I did not pull this out of thin air. This is based on a number of different articles and books that I've read. I'd be happy to provide you with some of those as examples.

• (1350)

Ms. Ève Péclet: As you know, liberty of the press is non-existent over there, so maybe people are forced to say that they were not forced because they're too scared of the repression.

But that's my own opinion. I've never been to Iran, and I've never met anybody who—

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: In terms of the structural way that the government works, that does tend to not be so private. That is information that people can access in terms of what conscription means in the country.

Ms. Ève Péclet: I have a few other questions.

[*Translation*]

In terms of...

[*English*]

Sorry. My questions will be in French.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: That's fine.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Péclet: You are advocating military action as soon as possible. That is one of the positions taken by your foundation. Your colleague testified to that effect last Tuesday.

What do you think that Canadian military action will accomplish in terms of fundamental rights in Iran? Could Canada not take a softer approach before going into that country and taking military action? What could Canada do?

I find your solution a bit too radical. If we are talking about respecting women's rights, for instance, or freedom of expression and democracy, do you truly think that a major military operation is really the solution that will lead to the government respecting and protecting fundamental rights in Iran?

[*English*]

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: I just want to clarify. If I have given the impression that I am advocating for military action as soon as possible, then I have definitely not been clear, so let me apologize for that.

I don't want to see military action. My goal is very much to avoid that at all costs. For fear of speaking out of turn, I would say the same thing applies to my colleague, Dr. Ottolenghi, who spoke to you a couple of days ago.

But I think generally, from an organizational FDD perspective, we have been at the forefront of advocating for non-military measures. That includes economic sanctions and that includes, very specifically, listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization, for fear of repetition here.

I do not believe that everything has been done that could be done on the sanctions front, on the non-military front, in order to prevent a nuclear Iran. I would very much like to avoid a military strike at all costs.

In terms of Canada's role, that generally isn't discussed. It's usually a question of whether Israel might pre-emptively strike militarily, and whether the U.S. might as well.

Whether any sort of western military strike is going to help Iranians....

I don't remember exactly what your question was. Was it whether it was going to improve the human rights situation?

Ms. Ève Péclet: Yes.

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: The risk of a military strike, for sure, is alienating the Iranian people and sort of uniting them against the west. That is a risk. But if you focus your strikes specifically on where the nuclear weapons or capabilities are being developed—

Ms. Ève Péclet: Can I just stop you? I just want to—

The Chair: Actually, I have to stop both of you because we're at nine minutes here. I allowed this to go significantly over time, and I did that in part because we don't have time to do another round. So this will give Mr. Hiebert a chance to do the last thing.

But before you do it, Mr. Hiebert, I'm just going to read.... Our analyst, Melissa, was able to dig up our report from last time. Just to remind everybody, recommendation number eight from our report on Iran said:

The Subcommittee recommends that the Government of Canada, in communicating its condemnation of the human rights violations perpetrated by members of Iran's state security agencies against the Iranian people, use all available tools, authorized by existing immigration and visa policies and legislation, to deny entry to Canada to members of Iran's security agencies, including members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij militia.

So that is where we stood organizationally when we did the report.

Mr. Hiebert.... Sorry, we had it down that you were going again.

Madam Grewal, I'm sorry.

• (1355)

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): That's fine, and thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much for coming, Ms. Saperia, and informing us on the pressing and substantial issues facing Iran today.

As you mentioned, economic sanctions have become the most adopted measure against Iran by western countries, and Canada should impose tighter sanctions against Iran. However, there has also been some criticism on sanctions negatively affecting innocent citizens more than the regime they are intended to harm. For example, poor citizens are becoming economically impoverished and are failing to obtain their basic needs for life.

So has there been any kind of upgrading in Iran?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Has there been...? I missed the last part.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: What I mean is, for example, the poor citizens, when they are not getting their basic needs met, is something like this happening in Iran?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Yes, that is a concern. Whether sanctions are hurting the people they're intended to hurt or whether they're hurting innocent people instead, there's no question that the Iranian economy has suffered as a result of the sanctions. Inflation is high. Unemployment is high. Their currency, the rial, has been devalued.

Again I will point out that the Iranian people have not tended to blame the west for their economic conditions right now. They are blaming the government. But secondly, the ideal goal of sanctions is to make life so difficult for the regime that it feels compelled to actually abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions. That may not be realistic, especially given how far they've already come in that. But sanctions might still render the government very vulnerable and unleash domestic Iranian backlash similar to what we saw in 2009, which would revive the internal opposition and topple the regime. It seems that a lot of Iranians would want those things, because they are so disenchanted with their government on so many different levels. So a democratic revolution would optimally, in my opinion, remove the current regime.

There has also been talk about the fact that many Iranians are actually supportive of some sort of nuclear program. Well, other countries have nuclear programs too. This one is scary because of this fourfold threat, because of their involvement in terrorism, and because of their genocidal statements. When you have a peaceful regime, then an ambition to have nuclear capabilities is not nearly as scary for the rest of the world.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Have you also heard reports of Iranian citizens potentially being executed for their religious associations, such as Youcef Naderkhani, who is the head of the network of Christian house churches in Iran? Are you aware of any political motivations for the executions, or is it merely because of the religious associations? In addition, what other religions or beliefs may be targeted by the regime? Could you tell me something?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Certainly part of it can be religious disagreements. Members of Baha'i are certainly a very threatened minority within Iran, and that should be a primary human rights

concern for those who are paying attention to human rights violations in Iran.

As for other considerations, the IRGC was formed in 1979, right after the revolution, to consolidate the revolution and to fight anybody who was counter-revolutionary. Religion and politics are all mixed up together. So anybody who is actively working against the revolution's ideals and the Iranian regime is going to be at risk in Iran.

• (1400)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Earlier I was talking about the sanctions against Iran, including an oil embargo by the U.S. and the EU. This has proven to be very effective. UN nuclear inspectors were recently permitted to enter the country and shed some light on the issue. Are you aware of their progress or any findings?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: You mean the recent visit by the inspectors? I think what they found is that they were once again turned away from accessing very important locations and very important information. So I think that's creating much more fear instead of less. There is a lack of transparency—which was the cause of UN-imposed sanctions in the first place—with regard to their uranium enrichment and in terms of what's happening, where it's happening, and why it's happening.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Finally, I have a very short question. Is the Basij force linked directly to the IRGC?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Yes, it is. It does fall under the IRGC command centre. There is one degree of separation, so it's not one of the primary branches, but it is immediately under that. It is intrinsically connected to the IRGC.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Just to follow up on our other conversation, it's my understanding that currently the Government of Canada sanctions individual senior members of the IRGC through the SEMA legislation, restricting them from doing business with Canadian companies. If the IRGC were to be listed as a terrorist organization, what difference in impact would it have?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Yes, senior leaders have been designated under SEMA, as have specific branches of the IRGC, as I've mentioned. So it is a good question: what will the terrorist listing do that SEMA has not? I tried to address that.

First of all, the targeted parties will be broader. Not every branch of the IRGC, and certainly not every relevant senior individual, has been listed under SEMA. Doing a blanket listing of the IRGC under the Criminal Code listing process is much more comprehensive.

Similarly, the penalties under the Criminal Code are much more severe than they are under SEMA. Generally, I believe giving law enforcement options under the Criminal Code will be helpful in terms of being able to target this particular concern.

Again, very importantly, SEMA sanctions pertain only to Iran's nuclear activity. This does not address at all the organization's terrorist involvement, so we need to be using each one of our tools as they apply. If the IRGC is a terrorist organization, let's list them as a terrorist organization. If they're breaching international requests regarding their nuclear transparency, let us impose both the sanctions under the United Nations Act and our own sanctions under the Special Economic Measures Act.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Are you aware of the IRGC being actively involved with Canadian companies?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: Oh, right, you asked about that before. I cannot point to specific names or companies right now, but first of all, that's something I can look into for you—although it takes a considerable amount of research, and one of the arguments we are making is that this job actually should fall to government. Government has the resources to be identifying what are IRGC front companies or companies linked to the IRGC in some fundamental way and operating within Canada.

Given our resources—our oil and gas resources—and given our physical proximity to the United States, there's no question that Canada is seen as a very desirable place for Iranians to set up shop. Again, let me specify that Iranians, generally, are not my concern. It is the IRGC-linked individuals who may have more nefarious intentions that I am concerned about. Obviously, Iranians doing

legitimate business here in Canada.... It's certainly being done with my blessing.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: So you have a belief that the IRGC is active corporately in Canada, but you don't have specific examples at this time?

Ms. Sheryl Saperia: That's correct.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Okay.

The Chair: That actually uses up the available time, and perfectly, as a matter of fact, at nine minutes and five seconds.

Thank you very much for coming in as our witness. You were informative once again, as you were the last time you were here a parliament or two ago, and we very much appreciate it.

Thank you very much, everybody.

We are adjourned.

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