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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)

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Let me gavel us into session.

[Translation]

This is the International Human Rights Subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today's date is April 24, 2012 and this is our 32nd meeting.

[English]

We are continuing to look at the human rights situation in Iran. We are engaged in a process of updating some hearings we did a few years ago on the subject.

With us today are two witnesses: Susanne Tamás, from the Bahá'í Community of Canada; and Payam Akhavan, a professor from McGill University, who is joining us today from New York.

Given the noise and confusion going on, it will be easier for the witness who is present in the room to start, rather than Professor Akhavan.

Ms. Tamás, can you begin your testimony first? We'll go to Professor Akhavan after you. Then we'll go to questions.

Ms. Tamás, please feel free to begin.

Ms. Susanne Tamás (Director, Office of Governmental Relations, Bahá'í Community of Canada): Mr. Chair and distinguished members, thank you for the invitation to comment on developments in the religious persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran since our testimony on the subject on February 26, 2009.

As anticipated in your report, "Ahmadinejad's Iran", and as documented by the United Nations, Amnesty International, and other civil society organizations, the general human rights situation in Iran and that of the Bahá'ís in particular has deteriorated markedly over the interim.

Three developments illustrate this trend: the trial and treatment of the Bahá'í leadership; the coordinated attacks on the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, the BIHE; and the increasing rate of arrests and arbitrary detention.

First I have a few words about the context within which these developments have occurred. In its 2012 report on the expanding repression of dissent in Iran, Amnesty International noted that, "Non-Muslims, especially the Baha'i community, have been

increasingly demonized by Iranian officials and in the Iranian state-controlled media", and that, "repeated calls by the Supreme Leader and other authorities to combat 'false beliefs'—apparently an allusion to evangelical Christianity, Baha'ism and Sufism—appear to have led to an increase in religious persecution".

This document, published by the Bahá'í International Community, catalogues 360 articles in print and online media and 58 seminars, conferences, and workshops that incited hatred against the Bahá'ís of Iran between January 2010 and May 2011. It also describes the inclusion of allocations for educational programs to confront the Bahá'í faith in national and provincial budgets, and the establishment of official organs for this purpose. The Iranian government has, in effect, institutionalized incitement to hatred against the members of this religious community, allowing it to persecute Bahá'ís with impunity.

Let us now turn to the trial and treatment of the seven Bahá'ís who served on an ad hoc group that looked after the spiritual and social needs of the community at the national level. Following their arrest on May 14, 2008, Iranian authorities declared the ad hoc group illegal, in an effort to leave the community leaderless. After months of solitary confinement and periods of intense interrogation, without access to legal counsel, the former Bahá'í leaders were brought to trial in January 2010. They were all found guilty and given the maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

An appeals court ruling rejected three of the six charges against them—those alleging espionage, collaboration with the State of Israel, and the provision of classified documents to foreign nationals with the intention of undermining state security—and reduced their sentences to 10 years. However, following an intervention by the prosecutor general, their sentences to 20 years' imprisonment were reinstated.

According to Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, the head of their legal team:

There is not a shred of evidence for the charges levelled against them. Charges such as espionage for Israel, propaganda against the national security and others, are all excuses. Any just and impartial judge would, without a doubt, issue a complete acquittal and release them immediately.

The second development is the Iranian government's most recent coordinated attack on the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, an initiative started in 1987 in response to the needs of Bahá'í youth, who, as a matter of explicit government policy, have been denied access to universities because of their religion since 1979.

During the week beginning May 22, 2011, Iranian authorities raided 40 homes in six cities across the country and arrested 19 people associated with the BIHE. Seven were tried and convicted of charges of membership in the deviant Bahá'í sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country. They were sentenced to prison terms of four or five years' duration, and their efforts to provide higher education to Bahá'í youth were declared illegal.

• (1315)

Among those imprisoned is a permanent resident of Canada, Nooshin Khadem, who completed her MBA at Carleton University in 2003. When she graduated, Nooshin's professors urged her to stay here for her own safety, but she returned to Iran to help other Bahá'í youth denied access to higher education. Two other Bahá'ís who completed masters degrees at the University of Ottawa in 2003 and were teaching at the BIHE were arrested in Tehran in September 2011 and have been sentenced to four-year prison terms.

This brings us to the third development, the unprecedented surge in arrests and arbitrary detention. In 2004, two Bahá'ís were arrested in Iran. During 2009, when I last addressed you, 74 Bahá'ís were arrested. That number grew to 125 arrests in 2010, and in 2011, 164 Bahá'ís were arrested, more than doubling the number arrested in 2009. The trend is clear and deeply troubling.

Most of the detentions follow a familiar pattern. Government agents show up at a Bahá'í home, conduct lengthy searches, confiscate personal items such as computers and books, and then arrest the residents. The officials' behaviour is becoming increasingly disrespectful and violent. During a raid in Kurdistan Province, 14 Bahá'ís were questioned regarding Bahá'í meetings, those attending them, and how they are organized. In a recent raid in Shiraz, an 18-month-old child was among those taken into custody. These three developments—the imprisonment of the former leadership, attacks on those associated with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, and the dramatically increased rate of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment—are elements of the Iranian government's campaign to eradicate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity. It's a campaign that has been escalating widely, sharply, and rapidly.

Canada has demonstrated consistent international leadership in defence of human rights in Iran and its actions are critical to supporting the development of democracy and the rule of law in that country. While recognizing the threat posed by Iran's military and nuclear capability to the region, the committee has drawn attention to the great threat the Iranian government poses to its own people.

We commend the committee for its timely action in updating and resubmitting its report and recommendations. True progress in Iran can only be measured by the emancipation of its own citizens, including its Bahá'í citizens, from the continued state-sponsored human rights violations.

More specifically, and as yet another expression of its concern, we would ask that the committee mark May 14, the four-year anniversary of the arrest of the Bahá'í leaders, by supporting the adoption of an all-party motion in the House of Commons calling upon Iran to release the seven Bahá'í leaders and the imprisoned Bahá'í teachers, and to end its persecution of members of the Bahá'í

faith and all others whose freedom of religion, belief, and conscience is routinely denied by that government.

I will stop there, Mr. Chairman, and would welcome questions.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

We'll go now to Professor Akhavan. Please feel free to begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Payam Akhavan (Professor, Faculty of Law, McGill University, As an Individual): Mr. Chairman, distinguished committee members, thank you for your invitation. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to share with you my ideas on human rights in Iran.

• (1320)

[*English*]

I would like to begin by commending the committee for holding a hearing on the human rights situation in Iran at a time when, unfortunately, the exclusive focus of the international community has fallen on the nuclear issue. Many of us in the Iranian human rights movement have argued for a long time that the real issue in Iran is not the question of nuclear capability; it's the nature of the regime.

It is a regime that, because it lacks legitimacy, rules through a systematic campaign of intimidation, violence, and hate propaganda. The international community must appreciate that the human rights situation in Iran is not merely a moral issue but an issue of far-reaching consequence for the broader transformation of the region and the solution to problems pertaining to peace and security.

As Ms. Tamás explained, the Iranian people are perceived by their own government as the enemy. The biggest threat to the power of the Islamic Republic is not the United States. It is not Israel. It is not the cast of enemies that the Islamic Republic demonizes in its official propaganda. It is the mere expression of people's human rights. We have to consider, when a regime criminalizes entire religious communities, be it the Bahá'í community, be it the Christian community, and when a regime expends significant resources to arrest 16-year-old bloggers and to regulate all interactions on the Internet, it is not a sign of its strength but a sign of its own weakness.

In that regard, I wish to speak briefly today about steps Canada can take to help the progressive transformation of Iran into a democratic society while isolating those who stand in the way of the majority of Iranians who want to put an end to human rights abuses.

I would like to begin with the question of Internet access. While the Government of Canada, together with other governments, has recently imposed very significant sanctions against Iran, we also have to appreciate that it is important to help the Iranian human rights movement and civil society by provision of technological assistance that will help them evade all the filters the government has created to prevent the use of cyberspace as a forum in which civil society can gather, organize, and exchange ideas.

The Iranian government has understood the lesson of the Arab Spring. It has understood the lesson of the Green Movement from June 2009, and it has taken steps, through a council on cyberspace established by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, to effectively create what is called a halal Internet, which means there would be a national Internet system that will be able to impose tight control on all uses of cyberspace by Iranian citizens.

In that regard, it's estimated that more than 17 million Iranians use the Internet. This is a very youthful generation that is Internet savvy, that has access to satellite television. The control and suppression of information is a key ingredient in the government's ability to maintain its repression.

In that regard, some five million sites have been blocked by the intelligence ministry of the Islamic Republic, and the Canadian government and others should consider how they can help provide technology to Iranian civil society so it can continue to use this vital medium as part of its resistance to this oppression.

I would also like to add that while the Islamic Republic is blocking access to satellite transmissions for BBC Persian television, for Voice of America, and for other channels that they deem a threat to their own power, the Islamic Republic continues to use the services of Eutelsat, a French-based company, in order to broadcast five out of its six official channels within Iran itself and abroad.

Press TV, the so-called CNN of the Islamic Republic, recently was harshly criticized for televising confessions of prisoners who apparently had been subjected to torture. Once again, if the Islamic Republic is going to deny its own citizens the right to have free access to information, then the international community must deny the same rights to the Islamic Republic of Iran to freely broadcast its propaganda and misinformation.

I would also like to speak once again about the question of targeted sanctions, an issue that has been brought before this committee on previous occasions. We must ensure that the sanctions that are imposed do not punish the average Iranian, but rather they punish those elements of the leadership that are responsible for massive human rights abuses.

Canada, unlike the United States and the European Union, remains the only country in the west that has still failed to adopt travel bans and asset freezes against Iranian officials implicated in human rights abuses. I believe it would be of great significance, in particular because Canada is a destination of choice for the elite of the Islamic Republic, as we know from recent revelations. For example, the head of the Iranian national bank has been living happily in Canada, and even obtained citizenship some years ago.

It would send a very strong message if Canada indicated that beyond sanctions, which very often indiscriminately punish the average Iranian—who already suffers from terrible economic circumstances—the Canadian government will blacklist, through travel bans and asset freezes, all individuals and their families who have been implicated in human rights abuses. In that regard, it's not becoming, on the one hand, to sponsor resolutions at the United Nations General Assembly condemning the human rights situation in Iran and then discover sometime later that the head of the bank that is the financial linchpin for the Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah,

and Hamas is sitting happily in a multi-million dollar mansion in Toronto.

I would like to end with one further remark that relates to the question of deportations of individuals in Canada who have made refugee claims. We have a situation once again where, on the one hand, the Canadian government is condemning the human rights situation in Iran, but we have the case of a Mr. Kavooos Soofi in Toronto, who has been fighting deportation to Iran. Organizations such as Amnesty International have submitted formal statements indicating that he's at substantial risk of torture and possibly even the imposition of the death penalty, insofar as he has converted from Islam to another religion and has been critical of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

Once again, we cannot condemn human rights abuses in Iran and at the same time be deporting individuals when they face substantial risk of torture and even death.

● (1325)

I would like to end by explaining once again that a regime that has to criminalize freedom of belief, target religious communities such as the Bahá'í, impose the death sentence on a Christian pastor, Youcef Nadarkhani, simply for preaching Christianity, and a regime that expends millions of dollars spying on its own citizens and controlling their thoughts and beliefs is one that is not powerful but suffers from the want of power.

It is for the international community and Canada to adopt policies that punish the perpetrators of human rights abuses, not merely by condemning their actions but by affecting their interests, while at the same time helping empower the majority of Iranians who want to see a democratic transformation of their country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That concludes my remarks.

● (1330)

The Chair: Thank you, Professor.

It's exactly 1:30, which means that with six members we have five minutes for each question, including answers. I'm going to suggest that questioners decide who they want to ask their question to. I doubt there'll be enough time for both witnesses to provide answers to questions. You don't have to do that, but I may have to cut people off in order to keep things moving.

We have to wrap up in a timely fashion because we're two blocks away from Parliament and it's difficult to get back in time for question period. We also have at least one item of committee business before we leave. All of that puts some constraints on our time.

We'll start with Mr. Sweet, as usual.

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

Professor Akhavan, thank you for taking the time to testify before the committee once more. I also commend you for your good work on *The Green Wave*. It's on the Green Movement that I want to ask my first question.

Ms. Tamás mentioned her observations from 2004 on this continuing acceleration of repression of the Bahá'í movement. Has that same severity on the general public continued after the Green Movement? I know you were talking about the nature of the regime already being darker than any regime we can imagine, but has the repression become more severe since the put-down of the Green Movement?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, Mr. Sweet, for your question.

The simple answer is yes, and dramatically so. First of all, the Green Movement itself was met with violent repression—the murder, torture, and rape of countless peaceful protestors. It was followed by a consolidation of the regime's grip of power. That is why I explained that the regime has taken extraordinary measures to block popular access to information, whether through satellite television or the Internet. They fear yet another uprising.

So the situation has deteriorated dramatically. There has been an intensification of hate propaganda, at least at the Bahá'í community, and the creation of all sorts of supposed conspiracies that link all... [Technical difficulty—Editor] All of this is a measure of the regime's desperation to hold on to power at any cost. Frankly, things may deteriorate yet further.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Professor Akhavan. We're having some technical issues with the signal. I think I'll go to Madam Tamás now for a question.

Thank you very much for your testimony. You've had some reports from your community about the sophistication of what Professor Akhavan was talking about—this intrusion into the Internet and mobile communications, and what has been happening as far as this new electronic sophistication of Ahmadinejad's regime.

Ms. Susanne Tamás: I referred in my testimony to the Bahá'í Institute For Higher Education, which was established to provide university education to Bahá'í youth routinely denied access to Iranian universities. Much of that education has been put on the Internet. Much of it is through online courses.

There has been a marked effort by the Iranian government to make that impracticable. So download and upload speeds have been really cut back. That makes it a lot harder for young people who can't go to university to even study online. But I don't have any direct knowledge of other aspects.

• (1335)

Mr. David Sweet: What about the sanctions Professor Akhavan was mentioning? Are these sanctions working? World consciousness is more on the nuclear threat Iran poses to the global community. But do you see any kind of capitulation in the regime at all since the sanctions by the general global community were ramped up over the last year?

Ms. Susanne Tamás: If my measure were what's happening to the people in the Bahá'í community in Iran, I would have to say that their situation continues to deteriorate. But I don't know if that necessarily translates into the sanctions not working, because we don't know what the situation would be like if there weren't sanctions.

I will leave more expert comment on that question to Dr. Akhavan.

Mr. David Sweet: If I have a moment, could Professor Akhavan reply to that?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. David Sweet: Professor Akhavan, on the sanctions, are they working?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: There is evidence that the sanctions are hurting the regime. Unfortunately, in certain respects, they're also hurting ordinary Iranians.

The regime today is as much a theocracy as it is a kleptocracy. Basically, the scale of corruption is extensive, and it's one of the ways the regime buys the loyalty, let's say, of the top elements of the Revolutionary Guard. And it's the way it finances its considerable apparatus of repression. It takes money to have thousands and thousands of people spying and monitoring, engaging in propaganda, and beating and torturing.

The point, though, is that the only thing being incentivized is Iran's cooperation on the nuclear issue. So it is the understanding of the Republic of Iran that if it makes concessions in relation to the nuclear issue, the international community is not going to make much of its repression of its own citizens. And that is where the international community is making a mistake. It should be understood that there is a cost attached to human rights violations, and I believe the regime does engage in a cost-benefit calculus. Despite its extremist rhetoric, I believe it's quite a calculating regime.

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

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Marston now.

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

Ms. Tamás, in your testimony, you talked about Shirin Ebadi. She has testified twice before this committee. If I recall correctly, she was concerned about her offices being closed down, or they had been closed down the last time she testified.

Are you aware of whether she's functioning out of her own offices?

Ms. Susanne Tamás: No, she's out of the country. She's not in Iran, and one of her colleagues, Mr. Soltani, who was also part of that practice, is in prison.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I'm not surprised to hear that, unfortunately.

It seems that whenever a country criticizes the human rights record in Iran in any form or other, western imperialism is thrown out. Rather than heavy criticism, would there be a more moderate way we might approach this? Are you aware of what steps other countries or groups of countries might be taking to engage Iran on its human rights record? Or is that just plain impossible?

Ms. Susanne Tamás: The parliaments of the predictable partners, the U.S. and the U.K., are taking action, and their governments are continuing their action. Every year, in advance of the discussion of the resolution at the United Nations, Canada, through its missions, makes representations to governments around the world to try to sensitize them to the human rights situation in Iran and get their support for the resolution.

In addition to that, perhaps additional thought could be given to how we can get to Iran's friends. In the work I've done attending the UN sessions and speaking with delegations from various countries, it's clear to me that some of them are acutely aware of this human rights situation in Iran. They would never countenance such a situation in their own countries, but for political or economic reasons, they don't want to take the public stance of voting for the resolution.

I don't know how much effort is being put into exploring with those same countries what alternative ways they might have of trying to explain to Iran that its own best interests lie in promoting the human rights of its people.

• (1340)

Mr. Wayne Marston: It's amazing what oil will do, isn't it?

Dr. Akhavan, welcome again. It's nice to have you with us.

Realistically speaking, the Arab Spring, as excited as we all were about it when it occurred, has not delivered as much as people thought it would. I think the reality is that when you remove the leader, you still have the same regime very much in power in some countries, and I'm thinking in terms of Egypt.

What do you think realistically the chances are of something happening in Iran to that degree?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, sir. It's a pleasure to speak with you again.

I think we have to be realistic about what historical transition to democracy entails. It took Europe four centuries of wars and genocides to achieve democracy.

I just returned from Tripoli in Libya. After 40 years of dictatorship and the mass atrocities of the Gaddafi regime, Libya is not going to be transformed into Sweden overnight. It's going to take time. Developing these institutions requires considerable experience.

I would say that Iran actually is far ahead of the curve compared to the Arab world, because Iran had its ideological revolution 30 years ago. When I was in Tahrir Square recently, in Cairo, and I saw all the romanticization of political Islam, it reminded me of what Iran was like 30 years ago. The one place in the Middle East where no one wants an Islamic republic is Iran, because people have lived under one for 30 years. That's why the civil society movement in Iran is thoroughly secular. Even devout Muslims in Iran who were in the Green Movement want a secular state because they believe that religion and politics don't mix. That's why Iran's transformation would also affect the Arab world.

What we have now is a situation where Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are engaged in proxy wars and power struggles, are both trying to hijack these movements in the Arab world for their own purposes. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia has given millions of dollars to

extremist Salafist movements because it doesn't want secular democratic movements that are going to come back and create problems in Saudi Arabia. In Iran there's support for the Assad regime because Iran fears the loss of its only regional ally.

That's the context within which we should understand that if and when the regime changes in Iran, it will just be the beginning of a long and painful process of building a democratic culture and system.

The Chair: You're out of time, unfortunately.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I have about 30 seconds.

The Chair: You're actually over by about 30 seconds right now.

Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you both very much for your presentations.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seems to be an essential part of the Iranian state, responsible for protecting Iran from outside threats as well as playing a key role in silencing dissent against the regime. Some countries, notably the United States, describe the IRGC as a terrorist organization. Canada, while tending to be fairly close to the United States in the recognition of terrorist organizations, does not.

Given the IRGC's relationship with and importance to the Iranian state, what do you think the effects of extending terrorist organization recognition to the IRGC would be to the Iranian civil and military officials?

Any one of you can answer this question.

Ms. Susanne Tamás: I yield to Payam.

Dr. Akhavan.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I was waiting for that. Thank you.

To put it very briefly, over the past decade there has been a shift of power away from the clerical establishment toward the IRGC and the progressive militarization of the regime in Iran. The IRGC today controls significant elements of the economy, and that's why some of the sanctions are geared toward the IRGC's grip on power and its access to those sources of funds.

The IRGC, on the one hand, is really the enforcement of the regime, but on the other hand, the rank and file of the IRGC are not necessarily sympathetic to the regime. During the violent repression of the Green Movement the regime could not count on IRGC's soldiers to shoot people on the streets, which is why it had to hire these Basij plainclothes thugs to do the dirty work, and there were rumblings within the IRGC that we refused to shoot our people in the streets.

On the one hand, I think that the leadership of the IRGC has to be isolated. Whether the best way of doing that is through branding it as a terrorist organization or not is a matter of some discussion, but at the same time, one should also reach out to the rank and file of the IRGC and say that the international community's fight is not with them, but it is with their leaders, who are essentially in power to enjoy all the benefits and privileges, including corruption, which is why the rank and file has become alienated from its own leadership.

• (1345)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Some respectable democracies, specifically Turkey and Brazil, have maintained a policy of engagement with the Iranian regime to try to guide Iran's progress on their terms. Turkey and Brazil have most notably pledged to help Iran in pursuing civil nuclear power and by enriching uranium themselves, supposedly ensuring that Iran does not get the technological capacity to weaponize uranium.

Could you comment on the benefits or drawbacks of an engagement policy with respect to Iran's human rights record?

Again, any one of you can answer.

Ms. Susanne Tamás: I think dialogue is always a good thing. To consult together with other people to resolve differences is very important.

If we look, however, to Iran's record when it has been engaged in dialogue—I am thinking in particular of its dialogue with Europeans some five or six years ago. Iran used that dialogue as an opportunity to deflect criticism. It wouldn't allow certain things to be discussed, and we didn't see any improvement in the situation on the ground.

I'm saying there are two messages. One of them is that dialogue is good, but the other is that your partner in dialogue has to come to the table with some integrity and some demonstration of good faith that they are prepared to listen and to change.

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

The Chair: You have just used up five minutes, to the second, right now, as a matter of fact, so we will go to Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I'd like to commend both our witnesses for their appearance and their recommendations today.

My first question is for Payam Akhavan. Given the intensification of human rights violations in Iran, which include also the increase in the rate and range of executions—they're on an execution binge, and among those prospective executions, two imminent executions involve Iranian Canadians, Saeed Malekpour and Hamid Ghassemi-Shall.

Can any specific action be taken with respect to Iranian Canadians and their imminent threat of execution?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you. If I may, I'll call you Professor Cotler, my venerable colleague from McGill.

You have written about the execution binge. We are aware that Iran has the highest per capita rate of executions in the world. Its executions are second only to China's. Unfortunately, that is part of the overall climate of terror and fear, which includes public

executions, which are reminiscent of pre-modern Europe and how sovereigns would basically instill fear in people.

Now, the case of Canadian Iranians is somewhat different because there is evidence to suggest that the Islamic Republic has specifically targeted dual nationals. One of the explanations is that it is paranoid about the links between Iranian civil society and Iranians in the diaspora. Another explanation, simply, is that dual nationals are being kept hostage. In effect, Mr. Ghassemi-Shall and Mr. Malekpour are being kept as bargaining chips by the Islamic Republic in order to put pressure on Canada.

My own impression is that Canada and other governments have to exact a cost rather than making concessions. There are various tools in the tool box that Canada can use to send the message that if either of these individuals is executed, there will be very serious consequences for Iran's interest. I would add that Canada has significant leverage because so many of the Islamic Republic's insiders have made Canada their home. This is one of the failings of our immigration policy, where we have condemned human rights abuses but look the other way so long as people are bringing hundreds of millions of dollars to invest in this country.

If the Canadian government, for example, were to say that the execution of these two Iranian Canadians would result in a forfeiture of assets belonging to individuals responsible for human rights abuses and so on and so forth, I think the Islamic Republic would change its posture. That's the language it understands.

• (1350)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

I have a question to Ms. Tamás at this point. You mentioned, of course, that May 14 will be the fourth anniversary of the imprisonment of the Bahá'í leadership. You've also referred to the intensification of the targeting of the Bahá'í in a variety of respects, whether it be the Bahá'í leadership, whether it be those involved in education, or whether it be the incitement and hate.

My question is this. Do you think this fourth anniversary might be an appropriate occasion—and I invite Professor Akhavan to respond as well—to have a take note debate, a kind of emergency debate in the House of Commons, about the plight of the Bahá'í in Iran, if not on the human rights situation as a whole?

Ms. Susanne Tamás: Yes, absolutely, I think it would be a wonderful thing to have a take note debate in the House. We understand that when those happen, when members of Parliament speak in the House, it's noted in Iran and it does have an impact. It not only cautions the Iranian government, but it encourages those who are sitting in prison that they're not sitting in the darkness, that people know about their situation.

Mr. Khanjani, one of the seven Bahá'í leaders, was 76 when he was arrested, which means that as of May 14, if he's not 80, he'll shortly be 80. His wife died while he was in prison. Although Iranian law allows prisoners compassionate leave to go to the bedside of an ailing spouse or to attend a funeral, he was allowed neither.

There's a gratuitous level of cruelty that accompanies the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, and I think it would be very timely if the Canadian Parliament would speak to this issue.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Professor Akhavan, do you wish to add anything?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: No. I would agree. The more we shine the spotlight on this issue, the better it will be.

The Chair: That's the kind of response we're looking for, because we have run out of time again.

I'm going to Wai Young, please.

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): Thank you so much for being here, both of you.

I want to just keep my comments brief, in the interest of time and to give you more time to answer.

Would you think that the average citizen in Iran, then, is more aware of the reality of the regime now than before the green spring?

Ms. Susanne Tamás: Dr. Akhavan.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Most definitely, yes. I can tell you an anecdote from a student of mine at McGill, a graduate student, who was a very devout believer in the regime and who questioned many of the things I would tell her about what happens in Evin prison and Iran's torture chambers. She came to me after being in the streets, saying she saw with her own eyes the Basij thugs beat an old woman to death.

What happened in June 2009 is that all of the horrors and abuses that for 30 years took place behind closed doors came out into the open, and the Iranian public saw with its own eyes the regime shooting and stabbing people simply because they wanted the right to have their vote counted.

The legitimacy of the regime cannot be recovered again, which is why a regime with all the oil wealth and weapons at its disposal is so desperate to control the flow of information through the Internet and through satellite television.

• (1355)

Ms. Wai Young: I have a follow-up question. If Canada did undertake to identify the entire IRGC as a terrorist entity, what do you think, in your view, would be the impact on Iran and on its people?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: It would be a further means of isolating the regime. But what I believe would be even more effective are targeted sanctions. The European Union and the United States have, since 2009, prepared lists of specific officials who are not allowed to enter the European Union or the United States, and whose assets would be frozen. That is an even more powerful message that individuals will have to pay the price, that even if they're in power today, there is a blacklist out there that identifies them and one day they may face justice.

Ms. Wai Young: How much more time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Two and a half minutes.

Ms. Wai Young: I've been very effective.

The Chair: You have been. Everybody says that about you.

Ms. Wai Young: Thank you very much.

Do you have any other suggestions beyond the targeted sanctions that you would like to spend some time sharing with us?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Very briefly, I would go back to my first recommendation, which is that the Canadian government should consider how it can provide technological assistance to Iranian civil society groups as a means of bypassing all the obstructions and filters that the government has created in cyberspace. That very simple measure can go very far in helping to keep alive the civil society movement.

Ms. Wai Young: Mr. Chair, I would like to pass the time back to any other person.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

You have already answered my colleague's question about the awareness on the street. Are they also aware of the significant role that Iran plays in propping up the Syrian regime?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: The better-informed Iranians are most definitely aware of that. The regime has tried very hard to once again claim ownership over the Arab Spring. When the uprising took place in Egypt, the regime tried to portray it as reminiscent of the revolution in 1979, which overthrew the Shah, rather than the revolution in 2009, which tried to overthrow the Islamic Republic. But I believe the regime is very concerned. The public is quite aware, because they're skeptical of what the official propaganda is. So I would say that, yes, there is an awareness of what is happening in Syria.

Mr. David Sweet: Particularly the regime's role in propping up the Assad regime.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Yes, as I said, among the better-informed Iranians.

One of the points I wanted to mention is that a lot of the members of the Iranian opposition are really deeply frustrated by the foreign policy of Iran. For example, during the protest following the Green Movement, people were heard chanting in the street, "We don't care about Gaza or Lebanon, we only care about Iran", meaning to say, why are we spending hundreds of millions of dollars to prop up Hamas and Hezbollah and Assad when there's rampant poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, prostitution, a whole range of terrible social and economic ills?

So the average Iranian doesn't care about exporting the Islamic revolution abroad. They care about bread and butter issues that the regime has failed to deliver on, which is why millions of people poured out in the streets in 2009, and which is why sooner or later they will pour back out on the streets, simply because the regime cannot meet their basic needs.

The Chair: We're out of time now.

We have one last questioner—Mr. Jacob.

I just want to mention that we will have a bus to take members back to the House, so we needn't worry that we're going to miss question period.

• (1400)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacob, I would like to welcome you to our committee. You have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a specific question I would like to ask. Where do things currently stand with respect to Mr. Soofi's deportation procedure? My question is for Mr. Akhavan.

Mr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you for your question.
[English]

I am not the lawyer for Mr. Soofi, so I cannot speak in terms of where the process is. I believe there was a pre-removal risk assessment, which held that he may be deported to Iran. Mr. Soofi's lawyer has now challenged that before the Federal Court, and the matter has been remanded once again to the same immigration officer who initially held that he should be deported.

I am afraid I don't know the details, but I believe that under the circumstances, it is unthinkable that someone like him should be sent to the arms of death and torture while at the United Nations we are condemning Iran's human rights abuses.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

What multilateral steps can a country like Canada take in order to improve the human rights situation in Iran? What other countries are concerned about the human rights situation in Iran and what tangible steps have they taken to improve things? I realize that when we talk about means, we are talking about means that will not punish the people but will send a clear signal to the Iranian government.

Mr. Akhavan, my questions are for you.

[English]

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Very quickly, sir, I gave you the example of providing technological assistance in order to empower civil society, to give them access to the Internet, to regulate the use of satellite television so the Iranian regime cannot block broadcasts that are hostile to it while it engages in broadcasts to perpetuate its own hate propaganda. Then there are the sanctions that target individuals for human rights abuses. The United Nations Security Council has adopted targeted sanctions against those involved in a nuclear industry. Why not impose those sanctions against those responsible for crimes against humanity?

I believe the leaders would take notice that they were marked, that they were blacklisted, and that one day they might pay a price for their terrible deeds.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you very much for these suggestions. Often everything hinges on information. It is not only about money.

Thank you, Mr. Akhavan.

Mr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: This brings us to the end of our current set of witnesses, so I want to take the opportunity on behalf of the committee to thank both of them.

I have one question of my own for Professor Akhavan.

You are in New York right now. Is that correct?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Yes, that's correct.

The Chair: Is that a Tim Hortons cup you're using?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Sir, I'm a true Canadian patriot.

The Chair: All right. You are to be congratulated.

Thanks to both of our witnesses.

I do want to deal with just one item of committee business, if I can, for the rest of us here. We've been contacted by Amnesty International, which suggests that we invite as a witness someone who could provide some information regarding the Copts and their treatment in Egypt. It's a man named Mohamed Lotfy, who was present in Egypt for about six months starting around the time of initial Tahrir Square....

According to the letter I've received, he conducted meetings with each of the political parties in Egypt on behalf of Amnesty International, trying to get their views regarding human rights protection and promotion. He is available, if we want to meet with him, on May 1, which is currently a vacant meeting. That is a possibility that I throw out to members.

Are there any feelings on that?

Are you okay with that too, Professor Cotler?

Okay, let's put him in then. Good.

All right. That's all the business we have.

Thanks to our witnesses. Thanks to members.

The meeting is adjourned.

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