



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 048 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, October 2, 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)): Good afternoon, everyone. I welcome you to the 48th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is October 2, 2012, and we are going to continue our study of the persecution of the Copt community in Egypt.

[English]

We have with us today two witnesses from the Department of Foreign Affairs: Mark Bailey, who is the director general of the Middle East and Maghreb bureau, and Andrea Gojevic, who is also from that division.

I'll turn the floor over to you, and once you're done we'll go to questions from the MPs. The amount of time for each question and answer round will be determined by how much time we have left available.

Please begin.

Mr. Mark Bailey (Director General, Middle East and Maghreb Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I want to provide an update on the situation of Egyptian Coptic Christians in the context of Egypt's ongoing transition to democracy, and also say a few words about what Canada—that is, our department and missions—has been doing about this question.

On June 30, 2012, President Mohammed Morsi took office following Egypt's historic presidential elections, the first in that country since the Arab awakening transformed the political landscape of the region.

The pressures facing the Coptic community in Egypt have been a concern for Canada for some time. A number of incidents over the last several months have been particularly worrying. These include a situation in the town of Rafah last week in which Coptic Christians were threatened with violence by extremists, and an outbreak of sectarian violence in the village of Dahshour in early August. Both incidents forced members of the Coptic community to flee from their homes.

Since taking office, President Morsi and members of his government have committed to govern in the interest of all Egyptians and to protect the rights of Egypt's religious minorities.

The newly appointed Prime Minister, Hisham Kandil, named the members of his new cabinet in July, two of whom are members of the Coptic community, as is one of President Morsi's advisors.

A new constitution is being drafted, and once completed it will be put to a public referendum.

Article 2 of the current draft constitution deals, in part, with religious freedoms. An unofficial translation of the draft text is as follows:

Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic is its official language, the principles of Islamic Shari'a are the main source of legislation, the honourable Azhar is the final source of its interpretation and the adherents to Christianity and Judaism have the right to refer to their own doctrines in matters of law and performing their religious affairs and selecting their religious leaders.

The government has pledged that the new constitution will reflect the guidelines of the Al-Azhar document, a proposed set of guiding principles put forth by Egypt's pre-eminent Muslim and Christian leaders on how religious freedoms, human rights, and interfaith dialogue should be defined in the new democratic Egypt.

The adoption of the new constitution will be a critical benchmark in Egypt's transition to democracy. It will be a key opportunity for the new government to demonstrate its stated commitment to ensuring the human rights of all citizens, which was, of course, a central demand of the Egyptian people during last year's uprising.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, Egypt has a long history of religious diversity. Coptic Christians have been an integral part of Egyptian society dating back to the second century AD.

Unconfirmed estimates indicate that Coptic Christians constitute somewhere between eight and 12% of Egypt's population of 82 million, making Copts the largest Christian minority in the region.

Over the centuries, Muslims and Copts have co-existed and today the overwhelming majority of Egyptians support religious tolerance.

A poignant manifestation of this was seen during the uprising, when thousands of Egyptians of all faiths, including Muslims and Christians, marched together in Tahrir Square in support of the slogan "We are all Egyptians".

However, Coptic Christians in Egypt have felt vulnerable to threats on a number of occasions from mobs and extremists who do not accept the religious plurality of the country.

As I mentioned, over the past few months, Copts living near Alexandria and Dahshour, a village near Cairo, have been forced from their homes following violence and attacks at the hands of their neighbours, generally arising out of feuds between individuals from the Coptic and Muslim communities.

In the past week, Coptic Christians living in the city of Rafah in the Sinai Peninsula have been particularly affected by the lack of stability in the area, and some Coptic Christians have been threatened with violence and even death by militant extremists, causing some Coptic families to flee to neighbouring towns.

Prime Minister Kandil has spoken out against these threats, and has assured the families that Egyptian security personnel will ensure their protection in Rafah.

This comes in the context of a wider conflict between Egyptian authorities and extremists in the Sinai, where insecurity has affected all residents, especially in the northern part of the peninsula. We welcome these assurances, as we believe that it is of utmost importance that Egyptian authorities take all the necessary steps to protect members of religious minorities from violence and extremism. It is also important that perpetrators of violence against members of religious minorities are brought to justice.

In January 2011, an individual was tried and found guilty for the shooting deaths of six Copts and a Muslim policeman in Naga Hammadi in January 2010.

However, no one has been brought to trial to date in connection with the suicide bombing that targeted Copts in Alexandria in January 2011. The Egyptian police forces are still using the "reconciliation" model to address violence, a practice which generally avoids prosecuting the perpetrators of violence and vandalism.

There was a serious incident on October 9, 2011, the so-called "Maspiro incident", in which at least 25 Coptic Christian protestors were killed and over 300 were injured in clashes with Egyptian military personnel.

Following that tragedy, Canada welcomed the commitment by the Egyptian government to bring those responsible for the violence to justice.

Two parallel judicial processes, one civilian and one military, have taken place. Earlier in September, three soldiers were convicted of manslaughter in connection with the deaths of 14 protesters. They were sentenced to two to three years in prison. A civilian trial against two Coptic defendants who allegedly stole weapons from military personnel during the incident is scheduled to take place today. We are monitoring this closely. We hope that the remainder of the process will be fair and transparent, and bring justice to the families of the victims.

I would like to highlight some of the positive measures that the Egyptian government has taken over the past year to address concerns about intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities.

In October 2011, following the Maspiro incident, the Egyptian government added a new article to the Egyptian legal code which increased the penalties for discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, language, religion or belief. The Egyptian government also committed itself to addressing all claims of discriminatory practices against Coptic Christians. Religious leaders in Egypt are also working together towards increased understanding and tolerance, most notably through the Bayt al-A'ila (family home) initiative, which includes representatives from Al Azhar, the Coptic Church, the Anglican Church and others.

As mentioned earlier with respect to the Azhar document, the results of inter-faith dialogue can have a tangible effect on Egypt's transition.

●(1315)

We fully support these efforts, and encourage Egyptians to continue working together to build a culture of respect for pluralism and religious freedom, as the importance of strong social norms that make it unacceptable to discriminate on the basis of religion cannot be overstated.

●(1320)

[English]

Mr. Chair, Canada and Egypt have long-standing ties and a bilateral relationship that is mature and multi-dimensional. We look forward to working with the new government and we stand ready to assist with efforts to build a more democratic, inclusive, and prosperous country.

With respect to human rights, for many years the Canadian government has encouraged Egypt to respect its obligations, including those related to the treatment of religious minorities. When serious concerns have arisen—for instance, following the Maspero incident in October 2011—Minister Baird has made public statements calling on Egypt to ensure freedom of religion and the protection of religious minorities.

On October 17, 2011, the House of Commons passed a motion expressing "solidarity with...religious minorities around the world" and condemning attacks on Egyptian Coptic Christians and their institutions. The motion called on the Egyptian government "to ensure that the perpetrators of attacks be brought to justice" and asked the UN human rights council to investigate the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt. At the minister's request, Speaker of the Senate Noël Kinsella subsequently raised the situation of the Copts in Egypt and the House of Commons motion with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Our officials will continue to monitor closely the human rights situation in Egypt and will make representations to the Egyptian government as appropriate and needed.

Canada is a strong and committed supporter of the individual's right to freedom of religion and has made the protection of religious minorities and the promotion of pluralism a foreign policy priority. We believe that freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and a vital component in a healthy democracy.

Mr. Chair, Egypt is a vibrant and dynamic country with a rich tradition of philosophical and intellectual discourse. We recognize that there are many challenges going forward as Egyptians seek to define the political and legal foundations of their new system of governance. Despite these challenges, we believe that the vast majority of Egyptians are committed to building a society where people of all religions can worship freely according to their beliefs and can live their faiths in peace.

We believe it is vital that the new Egypt be guided by respect for democratic principles, including human rights and rule of law, and we will continue to urge the Government of Egypt to ensure that Copts and all other religious minorities are protected from violence and are free to play an equal and meaningful role in society.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be happy to take your questions and those of the committee members.

The Chair: Thank you.

Given the amount of time we have, it makes sense for us to have six-minute rounds.

I invite Mr. Albrecht to begin, please.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

Obviously, I think, all of us around this table are deeply committed to the value of freedom of religion as a fundamental human right, recognizing that most—if not all—other human rights flow from that.

Throughout your document, your speech today, and the documents we received from the Library of Parliament, there are a number of references to the attacks that are being carried on by extreme groups within Egypt, as opposed to the government itself, and there is some indication that perhaps the action of the government in dealing with those violent attacks is less than robust.

You also reference the reconciliation meetings, which are being used in lieu of prosecutions. It appears that in some cases these reconciliation meetings may actually be serving as a cover for not dealing aggressively with the violent behaviour.

Finally, in your comments today you mentioned the Maspero incident, the two parallel judicial processes, and the two- to three-year sentences in prison for those who were convicted of the deaths of 14 protestors.

Is that type of sentence consistent with other judgments that would have been rendered for murder in a less religious context? This appears to me—I'll be frank—to be a very light sentence for the deaths of 14 people. I'm wondering if you could comment on that. Also, could you comment further on the issue of the reconciliation process, which appears to provide a bit of a cover for actually dealing in a really forthright way with a problem that's pretty severe?

• (1325)

Mr. Mark Bailey: Yes, thank you.

I agree with you. To me personally, a sentence of two to three years for having caused the death of somebody, even when it's trying to bring about order in a public place, does appear lenient. What I can't answer at the moment—we will look into it and get back to you, sir—is whether that's consistent with other sentences the Egyptian justice system has handed out in other situations. I would have to ask our embassy and get them to look into it. I say personally I would agree with you. Two to three years does seem pretty light, especially since, as we said, there were 14 killed in this particular incident; there must have been some fairly serious measures taken to quell the disturbance.

In terms of the reconciliation procedures and so on, I think we can all understand and recognize that as part of the authorities' response to these incidents, efforts at reconciliation, at promoting better understanding and relations between the various communities, would indeed be a very desirable part of what the authorities would do.

If we mentioned this in our statement as being something that seemed to perhaps start to become a substitute for prosecution and justice, then indeed that does start to raise questions in our minds. As I indicated, it's something the mission is following closely. It's something that's covered in the annual human rights reports that we prepare and we intend to continue following it.

I would say we haven't yet come to a conclusion on that, but the very question that you have raised is indeed in our minds, and if we do start to come to a conclusion that it is a substitute for justice, then I assure you that's something we would be taking up with the Egyptian authorities.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Do I have a little time yet, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Lots of time, actually.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: On a more general question, and in terms of the constitution that's being drafted at the current time, is there evidence that the different representative groups within Egypt are actually fairly represented, for example, Coptic Christians?

Secondly, how about female Coptic Christians? Is there any attempt at all to provide some type of affirmative action, for lack of a better word, to ensure that there's an adequate representation especially of those who might be considered vulnerable?

Mr. Mark Bailey: At one point, very early in the process, I remember there was concern that the constitution drafting process was in fact a little bit too much dominated by one particular side of the discussion in Egypt, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, and those whose views would be similar or even stronger.

I'm not up to speed myself on what measures they've taken in this new constitutional drafting process that's under way now, so I'll have to look into that and get back to you, Mr. Albrecht, with an answer to that question.

You'll remember I mentioned that two members of the cabinet are members of the Coptic Church, and indeed one of those is a woman. I guess one could argue it's a good first step, but more needs to be done perhaps. I think it's clear that President Morsi and Prime Minister Kandil recognize the desirability of taking such measures. Whether they've gone far enough, whether more needs to be done, I don't think anyone would be prepared to say, yes, they've done all that needs to be done. I doubt even they themselves would say that. But it's still early days.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Just to—

The Chair: You're out of time. Can you be extremely brief?

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I was just going to say... In general, do you think conditions have improved since the fall of the Mubarak regime? Are they on the right track? You said first steps here. Are we seeing first steps generally in the country?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I don't think there's any question but that in the area of freedom of expression, political liberties, and so on, things have improved. That is unquestionable. On the other hand, and as I mentioned in my remarks, huge challenges remain, especially on the economic front, especially on the status of women and their general position in society. These are problems that have been developing over decades, even centuries, and Egypt isn't going to overcome them in the space of a few weeks or months or even years. It's going to take a long time.

There's no doubt in my mind and in the minds of other observers of Egypt that overall things have improved.

•(1330)

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Welcome, Mr. Bailey.

To continue further on the conversation you're having, when a leader of any regime is displaced, resigns, or even dies, they say there's change in the air, but there was a whole regime in place that had power and control over the citizenry in a way that's really hard to turn back. Have you seen significant change, in your view, in that area in Egypt?

Mr. Mark Bailey: That's an excellent question. You've hit the bull's eye in terms of the challenge that is facing President Morsi and his government.

We're talking about a *Queen Mary* here and it just cannot turn on a dime. The Egyptian state is a huge apparatus. It was used basically as an employment program for decades by previous regimes, going back to the time of Sadat, and even Nasser before him. You have a gigantic state apparatus filled with thousands and thousands of people who collect a pay cheque and then go out and drive taxis to supplement their income.

Has there been change in that area? No, not yet. They haven't succeeded in tackling that kind of problem.

This would be a footnote or a nuance to what I said about political liberties, freedom of expression, and so on. The same police and security forces that were operating in Mubarak's time are still there. President Morsi replaced some of the very top officials, the commanders, ministers, and so on, who were in charge, but the

basic guys who are out on the street, the ones who actually stop people and check their papers, are the same, and they haven't been retrained.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That was exactly my point. There was a lot of hope and expectation when you had the gatherings of people and the conversations about overthrowing Mubarak and all of those things, but the reality on the ground is that I don't think there's that big of a difference.

The other concern I have is you can draft the best constitution on the face of the earth, but if you don't enforce it and believe in it and live up to it, it has no value at all.

When we saw that pushback with the president and the military in recent months, it raised the question that even if they attain this constitution, what real value will it have? I have my doubts. Egypt is a country that has been in existence for a long time, and things are very entrenched there.

Coming back to the Coptic Christians, since the overthrow of Mubarak and since you've indicated there have been some changes in the hierarchy here and there, would you say that the situation for the Coptics has remained the same, or is it worse or better than what it was before?

Mr. Mark Bailey: My personal assessment would be that it's about the same.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Are the Muslim Brotherhood primarily Sunni?

Mr. Mark Bailey: Yes, they're almost exclusively Sunni.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I may be mistaken, but I spent some time in Saudi Arabia in 1979, six months in fact, and it is mostly Shia that are the leadership in Saudi Arabia. No?

Mr. Mark Bailey: No, they are actually Sunnis. The Shia are in fact—

Mr. Wayne Marston: That explains my misunderstanding of something, a long-held belief in that place then, because there was a distinct difference between the regime in Saudi Arabia and the people, especially when you got into dealing with the religious beliefs and all of the things that go on.

Coming back to the Muslim Brotherhood, they are seen as more strict and more controlling. If they were in charge of the country, would they be seen as more strict and more controlling of the people, their values and religion and things like that?

•(1335)

Mr. Mark Bailey: In Egypt? In a sense, they are in control of the country, or at least they have the presidency.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I realize that, but I'm saying, going forward, would you anticipate things becoming more strict, in the sense of religion and Islam becoming more problematic in that country relative to the Coptic Christians and others?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I would certainly anticipate a greater interest in controlling the public consumption of alcohol and those sorts of things that tend to be of concern to some elements of the people in the Muslim Brotherhood. I'm not sure it would necessarily have an impact on the Coptic Christians.

Mr. Wayne Marston: The reason I ask is that when we talk about the constitution, the articles in the constitution appear to give some sense of protection to the Coptic Christians. If the Brotherhood has been involved with the evolution of that, then that may well be more positive than what it first appears.

Mr. Mark Bailey: That would be my expectation.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I think the media in the west have kind of portrayed the Brotherhood.... We're used to hearing about brotherhoods in terms of something like the Mafia, in a negative context. Brotherhood in some places, of course, is far more progressive than in the religion-based....

In this case, which would you see the Brotherhood as being—more progressive or more regressive in terms of the constitution and how it may be applied?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I think they will be much more progressive on issues like political liberty, freedom of speech, ability to organize political parties, and so on, because they themselves were the objects of oppression for many decades by the Mubarak regime, and the Sadat and Nasser regimes before. So I think in that area they will be a good deal more progressive.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's good news.

Mr. Mark Bailey: I understand also, from our own mission's reporting, that the Brotherhood made quite serious attempts to reach out to the Coptic Christian community in the context of the elections and things that have been held out, and trying to offer assurances—

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's contrary to the view that was being put out there by the media, in the suggestion that perhaps things were going to go in the opposite direction. So that's very good news.

Mr. Mark Bailey: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

The Chair: That will conclude that round.

We now go to Mr. Sweet.

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

Mr. Bailey, I certainly hope you're correct, because one of the big concerns I have is a constitution where the premise of future legislation will be based on sharia; it gives me grave concern, grave concern not only for general human rights but particularly for the rights of women.

I can't see how that wouldn't be something that would have at least a red flag over it going forward in terms of what will be transpiring after a constitution is made, and then after new legislation is being developed in their own Parliament.

Mr. Mark Bailey: I think it's important to understand that insofar as the reference to sharia, this is nothing new. The previous Egyptian constitution had it as well. So this doesn't represent a change in terms of drafting the new constitution.

That is an important preface to what I'm about to say, which is that although in the west, as we were just discussing, there is a tendency to focus on very particular aspects of the Islamic sharia, aspects that we in the west find very difficult to accept—notably, some of the provisions relating to women, some of the provisions relating to

kinds of punishments, and so on, for criminal offences, etc.—in fact sharia is a very large body of law that deals with a whole vast array of things in the areas of criminal law, family law, property law, and all these kinds of things.

You know, in a way, it leaves the legislators free to pick and choose which of the various aspects of sharia they will implement, as Egypt has already done, and indeed as have most of the other countries in the region that are Muslim—which, with one exception, they all are. They have all done the same thing. They will all tell you that, oh yes, sharia is important, but as I say, they tend to pick and choose those aspects of it that they're going to implement or not.

• (1340)

Mr. David Sweet: As I said, I truly do hope you are correct. The difference with Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak is that theirs were decidedly secular regimes, with sharia to give them, as was mentioned, some “cover”, for lack of a better word. It will be different, I think, with the Muslim Brotherhood, but we'll see for certain going forward.

One of the other concerns I have is that Christians and Jews are mentioned in the constitution, but there's also a significant population of Baha'is. Of course, we've had the Baha'i community before us a number of times. They are very persecuted in Egypt—of course more profoundly in Iran, but persecuted in Egypt—and my concern is that any other religious minority is going to experience that, as the Copts have. I think it would be an error on our part to think that the Coptic persecution just began. I mean, this has been going on for years. They could only live in certain places. They could only do certain business. They even had to apply for improvements on their churches.

Again, this must be a warning that we're watching as well, I would hope.

Mr. Mark Bailey: Absolutely.

Mr. David Sweet: I know I'm making statements more than asking questions, because of course you don't speak for the Egyptian government or anything; you're here only to update us.

My other concern is that I have not heard any strong statements that would indicate to me a substantial change. For example, the Libyan prime minister, who's dealing with similar things—albeit it's a different size of population, but he's certainly dealing with extremists there as well—very forcefully said that the attack on the United States embassy was one that was masterminded and strategically carried out; it wasn't by accident. He was very courageous in that regard, and made that statement in order to serve notice on those who are radicals that they were going to be serious about it.

I haven't heard any of those kinds of statements. I've heard nice statements, that they're going to look after people and make sure they're not persecuted, but I haven't heard any statements coming from the leadership in Egypt that would send a strong signal to the population as well as to the military that they were elected by the people and that they're going to govern in a way that is serious with regard to human rights.

Mr. Mark Bailey: There have been some statements. Whether they'd be strong enough to satisfy you, I couldn't say. If you like, we can find a few examples and send them to your office.

Are you talking specifically about the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, or are you talking more generally?

Mr. David Sweet: No, I was using an example of what I would be looking for, and particularly—my colleague mentioned this too—about when we've seen people actually murdered and no one has been brought to justice, or when they are...very minor sentences.

I find it unbelievable that part of the whole process is going to include a couple of Copts who apparently had some weapons, and they're on trial too, after 28 people were murdered and hundreds injured. Those are the kinds of things that I think the prime minister should be making strong statements about, and bringing people to justice as a follow-up to that as well.

I have a suspicion that I've now used up that very precious commodity at the committee.

The Chair: You're remarkably good. Your internal clock is excellent, because you just ran out as you were saying that, which means that it is time to move on to Professor Cotler.

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

I want to commend Mr. Bailey for his fulsome statement to us this morning on this evolving situation, and in that context, Mr. Bailey, I want to bring up the case of the Egyptian Coptic Christian blogger, Maikel Nabil.

He was the first political prisoner in a post-Mubarak era. He was sentenced to three years in prison. Shortly after, he made a statement in Tahrir Square, initially that the army and people are of one hand, but when he saw what happened with the army, he changed it to say that the army and the people are no longer of one hand.

For that he was charged and imprisoned for three years for insulting the Egyptian military. I came to represent Mr. Nabil. Due to his own courageous affirmations and the like, he was released—including after having been on a hunger strike for 30 days—after close to a year in prison. But we just learned, on September 30 to be exact, that Mr. Nabil is once again being charged by the Egyptian authorities, allegedly now on charges of insulting Islam. The Egyptian newspaper *Yum al-Saba'a* reported on September 30 that those charges included being in contempt of the Islamic religion and abuse of the divine, insulting the prophet and his followers, and the like.

I met with Mr. Nabil after his release and he told me he was going to be going to Germany for post-graduate studies. Egypt has now requested his return from Germany to stand trial on these charges. It's unclear now what the German response might be.

I'm not sure you've had a chance to even know of these developments because they've just occurred, so my question is whether you will be able to make some appropriate inquiries on this case and see where matters now stand. I think it would be regrettable if one of the leading voices in Tahrir Square—himself, as I say, a Christian Copt, the first political prisoner—would now once again be sought by Egypt to stand trial on these charges.

● (1345)

Mr. Mark Bailey: Yes, we'll be happy to look into that indeed. We'll ask our missions both in Berlin and in Cairo to follow up.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you, Mr. Bailey.

The second question has to do with some of the questions that have been put to you. You mentioned that the drafting of the constitution will follow the guidelines of the Al-Azhar document, setting forth basic principles with respect to the protection of minority and religious rights and the like.

I'm wondering about the overall constituent assembly that is responsible for the drafting of the new constitution. To what extent is the constituent assembly itself a representative body? For example, are Coptic Christians represented in the actual constitution drafting process? Are there Coptic women who are participating in the drafting process? What is the presence of women, generally speaking, in that drafting process? My basic concern is whether the actual constituent assembly is itself a representative body.

Mr. Mark Bailey: Thank you.

I don't have the answer to that question right now. As I think I mentioned a bit earlier, there were concerns earlier on that the constituent assembly was overly dominated by members of the Brotherhood.

But I'll have to follow up with our mission and see if we can find out the exact composition of the assembly. We can get that back to you. We'll be sending it to the clerk of the committee and perhaps she can share it with all of you.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: My last question—given time constraints and the like—is to what extent at this point is the evolution of the government and presidency in the person of the Muslim Brotherhood, and does that alter the manner in which we as a Canadian government have been dealing with Egyptian authorities? What changes in our engagement, let us say, with Egypt have come about as a result of the changes in Egyptian leadership?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I think it would be fair to say that our vigilance was already high, but we've notched it up another notch or two in light of the very concerns that the members of the committee have been voicing. We recognize that there are reasons why people are asking questions and are a bit concerned.

However, I come back to what Minister Baird and others have said. It's very much important to judge the Government of Egypt, and indeed any government, by what it does, and not necessarily by what is said about it, or even by what sometimes relatively less important members of it might say. What's most important is what it actually does. In that regard, I think we would hold the view that it's still very early days for Egypt in terms of its transformation following the revolution they had last year.

● (1350)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You made reference to the situation in Sinai that might affect the Christian Coptics in Rafah and the like and recent developments there. I'm wondering if you're able to comment on the situation in Sinai, generally speaking, as a kind of destabilizing presence that may be threatening to both Egypt and Israel, and the steps that are being taken in that regard.

Mr. Mark Bailey: It most definitely is. You're absolutely right, sir.

As I mentioned, there was this terrible incident back in August when a gang of jihadis attacked an Egyptian security post and killed 16 Egyptian soldiers. This was clearly a huge shock and a wake-up call for the Egyptian authorities and for President Morsi personally. He took pretty drastic action by firing the head of intelligence and firing some of the other senior military commanders, who were held accountable for their failure to indeed prevent this incident and deal more generally with the situation in the Sinai.

You're quite right: it's a very worrying development. There was an incident not that long ago in which these people who were operating in that area actually attacked the MFO station, the Multinational Force and Observers station, where Canadians indeed serve. Thank God that none of our Canadian personnel were injured or hurt in the attack, but they could have been.

Israel, for obvious reasons, is very nervous about what's going on in this area and about the potential for it to bring violence both to Israel itself as well as to other neighbouring countries—and to Egypt, for that matter. It's certainly not in Israel's interest to see Egypt destabilized or attacked in this way.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

That went over a little because Professor Cotler asked a question when the clock ran out.

Ms. Grewal, you're next, please.

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

Mr. Bailey, last October the House of Commons passed a resolution to ask the UN Human Rights Council to conduct an investigation into the plight of the Coptic Christians in Egypt.

Could you please update us on the progress surrounding this request, particularly on how it has been received and addressed by the Human Rights Council?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I don't have information on that, Mrs. Grewal. I'm not aware of the Human Rights Council actually taking action on the request.

One element that I suppose I can share with you is that when our mission in Cairo consulted with the leadership of the Coptic community in Egypt about having the Human Rights Council undertake this investigation, their views were rather negative about this being undertaken. Their view was pretty strong that were the UN to become involved in Egypt's situation in this way, this wouldn't help, and would quite possibly make their situation even more difficult.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I would also like to touch on The Economist Intelligence Unit and its statement about the possibility of there having been an internal military coup. The unit explains that there is speculation that if in fact there has been a coup, the new military is likely to have been assured by the president that they will attain a degree of operational autonomy. This is in return for supporting the

president in his overturning of the SCAF decree attempting to limit his power.

If in fact the military is assured of this autonomy, what does this mean for the civilian government's control of the military and the ability to ensure the military's accountability in the face of Coptic Christian persecution? Do you have anything to say on that?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I am not aware of this Economist Intelligence Unit assessment that you mentioned. If we could get a copy of it, we'll have a look and provide our assessment through the clerk of the committee.

As I indicated, our view is that the new president has taken some rather impressive steps, frankly, to reassert the primacy of the civilian power over the military. Certainly his dismissal of Field Marshal Tantawi and several other generals, and replacement with his own hand-picked military officers over the leadership of the military, to me would tend to indicate the opposite of that suggestion.

Perhaps The Economist Intelligence Unit has some information we're not aware of, so we'll have a look at it and make an assessment, and consult with our mission and others who watch Egypt, to see whether there is anything to it.

• (1355)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In your view, are there any specific things that Canada can do to improve the respect for human rights of Coptic Christians in Egypt?

Mr. Mark Bailey: Oh, yes. Clearly we can be offering all kinds of support, both to the community itself, but also to those parts of the Egyptian government apparatus in charge, for example, of drafting constitutions, or parts of their administration whose job it is to promote better interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Perhaps this issue of reconciliation and whether it's becoming a substitute for justice is something on which we might think about offering some cooperation, some technical assistance and advice. We have many well-known academics, and others in the area, who are world experts—indeed, one of them is here with us now—and I'm sure they would all be more than willing to offer their assistance to Egypt.

Indeed we do have programs that can provide that kind of assistance.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Chair, I will stop my time. I would like to give the rest of my time to Mr. Sweet.

The Chair: Do you have some more questions, Mr. Sweet?

Mr. David Sweet: I have no further questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Before we go to Monsieur Jacob, I have a question as a result of Professor Cotler's question. It raised something.

He mentioned the situation of Mr. Nabil and the effort to cause his extradition back to Egypt from Germany, where he now lives.

A number of countries, including some in Europe—I do not know if Germany is one of them—have adopted a law saying that we must be careful. They are legally obliged not to engage in acts that will qualify as blasphemy under any of the major religions or that would be excessively disrespectful towards any religion in some manner. I can't tell exactly how this is done in the law. I haven't studied it.

There are some countries in the Muslim world that have adopted similar laws. The Pakistani government has been actively promoting the idea that all countries should adopt similar laws. Its cover, I think, for the frankly extremely intolerant laws it has regarding religion, is that this is all about ensuring that people are respectful of all religions. In practice, of course, it is Islam that seems to be subject to the greatest concern for protection, and there seems to be very little respect for other religions.

At any rate, does such a law exist in Egypt as well? Is that part of their constitution or their proposed constitution?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I don't know. We'll look into it and get back to you with the answer, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacob, you have the floor.

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

Mr. Bailey and Ms. Gojevic, thank you for being here to answer our questions.

In his speech last week to the United Nations in New York, President Morsi said:

Egypt would like to stress that the international system will not get fixed as long as the application of double standards remains. We expect from others, as they expect from us, that they respect our cultural particularities and religious points of reference, and not seek to impose concepts that are unacceptable to us or politicize certain issues and use them as a pretext to intervene in the affairs of others.

In light of that point of view, what do you think are the most effective steps Canada could take to promote human rights during Egypt's transition toward democracy?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I think two kinds of action are necessary. The individuals concerned, their NGOs, their associations and activities clubs should be given technical assistance to organize themselves better, express themselves better and further assert their demands to have their rights recognized.

I also think legislators should be given technical assistance as well as Canadian expertise with respect to drafting a constitution, legislation and regulations. A member of this committee raised an important point. Drafting good legislation is not enough; the officials responsible for implementing it need to be trained and instructed in the meaning of the texts that they will be called upon to implement.

I think the best way to act would be to give our expertise, our assistance and our understanding of the challenges. Changing from one day to the next is not always easy for countries that have strongly entrenched and very old traditions and values. It takes time. Furthermore, there are ways to help with respect to this challenge.

• (1400)

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

May I ask a second question?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: What do you think the best way would be for Canada to support respect of freedom of expression and women's rights in Egypt during the transition period? Do you think certain kinds of action might be more or less effective?

Mr. Mark Bailey: I think my answer to the first question may also apply to the second. The status of women is unfortunately one of the biggest weaknesses in Egyptian society today. I don't know what has happened in that country for the respect for women to be so little honoured, at least in public.

A few years ago, when I held the same post I do now, I found myself prohibiting our female agents from getting training in Arabic. Actually, I found that what they were being subjected to in the streets of Cairo was totally unacceptable.

To come back to the question, I will say that Egyptian women need help in getting organized, asserting their demands with regard to respect and rights. In fact, I think I can say that our embassy is already doing this. We have programs aimed at encouraging these types of thing. The Canadian embassy in Cairo is certainly already involved in that type of activity.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Mr. Bailey.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

[*English*]

Before we allow our witnesses to leave, are there any further questions anyone wants to bring up? We have a tiny bit of time left.

I'm not seeing anything, so I'll thank both of our witnesses. You indicated that you'd get back to us. Please do so. That will be very helpful to us in pursuing our further work on this subject.

We're grateful that you were able take the time to be with us today.

Mr. Mark Bailey: We'll follow up with our missions, and I'll be writing back to the clerk, sir.

The Chair: All right. That's very much appreciated.

The meeting is adjourned.

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