



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 084 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, May 28, 2013

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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

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•(1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Welcome to the 84th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is May 28, 2013. We will be discussing the human rights situation in Iran.

[English]

I understand that, before we get to the main business of the committee for today, we possibly have a motion or two.

Is that correct, Mr. Sweet?

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): That's correct. Both of them have been distributed.

One is regarding one more witness because we have Justus Weiner, who's actually going to be in town. It's germane to the study we're doing right now. That will be for next Tuesday.

Then the other motion was regarding our concluding the Honduras study with two more meetings, one to give Goldcorp the opportunity—which they may not want to take—to respond to the last two witnesses. The other meeting was to have someone from the government speak on corporate social responsibility, again because of the nature of what came up in the last two meetings.

The Chair: Let's deal with the motion on Justus Weiner first, if we could. Is there any objection to adopting this motion to have Justus Weiner here on June 4?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That did not require unanimous consent.

The other one actually does. This is the motion to invite Goldcorp and one representative of the government to appear, thereby effectively making them our last two witnesses.

Is that agreeable to people? If it isn't, we'll reserve it and discuss it a different meeting. This is the one relating to Honduras.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Okay, I think we have consent on that one.

We have two witnesses today. Susanne Tamás has been a witness before this committee in the past. She was very, very helpful to us in

the past on issues relating to the Bahá'ís and their treatment—or, rather, their mis-treatment—in Iran.

We also have Payam Akhavan, whom I don't see. Professor Akhavan, you're on the phone, are you?

Dr. Payam Akhavan (Professor, Faculty of Law, McGill University, As an Individual): Yes, I am.

The Chair: So both of our witnesses are here. I suggest that we start with Susanne Tamás.

Both witnesses are familiar with how this sub-committee works. Normally there's about 10 minutes for opening statements, and then we go into questions and answers, the length of which is determined by how much time is available divided by the number of questioners we have.

Ms. Tamás, I wonder if you could begin. Please enlighten us.

Ms. Susanne Tamás (Director, Government Relations, Office of External Affairs, Bahá'í Community of Canada): Thank you so very much, Mr. Reid, for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Thank you to you and all the members for providing us with this opportunity.

The Iranian government violates the rights of many of its citizens, be they women, academics, human rights defenders, political activists, journalists, or members of ethnic and religious communities. Among those targeted are the members of the Bahá'í community.

The United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief recently described their situation as among the “most obvious” examples of “state-sponsored religious persecution in the world today”.

Without wishing to minimize in any respect the gravity of the cumulative impact of more than 30 years of persecution on the Bahá'ís of Iran, I'd like to focus my remarks on three issues of immediate concern: the fifth anniversary of the unjustified arrest and imprisonment of the entire former leadership of the Bahá'ís of Iran; the continued sharp increase in arbitrary arrests and associated violence; and the manner in which human rights violations against the Bahá'ís of Iran affect these people from cradle to grave.

May 14, just a couple of weeks ago, marked the fifth anniversary of the arrest and imprisonment of the entire former leadership of the Bahá'í of Iran. Some of you will recall from previous testimony that there is no clergy in the Bahá'í faith. These functions are entrusted to democratically elected institutions, known as National Spiritual Assemblies, that administer the affairs of the community, offering spiritual guidance and education, arranging for the education of children, organizing holy day celebrations and devotional and administrative gatherings, and providing access to Bahá'í literature.

I'm currently serving as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. Were I in Iran, I would be in Evin prison.

In the early eighties, the Iranian government disappeared nine members of Iran's National Spiritual Assembly; executed eight of the nine elected to replace them; banned all formal Baha'i administration; and then eventually executed seven of the nine members of the disbanded so-called third National Spiritual Assembly.

Sometime later, with the government's knowledge and tacit assent, the Bahá'í community established an ad hoc group of seven, known as the Yaran, or the Friends in Iran, to minister to the needs of the community. Iranian authorities communicated with this group. In fact in some respects they used it as a window on the community.

On May 14, 2008, six of the seven members of the Yaran were arrested and imprisoned, the seventh having been arrested some weeks earlier. Following several months in solitary confinement, they were falsely accused of "Espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic", charges for which their lawyer, Shirin Ebadi, said there was not a shred of evidence in their files.

After a trial that violated every international legal norm, they were found guilty and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment.

For Mr. Khanjani, now 79 years old, this is a life sentence. For all seven, their children, and their spouses, it is a personal tragedy.

But it is more than that. Depriving the Bahá'í community of its leadership, of its ability to self-organize, which is the internationally recognized right of every religious community, is but one strategy in a systematic and systemic campaign being waged with increasing ferocity against the Bahá'í community in Iran by a government bent on its destruction.

Marking the fifth anniversary of the imprisonment of the Yaran, four UN experts issued a joint statement calling upon Iranian authorities for their immediate release. Senior government officials, human rights defenders, and leaders of faith communities in Australia, Brazil, Chile, France, Germany, India, Netherlands, Slovenia, Uganda, the U.K., and the United States all joined in this call.

Canada's Ambassador for Religious Freedom expressed our government's concern in a press release issued on May 14, the anniversary date. It said in part:

Canada marks with regret the fifth anniversary of the illegitimate arrest and detention of seven Iranian Bahá'í national leaders by the Khamenei regime, and we renew our call for their release.

●(1310)

We urge the subcommittee to add its voice to those being raised around the world condemning the continued imprisonment of the former members of the Yaran and calling for their immediate release and the release of all other innocent prisoners of conscience. Let there not be a sixth anniversary.

We now turn to our second concern: a continuing and sharp increase in the arrest and imprisonment of Bahá'ís, accompanied by increasing violence. Between August 2004 and April 2013, 697 Bahá'ís were arrested in Iran. Of these, 316—or almost half—have been arrested in the last two years. There were four Bahá'ís in prison in Iran in 2004. Today, there are 116. Many of these arrests are made during coordinated and increasingly violent raids on homes, during which Bahá'í materials are confiscated and the Bahá'ís threatened and intimidated. Those arrested are often detained for weeks or months, at times in solitary confinement, and are subjected to intense interrogation. Some are released on bail until their trial on spurious charges and sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

There has been a parallel increase in arson attacks, anti-Bahá'í graffiti, hate speech, the desecration of Bahá'í cemeteries, and assaults on schoolchildren, with Bahá'ís denied any effective legal recourse. These incidents are documented in a recent publication entitled "Violence with Impunity", produced by the Bahá'í international community. They are the consequence of the government's campaign of misrepresentation and vilification against the Bahá'í faith and its adherents—a campaign that was designed to incite hatred against the Bahá'ís and create a culture within which the government can escalate its attack on them with impunity, which it is doing.

The Iranian government must end the unjustified and increasingly violent arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of Bahá'ís, and we will have to find ways to undo the seeds of hatred that it has sown in the hearts of its citizens.

This brings us to the third of our concerns: the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, which, as noted recently by the UN's special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, extends from cradle to grave, touching every stage of life. Bahá'í infants are imprisoned, along with their mothers. Bahá'í children whose mothers and fathers are both imprisoned are left in the care of relatives or members of the community. Bahá'í schoolchildren are frequently harassed and insulted by their teachers. Academically qualified youth who are known to be Bahá'í are denied their national entrance exam results, which are required to enter college or university. Youth whose affiliation with the Bahá'í faith is not known at the time of their admission are expelled as soon as it becomes known, some in the last semester of their studies.

Bahá'í families are reduced to poverty as a result of the imprisonment of their primary provider and/or the payment of exorbitant bail to secure their temporary release. Adults are denied employment in the public sector and discriminated against in virtually every other sector of the economy. Over the past year, for example, all Bahá'í-owned businesses in several cities have been shut down. Bahá'í marriages aren't recognized, which has consequences for the right to inherit. Elderly Bahá'ís are denied their pensions and the right to a proper burial, and Bahá'í cemeteries are all too often vandalized, extending persecution even beyond the grave.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran affects so much more than the denial of the right to freedom of religion or belief. It encompasses the violation of the interdependent, interrelated, and indivisible rights protected in the International Bill of Rights, and in so doing it undermines the very foundations of a democratic and pluralist society.

• (1315)

We would like to express our gratitude to the subcommittee for its continued and unwavering focus on the human rights situation in Iran. The studies that you have conducted and the concerns and recommendations that you have brought to the attention of the foreign affairs committee and your fellow parliamentarians have played an important role in keeping the human rights situation in Iran on the international agenda at a time when pre-occupations with other serious concerns—Iran's support for terrorism, its nuclear program, and threats against Israel—may otherwise have overshadowed it. It is essential that Canada continue to shine a spotlight on the human rights situation in Iran, a situation that is not a distant threat but a present reality and one that, if addressed, will make it so much easier to resolve these other very serious issues of concern.

We repeat our recommendation that the subcommittee express its concern and condemn the continued imprisonment of the former members of the Yaran, calling for their immediate release and the release of all other prisoners of conscience in Iran.

We look forward to responding to your questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Tamás.

We're going to turn now to Professor Akhavan who is currently in a small village in Italy and has gone to considerable difficulty to find a phone link with us. This was not easy. If there are any technical difficulties with the sound quality, I think they may be unavoidable.

Professor Akhavan, please feel free to begin.

• (1320)

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Good afternoon. I'm honoured to appear once again before this subcommittee to testify on the current human rights situation in Iran. I do so at a time when the circumstances are particularly difficult for the people of Iran. In the run-up to the June 14 election in the Islamic republic, the prospects for a gradual reform of a manifestly unjust and untenable authoritarian regime appear increasingly remote.

Some had hoped that following the brutal repression of the Green Movement in 2009, and in view of Iran's unprecedented economic

decline and international isolation, its leaders would somehow compromise with Islamic reformists. The assumption was that they would do so in the name of reconciliation, with those reformist elements still committed to the constitution of Islam's republic, in the name of salvaging some legitimacy for the leadership in the name of regime survival. Such hopes quickly evaporated as it became apparent that the hardliners would not surrender an inch. They had even turned against themselves in the increasingly public and bitter power struggle among differing hardline factions.

From the 686 candidates who registered for the June 14 election, the unelected, unaccountable Council of Guardians only qualified eight candidates. Among these eight candidates it appears that at least four have direct family ties to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It is revealing that not even Ayatollah Rafsanjani, once a pillar of the Islamic republic, was allowed to run. The disqualification of Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, a family relation and close political ally of president Ahmadinejad, is yet another sign of the unprecedented divisions within what was once the inner circle of the regime. If we add to this equation the significant number of prominent political prisoners and exiles who are excluded from the political process, the idea that the forthcoming elections will be either free or fair belongs to an Orwellian novel rather than reality.

The struggle in these circles is less for ideology and more for personal gain. It is best understood in the context of what can be described as a dual theocratic-kleptocratic state, where religious hatred and violence are used as a cover for the pillage of the country's resources. Consider that several prominent ayatollahs languish in Iran's prisons because their conceptions of Islam differ from that of the political leadership.

A case in point is the ongoing imprisonment of Ayatollah Kazemeyni Boroujerdi, who has called for the separation of the state and religion, remarking that the Iranian people are tired of the religion of politics and political slogans. It was said that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy nor Roman. Today, it can be said that the Islamic republic is neither Islamic nor a republic. The Iran of today has become the Islamic republic of gangster capitalism, where an unholy alliance of the clerical establishment and the Revolutionary Guard Corps rule through economic patronage for the inner circle, together with torture at home and terrorism abroad.

The central role of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, acting in concert with Hezbollah in the shocking atrocities against civilians in Syria, is further testament to the leadership's violent conception of power. It is this dynamic of militarization that vividly demonstrates the inextricable tie between the nuclear issue and democratization. For far too long, the world community has allowed the nuclear issue to eclipse human rights. On the one hand, the Iranian people suffer from the threat of war and crippling sanctions that have made life unbearable for many. On the other hand, there is also the fear of a grand bargain in which the Iranian leadership will make compromises on the nuclear issue in exchange for appeasement and disregard of their brutality against their own citizens. In both scenarios, the Iranian people are the losers. The only viable option is the historical struggle of Iran's youthful population and tireless civil society for non-violent protest in furtherance of a democratic future in which power is a responsibility rather than licence for abuse.

•(1325)

It is remarkable, in the context of threats of war, that a comprehensive World Values Survey by a highly qualified Israeli team of researchers found in a comparison of 47 countries that Iranian society's potential for liberal democracy was higher than that of 23 other countries, including such Arab countries as Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan, and such Asian countries as South Korea, India, and Thailand.

In comparison with 29 countries surveyed in the European Social Survey, Iran was found to have higher tendencies towards liberal democracy than Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Romania. As I have testified before this subcommittee for the past several years, the challenge still remains the empowerment of the Iranian people, together with the isolation of a ruthless leadership that is intent on clinging to power at all costs.

In this light, the recent global dialogue on the future of Iran, held in partnership between the Munk Centre at the University of Toronto and the Canadian ministry of foreign affairs, is a welcome first step in moving away from talk of either war or appeasement towards solidarity with civil society on a sustained and substantial basis.

With a sizeable, diverse, and influential Iranian diaspora in Canada that's committed to a better future for their country of origin, Canada should continue to explore every avenue of assistance to civil society, with a view to facilitating non-violent change. It is, of course, ultimately for the Iranian people to bring about this change, through the sacrifice and heroism that we have witnessed over the past years.

There should be no illusion that building a culture of human rights, strengthening civil society, creating a free press, establishing an independent judiciary, and promoting dialogue and compromise among different political, religious, and ethnic groups will come overnight. It is necessarily a long and painful process. But all the vital ingredients are present in Iran. The question is how to achieve a transition that will be the least destructive and the least violent for the Iranian people. In this regard, the regime's failure to compromise is both discouraging and encouraging.

It is discouraging, because the regime has demonstrated the brutality with which it is willing to hold on to power at all costs. The nightmare scenario playing out in Syria today is a life-and-death struggle for the Iranian regime at a time when it is besieged both internationally and at home. Perhaps it is a signal as to how far it is willing to go in murdering innocent civilians in order to maintain its rule.

The failure to compromise even among the inner circle of the regime, however, is an encouraging sign, insofar as a system that is built on corruption, deceit, and violence will invariably turn on itself. The regime's worst enemy is itself: its refusal to understand that in today's world of openness and interdependence, in today's Iran, with its highly talented and politically aware youthful population, it is simply not possible to rule indefinitely through violence and terror. The Iran of tomorrow belongs to those who yearn for freedom and prosperity. It does not belong either to the ayatollahs' backward ideology or to the Revolutionary Guards' violence.

I will end by reflecting on the organic nature of change from below, the seismic shift in Iranian culture, civil society, and grassroots disillusionment with the political abuse, and the irreversible demands for human rights and the rule of law, as the illusion of revolutionary ideology disintegrates in the face of corruption and injustice. In particular, I would like to speak to the conception of power that the Islamic republic holds on to and say why it is doomed to fail.

The story is that of Barmaan, who was just one month old when his mother began serving a 23-month prison sentence in July 2012. Her crime was that she was a Bahá'í. Her crime was that the regime did not approve her religious beliefs.

Alas, it is not only Baha'is who languish in prison for such crimes. As I mentioned, even prominent Shia ayatollahs, such as Boroujerdi, not to mention secular democrats, socialists, labour union leaders, women's rights activists, student leaders, and all others who are deemed to be a threat, are somehow harassed and repressed by the Iranian regime.

•(1330)

The story of Barmaan is important because of the conception of power that it demonstrates. Barmaan was born two months prematurely because his mother went into early labour after the emotional trauma of a raid in her home in the city of Semnan.

Barmaan will be two years old when his mother is released, if she is released after serving her sentence. His father was already imprisoned for being a Bahá'í when his mother went into premature labour. Like many other infants, Barmaan will be a prison child whose concept of life will be shaped by the harsh conditions of prison in Iran. Like many other children, when he plays, he may imagine that his dolls should beat each other because that is what he has seen. Like many other children, his drawings will be that of his mother and father behind prison bars.

Why do I mention the story of Barmaan? Because it demonstrates the desperation of a regime that pursues deliberate cruelty to maintain its grip on power. If a man beats his pregnant wife and children, we would not see him as powerful. On the contrary, we would see him as so desperate and impotent that he must confine himself to violence against the defenceless. The denial of an innocent childhood to Barmaan and countless other Iranian children like him shows just how low the Islamic Republic has sunk and just how powerless it has become against its own citizens.

Let us hope that some enlightened elements within the regime understand that history is not on the side of the those that persist in such brutality. Let us hope that Iran will go the way of a post-apartheid South Africa, with a negotiated and non-violent democratic transition, rather than suffering the horrors that unfold daily in places such as Syria.

To this future, inevitable yet indeterminate in its modernity, we need to focus our attention as we ponder the current human rights situation in Iran.

Thank you for your kind attention, Mr. Chair, and for the opportunity to share these thoughts with the distinguished members of the subcommittee.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor.

We have enough time for five-minute rounds of questions and answers.

We'll start with Mr. Sweet.

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

And thank you to our witnesses, Professor Akhavan and Susanne Tamás, who have enlightened us on many occasions in the past. We're very grateful for your expertise here at the committee.

I also wanted to acknowledge the fact that MP John Weston is here as well, who facilitated the visit of Shirin Ebadi to our committee the last time. I want to commend him for that.

I want to remind you, Chair, that about a year ago, on May 15, 2012, we had a take note debate on human rights in Iran. Many of my colleagues here at the table spoke that evening. That evening, I simply described to the House the individual personalities involved in the imprisonment of the leadership of the Bahá'í.

I want to begin my questioning the same way. The Iranian Political Prisoner Global Advocacy Project, which MP Cotler and Senator Kirk ought to be commended for leading, has provided members of Parliament with a biography of one of Ahmadinejad's recent victims. Here I'd like to spotlight the story of Navid Khanjani, a Bahá'í student and civil activist. He's been sentenced to 12 years of brutal imprisonment in Iran. Navid has already faced intense interrogation in Tehran's Evin prison and was forced to record video testimony against himself under duress. Navid's is the longest sentence ever given to a human rights activist in Iran for propaganda against the regime and acting against national security. His crimes? Wanting to go to university. Those of the Bahá'í faith are banned from universities in Iran. He founded the Bahá'í educational rights committee, being a member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters and of human rights activists.

Now that I've talked about Navid Khanjani being imprisoned in Iran, I'd like to pose my first question to Susanne Tamás.

Ms. Tamás, persecution is rampant in Iran. Zoroastrians, Christians, Hindus, minority Muslims, and Jews all face persecution. Could you explain to the committee what is unique about the Bahá'í community and the persecution it faces compared to the persecution that other minorities face?

• (1335)

Ms. Susanne Tamás: Thank you very much, Mr. Sweet.

It's very difficult to respond to that question without first saying that the persecution any people face is intolerable. What is happening to the Bahá'í is symptomatic of what is happening to many groups of Iranian people.

Probably what distinguishes the situation of the Bahá'ís that first, they are not recognized as a religious minority and are therefore not protected by legal structures; second is the "Bahá'í question" memorandum issued by the Iranian government in 1991, which was brought to light by the UN in 1993, in which a strategy is mapped out to deliberately block the development of the Bahá'í community. I'm not aware of a similar strategy for other communities.

I think that, as horrific as all of the suffering is for all of the people unjustly dealt with in Iran, what distinguishes this community is the inveterate hatred of the Iranian government toward it and its desire to block, stop, and suffocate it in any way that it can.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Ms. Tamás.

Professor Akhavan, of 686 candidates, only eight were actually approved. You mentioned that many of those who weren't approved were actually inside the regime before.

Are we getting closer to the collapse of this regime?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I'm sorry. Are we getting closer to...?

Mr. David Sweet: —to seeing the collapse of this regime?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Well, some people have been saying that for 34 years, Mr. Sweet, so one has to be prudent about predicting that. But clearly, the regime is facing unprecedented crises of legitimacy. The radicalization of the regime, the elimination or marginalization of even the Ahmadinejad camp or the Rafsanjani camp, groups that were once integral parts of the regime, is really the spine of the increasing isolation of the regime not just internationally but also within Iran itself.

It's very difficult to predict the collapse of the regime, and collapses are not necessarily single events that occur on a single day, but the trajectory for the regime is certainly not promising. We have to be prepared in a worst case scenario for a weakened and isolated regime that can still hold on to power for quite some time, but very weakened and on an unsustainable basis.

The focus really has to be, as I said, on how the policies pursued by Canada and other governments can facilitate a non-violent, negotiated, democratic transition. Part of it may be isolation of the leadership while we empower civil society, but part of it may also be to give incentives for a surrender of power in ways other than what we've seen in other places in the Middle East.

The Chair: We'll go now to our second questioner.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Ms. Tamás, it's nice to see you back before the committee, although we've had you in front of us before.

I have a couple of quick questions. The fastest and probably the easier is, how many Bahá'ís are there in Iran?

In your testimony today, you've painted a pretty clear picture of the daily life of oppression that Bahá'ís live. I'm curious, with the run-up to this June election, to know whether you are aware of any increases in the scapegoating of Bahá'ís to draw attention away from other potential offences relative to the election.

• (1340)

Ms. Susanne Tamás: Thank you, Mr. Marston. It's a pleasure to see you again. I'm sorry that it's necessary to be here to do this.

It's very difficult to get an accurate count of how many Bahá'ís there are in Iran, because clearly we don't have an administrative structure there. Just keeping track of people would be difficult. The number used by the UN is 300,000. I expect there are more than that, but I wouldn't want to estimate how many.

What we've seen is a steady increase in the level of violence and arrests.

I don't know, because I haven't had information for the past couple of weeks and so don't have the most recent look at what's been going on. I'll probably be able to answer that question a little better in a few weeks' time. I'm going to leave it at that.

Dr. Akhavan may have some insights.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Professor Akhavan, it's nice to have you with us as well, although it's certainly difficult when we can't quite see you. You've provided testimony to this committee for some time regarding Iran, so we always look forward to hearing from you.

One of the questions that comes to mind is what international obligations Canada has in regard to engaging Iran on their record of human rights. Is there anything that we can or should be doing, aside from obligations that we may engage? Are there factions over there that are in any way reaching out to the rest of the world?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, sir, for your kind words and your very good question.

As I mentioned, a global dialogue on the future of Iran is an important initiative on the part of the Canadian government—and, of course, a dialogue produces results over time. I think it's very important to sustain this to allow for a diversity of views to be represented. I think that the first meeting, despite its challenges, did go quite far in doing that.

I think that one of the main shortcomings of Canada—although Canada has played a great leadership role across both the Liberal and Conservative governments in sponsoring resolutions at the U.N. General Assembly on the human rights situation—is where it stands apart from both the United States and European Union in its failure to adopt targeted sanctions against the Iranian officials responsible for human rights abuses. This is something that we've called for over several years. It's important to signal to the regime that it's not merely the nuclear issue that is a concern to the international community and which is exacting a cost on the regime, but that human rights abuses will also exact a cost.

The European Union now has a list of almost 100 Iranian officials—and it's not that those individuals will necessarily be travelling to Europe, or that they necessarily have assets that can be frozen. But it's an important way of not just naming and shaming, but also in a sense blacklisting individuals who have to ask themselves what will happen if they're no longer in power, if their names are being listed not just by non-governmental organizations and activists, but also by governments, by the international community. Could they one day face justice? I would hope that Canada begins to adopt targeted sanctions. There's plenty of documentary evidence from organizations such as the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, which

has been relied upon by the EU and the United States in determining who should be listed.

Just very quickly, further to the question that you asked Ms. Susanne Tamás, I think it is fair to say that the number of Bahá'ís in Iran—although one cannot define it—is significantly larger than 300,000. One of the reasons the regime is so desperately trying to repress the Bahá'í community is the widespread disillusionment of people with the brand of Shia Islam that has been imposed on them. So the Bahá'í beliefs, which are basically very progressive, but still akin to people's spiritual needs, are very popular among significant elements of the Iranian population. Just as many people are becoming Christians, and so on and so forth, the regime is very threatened—even by Sufism, which is part or particular interpretation of Islam. All of this is once again a measure of their desperation, of their fear that they're losing power.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

We have to go to our next questioner. We're at six minutes actually.

Ms. Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms. Tamás and Professor Akhavan, for your time and your presentations. Certainly all of us do appreciate them.

Professor Akhavan, you are one of the founders of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, and your leadership in the Iranian civil society movement has been featured in *The New York Times* and *Maclean's*, and in the award-winning documentary film *The Green Wave*.

So from all your experiences, Professor Akhavan, what do you believe are the best ways to address the human rights situation in Iran?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: My goodness, that's a very challenging question. Sometimes the more one gets entangled the more difficult it is to see things clearly.

I'm a firm believer that soft power is very often underestimated by policy-makers. Even symbolic condemnation campaigns of naming and shaming, and dialogue with civil society, all of these efforts, even if they cannot produce immediate results, create the basis for a sustainable transformation.

We shouldn't believe that if Ayatollah Ali Khamenei goes and then another tyrant is in power that somehow we're going to achieve democracy. Democracy is above all about institution building. It's about building culture and public awareness. So I would say that the steady stream of dialogue and engagement, and the condemnation of human rights abuses by the international community, all of that cumulatively is very important for helping the historical struggle of the Iranian people to achieve democracy.

To repeat, I think my call for targeted sanctions over the past several years is also a very important. What the Iranian public sees now are sanctions that of course hurt the regime, but they hurt the ordinary people even more. It's very important to have targeted sanctions that identify and implicate particular individuals in these abuses. In answer to your question, that perhaps may be a very concrete measure that I think the Canadian government should consider very seriously.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In a recent interview you stated that Iran has a vibrant civil society for Canada to engage with. Can you explain further how the Canadian government could reach out to Iranians and why this is a viable strategy towards bettering the human rights situation in Iran?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: The question has many different dimensions, but within the limited time available here, I think one of the challenges in Iranian civil society or with the Iranian public in general is for Iranians across different political, religious, and ethnic divides to learn to converse with each other, to learn the art of dialogue and compromise against an authoritative and repressive regime, which has denied them that opportunity. That, to me, is really the only sustainable basis for having a democratic transformation in Iran.

The reason the regime persists is that it has done its utmost to crush civil society, to repress labour unions, women's movements, student movements, human rights movements. It does this because it knows that the more vibrant the civil society becomes, the greater the chance that the ground will crumble beneath the feet of the regime.

Investing resources in facilitating dialogue, facilitating that space in the public consciousness, is extremely important.

There is one particular issue that I should also mention. There is a citizens' lab at the University of Toronto that is doing great work in this regard, helping with technology so that young people can bypass the filters of the regime. The regime is talking about the so-called halal Internet, an Internet that it can control, because it realizes what a powerful tool the Internet is for civil society, for debate, criticism, and dialogue.

I think we should be careful not simply to think that by imposing sanctions and isolating the regime we're going to achieve our objective. We need to be much more selective and nuanced, and also understand that isolating the population by denying them access to the Internet is actually counterproductive.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go now to Professor Cotler.

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

I want to commend both of our witnesses today, Ms. Tamás and Professor Akhavan, for their compelling and very timely testimony. I have a question for each of you.

Ms. Tamás, you mentioned that it is essential that Canada shine the spotlight on the human rights violations in Iran. Professor Akhavan mentioned the same thing. This is what we've been trying to do with our Iran Accountability Week and the Iranian Political

Prisoner Global Advocacy Project. You asked that the subcommittee condemn the imprisonment of the Bahá'í leadership and call for their release and that of other political prisoners.

I'm giving notice to the subcommittee now that I will be circulating a motion to that effect for purposes of adoption, hopefully at our Thursday meeting, based on the testimony of both Ms. Tamás and Payam Akhavan today.

My specific questions are the following. First to Ms. Tamás, what do you think we could best do to try to secure the release of the imprisoned Bahá'í leadership?

To Professor Akhavan, what might we be able to do to help secure the release of political prisoners in Iran as a whole?

We can start with Ms. Tamás.

Ms. Susanne Tamás: That's a very difficult question to answer. I'm not sure that I know what Canada can do to make that happen. Canada is doing so much at the multilateral level not only to tell Iran of its concern but also to get other countries on board and pay attention to it. I think there are key countries that have Iran's ear, that Canada could work bilaterally with those countries and say to them, "Look, you know what's going on in Iran; this is not the kind of thing you would support in your country. Setting aside all of your reasons for not wanting to publicly name and shame Iran, what else are you going to do to persuade it that its own best interests lie in ceasing all of these human rights violations?"

In fact, if they could understand the symbolic value of releasing the Yaran and did so, it would have implications for the entire Bahá'í community. That would be a huge step forward.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Professor Akhavan, how do you think our Iranian political prisoner global advocacy project can work most effectively to help bring about the release of the political prisoners who we have taken on as parliamentarians and others in that regard?

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

I think that the efforts such as the adoption by members of Parliament, of the Senate, of political prisoners and publicizing their plight, all of these are important measures. When political prisoners are forgotten, the prospect of their abuse becomes that much greater. But I think that we need to shift gears, perhaps, and also look at the perpetrators and not just the victims of this sort of violence. Getting back to my earlier comments—I sound like a broken record talking about targeted sanctions—I think it is equally important to publicize the names of the perpetrators and to give them notoriety, because at the end of the day many of these individuals have a power calculus. They're using human rights abuses to stay in power. When they realize that this may exact a cost somewhere down the road, I think it can have perhaps some kind of a deterrent effect. So naming them is as important as naming the victims.

I would also endorse what Ms. Tamás has said, that one other way that Canada can help, given the fact that Canada already has a very strong position vis-à-vis Iran, is it could work together, for example, with the government of India and other governments that are closer to Iran and that still give Iran some sort of international standing. If those governments also, in addition to the western governments, are raising these issues, I think the signal would be loud and clear to the Iranian regime that in order to have legitimacy with the international community, they have to release political prisoners, and that I think is exactly what message they need to receive.

• (1355)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you, Professor.

Thank you, Ms. Tamás.

I just want to mention that I appreciate that colleagues from all parties are here. Mr. Weston is here, my colleague Judy Sgro is here. There's a great interest by parliamentarians now, and we will mobilize with regard to the recommendations you mentioned.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you.

The Chair: That's quite true. There has been a substantial amount of interest.

We have Mr. Weston; Mr. Lizon, who is not normally here; Ms. Sgro, of course; Christine Moore from the New Democrats. So there's quite a bit of interest from MPs who have come to attend our meeting.

In fact, Mr. Lizon is on the questioners' list. Please feel free to begin.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm not a regular here on the subcommittee, but I'm filling in for my colleague. I actually have many questions, and I was thinking of which question to ask.

I am familiar with a lot of these problems that were described. I grew up in Communist Poland, and in my youth we were also asking the question, "When is this going to end?" Nobody truly believed it would end in our lifetime, but it did happen.

I have a question. If the current regime in Iran collapses, how prepared are the Iranians to replace it with something that would lead to a fully democratic country?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I would assume, sir, that question is for me?

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Yes. Go ahead, professor.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: It's an excellent question. That is what I try to allude to in my statement about post-apartheid South Africa, about a negotiated peaceful transition. I think I was asked whether the regime is on the brink of collapse. You never know: it's very difficult, and collapses don't come all at once. Certainly, based on your experience with communist Poland, you would know that the rotting away of communism was a long time in the making. Even if it was consummated dramatically, it didn't happen overnight.

I think there are deep divisions within the regime, and there are fundamental problems. I have little doubt that sooner or later we will see an Iran that is very different from the one we see today.

The question is: how do we go from here to there while avoiding some sort of cataclysm that could result in massive suffering, not just for the Iranian people, but for the entire region? Iran itself is a very diverse community of different political, ethnic, and religious persuasions. Within Iranian civil society, there is a substantial number of Iranian political activists, and there is now a move to create dialogue so we can have a democratic constituency that can sustain democratic institutions once that change comes about.

Essentially, Iran is far ahead of Egypt and the other countries in the Middle East because it is in a post-ideological, post-utopian state. When I was in Tahrir Square in Cairo, people were praising Ahmadinejad. They still had this romance about an Islamic state, and that's because they hadn't lived under one.

It's like the story of the man who sent his son to study in the Soviet Union rather than Paris to make sure he never becomes a communist. People in Iran have no illusions about that sort of state. That's why I've been talking about the surveys showing that among the population there are many liberal values, like skepticism about power. But at the level of the international community, I think policy-makers also need to think about what people throughout the world can do to encourage some sort of negotiated peaceful transition.

Rather than focusing on the nuclear issue and ever harsher sanctions and threats of war, I think we need to be a bit more—if I may say—intelligent and not so short-sighted. We must understand that Iran has immense potential, but we need to go beyond short-term narrow calculations and invest in a long-term democratic transition.

• (1400)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The last questions will be asked by Ms. Moore, to whom I now yield the floor.

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Thank you.

My first question is for Mr. Akhavan.

I would like to know why Canada does not target individuals who are part of the regime through instruments such as the International Criminal Court.

I would also like to know whether there are any differences in the way Bahá'í women and Bahá'í men are treated.

What is the difference between Iranian women and Iranian women of the Bahá'í faith? Is there a difference?

[*English*]

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you for that question. I will perhaps leave your second question for Ms. Tamás. I will simply say one of the Bahá'í principles that enrages the hardliner religious leaders in Iran is the equality of men and women. Very often the propaganda portrays Bahá'í women as being immoral and promiscuous and so forth, but conversely that's also part of the appeal of the Bahá'í beliefs to significant segments of the Iranian population.

With respect to the International Criminal Court, there was a question on the referral of Iran to the U.N. Security Council for crimes against humanity. Do I understand your question correctly?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: He's asking whether he has understood your question correctly.

Ms. Christine Moore: The first question was simply about why the International Criminal Court is not being used to target the regime members who commit those offences.

[*English*]

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I know that Professor Cotler has, for many years, been at the forefront of a proposal with respect to bringing the leadership of Iran before the International Criminal Court. Of course, the problem is that Iran has not recognized the court's jurisdiction and has not signed the treaty, which would mean that half of its leadership will be prosecuted in the Hague.

The only way to really address this issue is before the UN Security Council. Of course, we see that even with respect to Syria, where there are massive atrocities, there is little political inclination to do so, given the politics of the Security Council. But I still think that Canada can raise the issue, even if it is not politically feasible. I think anything that begins to promote individual accountability for crimes against humanity in Iran would be very important.

In order to move towards a foreign policy that promotes accountability, first we can do what we are capable of doing within the government itself, which is to adopt targeted sanctions. That could certainly be a starting point, which doesn't depend on the complex politics of the United Nations.

The Chair: Ms. Tamás, would you like to respond to your part of the question?

• (1405)

Ms. Susanne Tamás: Certainly, thank you very much for the question, particularly because it's caused me to reflect.

Here, I'm going to go back to the list of statistics of prisoners that we have. I have been surprised by the number of women prisoners of all ages who are Bahá'í. When I think about that I wonder if it's because Bahá'í women are empowered: they have voices, they raise their voices, they engage with neighbours, they educate children, and they're active in their families. They discuss with their neighbours how a family functions, and issues of equality, the importance of educating the girl child—all of these things are part of their belief system. Whether or not that accounts for the fact that many of them are imprisoned along with male Bahá'í, I don't know.

So I really want to thank you, Ms. Moore, for your question because I will go back and take another look at that particular statistic.

Male and female prisoners are kept segregated. Even visits are segregated. So if a family wants to visit Mr. Khanjani, the female relatives can visit him one week, and then the following week the male members of the family can go to visit him. The male members of the community are being held in Gohardasht prison, whereas the female members are being held in Evin prison.

I don't know if that's because they are Bahá'í. It may simply be the Iranian government's way of sifting and sorting people of male or female gender.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

I think we've used up all of our available time. In fact we've gone over it a little bit, so we're going to have to end this meeting.

I do have one last thing to take care of. I have a request that we approve a budget to send off to the main committee.

I know you're eager to approve it, Mr. Marston. I should tell you what it is for, first. It's actually for the witnesses for the Iran study. Is that okay?

Mr. Wayne Marston: I so move.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thanks, everybody.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for coming. You've been very informative. This is not the first time, and once again you've lived up to the high standards you've set in the past.

Thank you, Ms. Tamás, for being with us from Montreal by video conference.

Thank you, Professor Akhavan, for calling after hours from Italy. I know you went to considerable difficulty to do so.

We appreciate both of your being here. Thank you very much.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you.

Ms. Susanne Tamás: Thank you so very much. This is very helpful and we wish you luck with your work.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we are adjourned.

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