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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. Pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2), we have our study of Canada's response to the violence, religious persecution and dislocation caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

We'll get started. I think everyone can see the camera here. Today we are being recorded by CTV, so we'll have them for the duration of the meeting.

I want welcome our witnesses today from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. Starting on my left, we have Leslie Norton, who is the director general for international humanitarian assistance. Then we have Mark Gwozdecky, who is the director general of the Middle East and Maghreb. We have Andrew Bennett, who is the ambassador for the Office of Religious Freedom, and we have Donica Pottie, who is the director of the Conflict Policy and Security Coherence Secretariat.

Welcome. It's nice to have you here.

We're going to get started. I believe we just have opening remarks from you, Mr. Gwozdecky. Let's start with your opening remarks and then we'll go around the room over the next hour and a half or so, asking questions and going back and forth between opposition and government.

I'm going to turn the floor over to you, sir. We look forward to your opening statement.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky (Director General, Middle East and Maghreb, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, honourable members, for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I'm going to start by giving you an overview of the state of affairs in Iraq and Syria, and then speak to the Government of Canada's activities that aim to oppose ISIL, to help the Iraqi people, and to support the Government of Iraq.

The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, is wreaking havoc in the region, inflicting great hardship upon people who have already suffered from civil war and strife. ISIL has organized, mobilized, and advanced on the basis of adherence to a distorted ideology that aims at eliminating so-called non-believers, who are identified as all those refusing to convert to ISIL's perverted version of Islam.

At its heart, this is a conflict based on religious persecution and fuelled by religious hatred, which has led to a humanitarian catastrophe. It represents the ideology of obscurantism; that is, the deliberate preventing of the facts from becoming known. It is opposed to the fundamental freedoms upon which our society is based, to all aspects of tolerance and pluralism, and even to the very idea of the inherency of human dignity.

[Translation]

To counter the extremist rhetoric in the Middle East, including in Iraq and Syria, we must promote an alternative vision to that supported by the Islamic State and other extremist groups. We must provide an alternative to the fear of oppression, discrimination, marginalization and abuse that are often perpetrated by the governments in power, factors that have allowed extremist ideas to spread.

The only possible long-term solution is political inclusion, better governance and respect for religious freedom and human rights. This political solution must come from the Iraqis and Syrians, but Canada is committed to long-term political and diplomatic efforts in support of that goal.

Although promising progress has been made in Iraq, we know that achieving that goal will take time. That is why Canada is supporting the local forces fighting the Islamic State in Iraq. Canada also remains ready to contribute to the long-term reconciliation and political reform.

The tragic events that took place in Paris earlier this month, involving extremists linked to transnational terrorist organizations based in the Middle East, clearly demonstrate that our efforts are part of a bigger fight.

While we work with our friends and allies to combat the threat that this ideology poses around the world, we must remain committed to the goal of reversing the military gains of the Islamic State, restoring humanitarian aid, protecting fundamental rights and reaffirming Iraq's authority on territories currently under the control of the Islamic State.

To do so, the U.S. has formed a coalition of over 60 countries supporting military action against the Islamic State. This coalition provides military advisers and equipment.

• (1105)

[English]

Within the coalition, Canada belongs to a core group that is participating in a combat role through air strikes against ISIL in Iraq. Canada's allies are taking part in these air strikes also. We count among these allies 10 Middle Eastern countries. The Canadian Armed Forces contribution, through Operation Impact, includes fighter, surveillance, and refuelling aircraft for the air operations against ISIL.

Canada's military has also contributed military advisers and planners to assist Iraqi security forces, as well as airlift support for the delivery of military equipment. You will hear more about this later this week, when Ministers Nicholson and Baird will speak to this group. In support of the role that the Canadian Armed Forces are playing, DFATD and several other departments and agencies are making significant contributions to ensure that those on the front lines have the best chance of defeating ISIL.

Let me reaffirm at this time that the humanitarian crisis we're witnessing is as a result of an ongoing conflict between government forces and a number of armed groups, and most notably ISIL's violent campaign of religious persecution of members of religious minorities as well as of Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims who reject ISIL's warped view of Islam. Canada's activities seek to support the Iraqi people in combatting the various manifestations of this violence.

Let me begin on the security side. Through its counterterrorism capacity-building program and the global peace and security fund, the department is providing \$10 million in non-lethal security assistance to Kurdish security and defence forces. Our support translates into such vital protective equipment as helmets, body armour, and remotely operated explosive detection vehicles, as well as logistics support, including transport vehicles, binoculars, computers, and GPS units.

To further target ISIL and other extremist groups in the region, the counterterrorism capacity-building program is also implementing a \$5-million multi-year regional initiative to stem the flow of foreign fighters and counter violent extremism. Project activities will be aimed at increasing local capabilities to identify and intercept foreign fighters in source, transit, and destination countries.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Canadian diplomats and public safety agencies met with partners in the region to provide the best possible assistance. We are ensuring that Canada's investment complements local initiatives and supports the work of like-minded donors.

Canada is also working with regional partners such as the Hedayah Center in the United Arab Emirates to implement projects aimed at countering extremist propaganda. Extremist rhetoric encourages intolerance and the use of violence, especially among marginalized and dissident young people who may well be influenced and mobilized by such propaganda.

If we want to overcome extremism, we must wage an ideological battle, a battle that denounces extremist propaganda for what it is:

perverse calls for religious and historical legitimacy devoid of substance and rooted in intolerance and cowardice. At the same time, the international community must become more engaged in helping those segments of the population by finding a solution to the factors that make them so vulnerable to extremism.

As a result, Canada is contributing to the efforts made to address immediate humanitarian needs, to hold human rights abusers accountable and to support the long-term rebuilding, stabilization and development of the communities affected by the conflicts. These efforts can help incite those vulnerable people to want to live in a democratic Iraq where fundamental rights are protected and respected.

Since the beginning of 2014, Canada has provided \$67.4 million in humanitarian assistance for displaced Iraqis. Canada has also provided \$400 million to support humanitarian interventions in response to the conflict in Syria, including \$9.5 million for Syrian refugees in Iraq.

This assistance, provided with the help of experienced humanitarian partners, helps address the urgent needs of millions of civilians in health, shelter, food, education and protection, including from sexual and gender-based violence.

[English]

ISIL's brutality has been particularly felt by women and girls. Reports of sexual violence by ISIL are widespread, and it is increasingly clear that this is part of a deliberate campaign of persecution against religious minority groups. Due to the stigma attached to rape, most incidents go unreported. Even when they are reported, families and communities sometimes blame the victim. Sadly, the impacts of sexual violence often endure far beyond the end of conflict.

In response, Canada is taking concerted action to assist the survivors of sexual violence and other related abuses of human rights by ISIL. On October 6, Minister Baird announced \$10 million for measures to respond to sexual violence and other abuses against women and girls. These funds will be spent on two key priorities.

First, Canada is concerned with increasing accountability in the documentation to help hold perpetrators of these crimes to account.

Canada has made a contribution of up to \$5 million to Justice Rapid Response, an intergovernmental mechanism for rapidly deploying active duty criminal justice and related professionals from a standby roster. Justice Rapid Response will identify and train first responders on the ground and define outreach activities, including engagement with survivors of sexual violence.

Canada has also made another \$5 million available to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to help respond to, document, and investigate sexual violence and other related human rights abuses. Canada is focused on preventing, and supporting survivors of, sexual violence and related abuses, and \$5 million has been allocated to enhance protection for vulnerable women and children from sexual violence and related human rights abuses.

A DFATD official was on the ground in Iraq this fall to identify initiatives that will help assist survivors of ISIL's crimes of sexual violence. Canada's humanitarian assistance funding is already supporting a number of humanitarian organizations to assist survivors of SGBV through access to psychological support services, medical treatment, awareness sessions, counselling, training, empowerment courses, and clinical care. Displaced people are especially vulnerable to SGBV. That is why Canada is supporting the UN Population Fund, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the ICRC, and Plan Canada to prevent and respond to sexual violence in Iraq. These organizations are setting up women's centres and providing medical treatment as well as psychosocial counselling and legal assistance to survivors.

• (1115)

[Translation]

In Syria, Canada supports the United Nations Population Fund, in order to meet the needs of women and girls, including survivors of sexual abuse. With that support, 2.3 million girls and women will have access to improved sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response mechanisms, including psychosocial support and medical services.

Canada also denounces the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. In addition to providing much needed assistance and protection to the refugees in the region, we are leading the way by making sure that the use of sexual violence by the Islamic State, against members of religious minorities in particular, remains a global priority, including for the G7 and the United Nations.

In terms of the global refugee issue, Canada intends to do its part to address the crisis caused by the violence in Iraq and Syria. In addition to providing much needed assistance and protection to the refugees in the region, Canada has accepted 20,000 Iraqi refugees and will accept 3,000 more this year, as well as 5,000 more from Turkey by 2018.

Canada is also committed to settling over 11,000 Syrian refugees under its humanitarian and compassionate program.

In the long term, Canada plans to contribute to stability and development in Iraq. The department is working on setting up a bilateral development program to meet the short-term needs and to support long-term resilience and prosperity in Iraq.

Finally, through Canada's Office of Religious Freedom, we will be working over the medium and long term to promote interfaith dialogue, to encourage understanding and respect between Iraq's religious communities, and to help build a political and social framework that allows all Iraqis to express their faith freely and without fear. To that end, the government has recently announced a new initiative with the Minority Rights Group International, seeking to document human rights violations against vulnerable groups in

Iraq. The initiative will focus on religious communities and provide support to human rights defenders working with religious minorities.

Canada's Office of Religious Freedom is also working closely with its partners to identify additional opportunities for collaboration with the religious communities directly affected by the situation in Iraq and Syria.

• (1120)

[English]

We are encouraged to see that the new government in Iraq is reaching out to all of Iraq's religious and ethnic communities in order to build a more inclusive country. The marginalization of Iraq's Sunnis was at the basis of ISIL's resurgence in Iraq, so the importance of inclusiveness cannot be overstated.

We're equally pleased to note that Baghdad is taking action to fight corruption within the security forces and government, and to resolve some of its disputes with the Kurdistan regional government.

In closing, let me stress again that Canada deplores ISIL's acts of terrorism against civilian populations, and it is committed to working with partners, including the Iraqi government, to halt these despicable acts and alleviate the suffering of ISIL's victims. All aspects of Canada's multi-faceted approach are important and complementary. Canada is proud to support Iraqis in their efforts to defeat terrorism, and we look forward to working with the Iraqis and our international partners on the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq.

Thank you. My colleagues and I would now be happy to answer any questions you might have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Gwozdecky.

Our first round will be seven minutes for questions and answers. I'm going to start with Mr. Dewar.

The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our guests today.

I want to start off by acknowledging something that we had asked for after I accompanied Minister Baird, along with my colleague Mr. Garneau, and the assessment we made. We, as the official opposition, asked for support for those who have suffered from sexual violence, but also for the prosecution of others. I'm glad you mentioned that. It wasn't as welcomed when I mentioned it in the House. I was accused of wanting to just send lawyers to deal with ISIL, but I'm glad to hear the government has taken that on. It's very important to gather evidence, because at some point we want to see justice done. So I want to give credit to the government for that project and the \$10 million that was announced.

I also want to just touch on the fact that some of the points you just made were around the importance of humanitarian assistance. I also note that you enumerated the amounts that we are investing or have pledged to invest. I think that's important. Certainly, that was our assessment when we put forward what we wanted to see, not just on protection of victims of sexual violence and documentation, but also on ensuring that those who are suffering because of having to flee are going to be well supported. The World Food Programme, the winterization program, and others are very important. We thought that was where we should be putting the emphasis.

I do note that we haven't been able to get the same transparency from the other department. It would be interesting—if you have information on that—to see how much we're actually spending on the military side. I think that's important not only for transparency but also to understand what's the best investment. If you have the information on how much the military mission is forecast to be, or if you have actual numbers for now, they would be most welcome.

I want to ask you about a couple of pledges that have been made. There's one in particular that I'm very concerned about because of what we saw on the ground. That's the pledge for winterization. This is a 2015 pledge. There was UNICEF, the No Lost Generation, for \$8 million; the World Food Programme for \$10 million; and \$9 million for winterization. I don't have to tell you that the winterization is important because of the winter they're suffering from now.

To my understanding, we haven't been able to get the money transferred in those three areas. The pledge is there. I'm just wondering if you can update us on the UNICEF money for child protection, the World Food Programme, and most importantly, or as important, the \$9 million we had pledged for 2015, which hasn't yet been realized.

Could you give us an idea when those pledges will actually be transferred?

Ms. Leslie Norton (Director General, International Humanitarian Assistance, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Just to confirm, the announcement was for \$40 million for Iraqis affected by the conflict. Indeed, \$10 million was for WFP; \$9 million was UNHCR, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. That's correct. The \$8 million for UNICEF was a previous announcement, back in October. All of this funding has gone to the organizations.

Regarding the \$40 million, because of the fiduciary risk assessment in the current context with some of our NGO partners, we might have two or three payments. All of the grant arrangements and agreements are signed. Most of the money has been transferred. However, because of our fiduciary risk, there might be two or three payments for some of the organizations. But that is not the case for the UNHCR. It is not the case for UNICEF. It is not the case for the WFP.

• (1125)

Mr. Paul Dewar: So those are all moneys sent, delivered, and engaged. Thank you for that.

On winterization, we've had this issue before, where pledges are made, then winter's come and gone, and sadly, the money hasn't been

there. I think that's a challenge we all have to focus on, notwithstanding, obviously, your concern around fiduciary responsibilities.

I wonder if you could just share something with us. April is when the six-month time period will have come in terms of our commitment to the mission. From what I'm hearing today, you're working on a different timetable in terms of our commitments on everything from humanitarian assistance to supporting governance.

What is the timetable you're working on? Is it another year, another six months? Do you see the six-month timetable pertaining just to the military mission? What's the calendar you're working on in terms of our work in Iraq?

As you know, the parliamentary motion was for six months, to be looked at again with regard to whether to renew or not. I'm just wondering if you could share with us the thinking within the department.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: My colleague Ms. Norton will speak to the humanitarian piece.

To characterize our efforts, I would refer to my statement, in which I said we are engaged in a long-term political and diplomatic engagement with Iraq that includes the kinds of support you heard about in the statement. Because we have a long-term interest in having a stable Iraq in the region, we have a long-term interest, as the Prime Minister has said, in degrading the capabilities of ISIL. To do that, we need to support the Government of Iraq, because ultimately, Iraqis are going to be the only ones capable of dealing with this problem. However, it is in our interests, as we know from recent events in Canada, to take these steps, because the threats that grow in Iraq and Syria can wash up on our shores.

With regard to the various programs, we can speak to the timeframes attached to those, but we have a long-term relationship with Iraq, which we want to grow because we think it is in the interests of Canadians.

Leslie.

Ms. Leslie Norton: As you know, we respond to humanitarian crises based on need. The current UN appeal is for the totality of 2014-15, so our funds will be at work throughout the entire calendar year of 2015.

It looks as though we may be heading towards a protracted crisis in Iraq, and we will evaluate the needs as the next appeal is launched. If the current appeal is increased, it will be analyzed and we will provide recommendations accordingly.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We'll move over to Mr. Anderson for seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here with us today.

In early December there was a meeting of the coalition partners in Brussels, from which they issued a joint statement laying out five lines of effort. These were as follows: supporting the military operations, capacity-building, and training; stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters; cutting off ISIL or Daesh's access to funding and financing; addressing associated humanitarian relief in crises; and exposing ISIL or Daesh's true nature in terms of their ideology.

Actually, I would like to work from the bottom up on that one.

Ambassador Bennett, in terms of the Office of Religious Freedom, what are you doing? We talked a little bit about this, but how are we approaching the issue of revealing the ideological extremism of these folks?

I guess we've all seen some recent polling that maybe concerns us because it shows that some of these ISIL-held beliefs seem to be held by a section of the general population. It seems that some of the justice penalties are applied by some of the local regimes as well.

I am just wondering. Are we dealing with this as a theological issue? Are we dealing with some higher calling such as the call to democracy and pluralism? What is our approach in dealing with this?

• (1130)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett (Ambassador, Office of Religious Freedom, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you can appreciate, it's a multi-faceted response, like a lot of our efforts. On the one hand, we're trying to encourage those countries in the region that have an interest, as we do, in the broader security of the region and stopping ISIL in its advance to speak out more directly on these questions about how ISIL takes Islam and distorts it to advance their extremist goals and extremist ideology. We've been engaging the other countries in the region, especially those that we know have a more balanced approach—I don't want to say moderate, but a more balanced approach—to interpretation of Islam. Jordan is a key ally for us in this regard.

I hope to be travelling to Jordan in early February. I'll be meeting with interlocutors there, both religious leaders and government, to talk about how we seek to engender a particular understanding of Islam that is open to pluralism, that advances interconfessional dialogue. Certainly with our current project we're launching with Minority Rights Group, that's part of the goal—to ensure that interconfessional dialogue takes place in Iraq, but also in countries of what I would call proximate migration, where we've had mainly Christians, a certain number of Yazidis, and some Shia and Sunni Muslims. These are countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. We're looking at working with a variety of different partners to engage those communities in those countries to ensure there can be that dialogue between Christians, between Christians and Muslims in particular.

The Office of Religious Freedom sponsored a recent round table in Toronto. It was hosted by Minister Paradis and Minister Alexander. It brought together religious leaders from the different apostolic churches, the Jewish community, the Muslim community, the Yazidi community. One of the major concerns expressed by all

the people there was that this region not be emptied of minority faith groups. Rabbi Frydman-Kohl from Beth Tzedec in Toronto said the Middle East without Christians cannot be the Middle East, and likewise with the Yazidis and other minorities.

We're continuing to engage domestically here with religious leaders to get a better understanding of the possible approaches we can take to ensure these communities are able to remain in the region. Our colleagues at CIC are working on refugee resettlement programs for those who feel the need to leave. Certainly Minister Alexander made an announcement just a week and a half ago or two weeks ago about that.

It's a two-pronged engagement, Mr. Anderson, both in the region with allies and with countries where we're hoping to see a stronger message about condemning ISIL and their activities, and then also here in Canada.

Mr. David Anderson: From the beginning of our hearings we've clearly heard from communities that they want to be in that area when this is done, if they possibly can. Obviously there's an immigration issue, but as with all of us we like to spend our time in the area we call our home.

Working my way up the list, I will probably leave the humanitarian relief and access questions to Ms. Brown who is very familiar with them, but can you talk a little about what we've been doing to try to cut off access to financing? We've talked about that a little earlier at committee as well. I'm just wondering if any of you have any information on what we're doing to try to deal with that aspect of their operations.

Ms. Donica Pottie (Director, Conflict Policy and Security Coherence Secretariat, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): We're not able to speak with a huge amount of detail on that. I can confirm that we have, of course, listed ISIL as a terrorist group under our Criminal Code, and therefore, there's an additional duty on Canadian financial institutions of due diligence and disclosure to law enforcement. We're also working through the OECD's Financial Action Task Force and something called the Manama Meeting on Combating the Financing of Terrorism to work with partners to try to stem the flow of financial resources to ISIL. If people around the table would like more details, we could provide those in writing.

• (1135)

Mr. David Anderson: Have we been able to deal with the sale of petroleum products and those kinds of things? That was an early source of income for the organization.

Ms. Donica Pottie: Mr. Chair, with apologies, I don't have any great detail or background in this area, but we can certainly get that information to members, if it's desired.

Mr. David Anderson: I have a couple of questions about Syria.

The situation there allows some of these folks to be moving back and forth. I'm just wondering, do we see a short- or medium-term solution to the Syrian issue in order to deal with the issue in Iraq?

The second part of that is, we've talked a lot about capacity-building within Iraq and the military forces there. I'm just wondering how that is coming along. We've been meeting probably for four months or whatever, and when we started that was obviously a large issue. Have we been able to make an impact in terms of creating a stronger fighting force there than they've had in the past?

The Chair: If I could just have a quick response because we're pretty much out of time.

Mr. David Anderson: Actually, the second question is of more interest to me than the first one.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: The second question is one that, with all due respect, I'd like to allow ministers to speak to on Thursday. It's at that meeting that the focus will be on the military dimension. Today we're prepared to speak to all the non-military aspects of our activities.

In terms of Syria, it's perhaps getting less visibility in the media, but nonetheless actions are taking place. There's constant discussion through intermediaries with the Syrian regime and with others. In fact, I believe today there is a meeting taking place in Moscow convened by the Russians. A number of members of the Syrian regime and some representatives from the opposition are meeting. It's not an official government-to-government style peace event, but we would call it more like a track 1.5 event. It is taking place and it is one of the few examples of both sides sitting around the same table. I wouldn't predict a short-term resolution, but certainly there is diplomacy at work.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Scarpaleggia, welcome to the committee. Over to you, sir, for seven minutes.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd just like to continue on that issue that Mr. Anderson raised, or that you provided comments on, in regard to this meeting with representatives of the Syrian regime and members of opposition groups in Syria. You called it a track 1.5. I'm not familiar with what that means. I'm not a permanent member of the committee, so perhaps you could elaborate on that.

What kinds of things would be discussed at a meeting like that, for those who are uninitiated in that kind of on-the-ground diplomacy, if you want to call it that?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: I'd like to be able to give you a lot of detail, but this is a meeting that the Russians are not offering a lot of information on.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: I understand.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: They're trying to maintain a lot of discretion around the event, so I don't have a lot to speak to you about.

A track 1.5 would be different than the traditional government-to-government style negotiation where you have official government representatives from a number of states around the table. In the case of this meeting, my understanding is that the official Syrian opposition are not represented, so to speak, at the table, but representatives from a variety of opposition groups are. So they're

there not in their so-called official capacity, but more in their personal capacities. That's why it's something different than the traditional government-to-government style—

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: What would be the objective of a meeting like that? Perhaps you mentioned it in your response before. I'm just wondering what the purpose would be from the Russian perspective, or any perspective.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: I don't want to speak for the Russian government, but my assumption is that they're working to end the violence and promote some form of reconciliation—

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: In Syria.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: —that could lead to an end to the crisis.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: In terms of helping Syrian refugees, I know the government announced that it would be accepting more, finally after a great deal of pressure. But if we poured more resources into this aspect of the crisis—aid to refugees, assistance to refugees—would it be possible to bring Syrian refugees to Canada faster? What are the obstacles to getting these refugees to Canada faster? Are there financial obstacles? Are all the obstacles administrative, due process? Could you comment on that?

• (1140)

Ms. Leslie Norton: With all due respect, I think that goes beyond the mandate of what we're here to speak to, and I would kindly suggest that our CIC colleagues be invited to respond to that.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Fair enough.

In terms of the Office of Religious Freedom, I understand the objective, but can you take me through sort of a step-by-step scenario?

Concretely what are you aiming to do when you go over there, Mr. Bennett, to pursue your very worthwhile and noble mandate? You meet different religious groups over in the region, and what are you going to ask them to do, concretely? It seems you'll be going into a situation of extreme uncertainty and chaos where the immediate concerns are survival and protection from immediate violence and so on.

You have a very difficult task, which you are taking up with a lot of fortitude and so on, but what are the concrete steps you will take?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Let me be very frank to begin with. One of our operating understandings in the Office of Religious Freedom is to avoid any naïveté. I think whether it's in the Middle East or in Pakistan or in many other countries where you have the entrenched nature of this type of religious persecution and violations of religious freedom, whether through social hostilities, government restrictions, or government action or inaction, in many cases we're talking about multi-generational change.

In the case of Iraq—and by extension Syria—the two are linked. The persecutions taking place in Iraq have a particular flavour. In Syria we're seeing them in the context of a civil war.

My concern when I go over is really to have a better understanding of the immediate needs of these communities, especially religious minority communities, that have been displaced from Syria and Iraq and that are in countries of proximate migration, Lebanon and Jordan, and what they require to ensure they can remain in the region if they choose to. What do we need to do in terms of engaging our allies such as the Jordanians, the Lebanese, and others? How can we assist them?

Often it's through very small programming activities. It can be through advocacy on the international stage or through multilateral bodies—the UN or others. We're just in the process of building up an international contact group on religious freedom to bring together like-minded countries that seek to advance religious freedom.

It's not just western liberal democracies. We're engaging the Jordanians, the Indonesians, members of a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Moroccans, and the Tunisians to look at how, if we have this understanding about religious freedom, we can work both within multilateral institutions and together as a body to raise awareness about what is going on. I think part of that is also about engaging countries in the region that might need a little bit more support.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: It is sometimes a matter of speaking to the right person who can press the right lever to bring some kind of relief to a persecuted group. It could be small and so on, but it happens. These are the little miracles, if you will, of outreach.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: That's right.

The Chair: Thank you. That's perfect timing.

We're going to start a second round, which will be five minutes, beginning with Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks so much for being here. The committee has been seized with this study for the last several meetings, and your experience and input are highly valued.

Ms. Norton, I am going to turn some of my time over to you for a bit more discussion on the humanitarian situation. I know you have spent time on the ground there, and you have some incredible insight into what's going on.

Canada has been a generous contributor, and we're very thankful to Canadian taxpayers for what they have given to help resolve situations over there, but the humanitarian needs are great. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the partners we are working with, the other countries that are donor participants, and how we are working together.

I know one of the things we hear is that oftentimes money that is pledged doesn't get there. Can you tell us how we are working to ensure the funds that are pledged are contributed, where they go, and who the humanitarian partners we're working with are?

It's a big question.

• (1145)

Ms. Leslie Norton: Thank you very much for your many questions in your one big question. Perhaps I'll just start by saying

that currently there's an estimated 5.2 million people requiring assistance in Iraq itself, of which 1.5 million people are considered out of reach. So they're in the hard to reach areas.

As Mr. Gwozdecky had noted in his opening remarks, Canada has provided over \$67.4 million to respond to the humanitarian needs of Iraqis. We are currently the fourth-largest donor to this humanitarian crisis. We are behind Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and the U.K., according to the numbers today.

What we do when we work in such complex situations, as you know, is that we work with trusted and experienced partners. The very serious security situation in many parts of Iraq just underscores the importance of needing to work with these experienced partners. Our partners include UN agencies like the World Food Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as well as UNICEF for the No Lost Generation initiative; the Red Cross movement, primarily the ICRC—and it is the ICRC who has access in the hard to reach areas—as well as a number of NGOs. When I was in the region in October I was in Dohuk and Erbil and what I did note was that at the time there were not as many partners as one might find in other contexts. Again that's for obvious reasons because of the challenges working particularly in this context.

What we do know is that our partners are getting results and some of the results that our partners are reporting, for instance, are that WFP has been able to feed 1.5 million people. We also know that 1.26 million people are receiving shelter, as well as essential household items. We also know that 500,000 IDP and host-community children are given access to educational opportunities. This is something that is the direct result of the Canadian assistance in combination with the other donors.

Iraq is not a context like Syria where there have been annual pledging conferences hosted by the Kuwaiti government. However, it does continue to have a different type of profile. We are not meeting as donors four times a year in Kuwait to talk about the pledges made, and to basically report on pledges made. It's a different context.

So who are we working with? I've answered that. As for the other donors, I mentioned the four largest donors. However, in Baghdad and in Erbil there is a donor coordination group that comes together. While we do not have a permanent humanitarian officer based in northern Iraq, we do have people travelling there from Amman on a regular basis. I also have my team travelling there perhaps four to six times a year. We're visiting the country on a regular basis.

When I was there we did in fact get together with the NGO community, with the ICRC, and we also visited and met with the UN agencies that are there. The UN has activated the cluster system, so there are regular meetings going on to ensure coordination.

Perhaps on a final point, we do ensure accountability for our humanitarian funding, again, by working with these experienced partners. They have put in place very strong accountability measures and systems to ensure that funds are used in an effective, efficient, and appropriate manner.

• (1150)

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Norton.

We're going to turn back over to Mr. Dewar for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to understand how things are being coordinated.

I appreciate, Mr. Gwozdecky, that obviously on the military side, as you mentioned, you'll let the ministers respond to those questions. But as we've noted before at this committee, on this issue and others, there's an understanding of a kind of whole-of-government approach. In terms of consultation, I'm assuming there is some back and forth between departments. Perhaps you could inform us on how DFATD is being consulted on the mission and how that's working.

I was interested to note the language in your comments, that the goals were to oppose ISIL and support people; that's great. We hear other things, like degrade and destroy, from other parts of government, and we're in a full-out war when it comes to even senior members of cabinet. This is a strategic plan that has to be put into play, and that's what you're here to describe.

First, are you being consulted by DND on what the strategy should be? Second, what are the metrics you're using for success? Many people are looking at what's happening and asking how we're measuring this. I mean, the World Food Programme, that's fine, but when you're talking about the overall goals, are there metrics or is there a real measurement you're using as government officials, one that you've been given or that you've been provided?

So first, what's the consultation like with DND and the military, from your end? Second, what are you measuring here, and if you have a measurement, could you share that with us in terms of how things are going?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: Let me first speak to the question of the strategic goal, which I would defer to the Prime Minister, who pretty much laid it out clearly. Let me just remind you of what he said. He said that we intend to "significantly degrade the capabilities of ISIL" to halt its spread in the region and greatly reduce its capacity to launch terrorist attacks outside the region. He went on to say that this will not eliminate ISIL, nor automatically ensure that an alternative form of governance is able to occupy the space currently controlled by ISIL in Iraq or Syria, but it will, however, open the opportunity for others to do so.

I think in that statement you see that there are really two lines of work here. One is the military mission, which is, as he indicated, trying to create a space for the governments of Iraq and Syria to take control of their territories and institute governance for all. It's the military mission that is defined and will be discussed on Thursday, but as I mentioned, we're engaged in the longer-term process of having a relationship, a mutually beneficial one, with important governments in the Middle East. That's an ongoing one. It doesn't end after six months; it's simply in our interest to do so.

In terms of the consultation, there is constant communication and consultation with National Defence and all the other government agencies. Not every bit of information is shared with each other. It's on the basis of what our respective mandates are. Ultimately it's for the ministers and cabinet and the Prime Minister to decide on strategic direction. It's really officials who are providing the advice that would support that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's helpful.

Were you consulted on whether or not to go into Syria? Is that something where there were discussions between department officials as well as military officials? I'm speaking about the military option.

• (1155)

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: I don't know that I want to speak for the entire Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. As you can see here, there are many different players. I would just like to keep it to the fact that there is constant consultation, but I'm not going to address every single decision—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Well, no, I'm just saying that because we were guided...or the government has the motion from Parliament, and one of the options there was the Syrian option. I'm just trying to get an understanding of how things are working on this mission and if there were any consultations with the department. Obviously there's a diplomatic issue here. There's a foreign affairs issue as well as a military one. I note that the door had been opened, and it's since been closed by your minister, which I was happy to see. We were hoping that would be the case.

I'm just trying to understand how this is working and if the department was consulted on Syria at all.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: There's a high degree of consultation and coordination right across the government. But as I've said, ultimately it's for ministers and the Prime Minister to set the strategic direction.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Goldring will finish off the second round.

You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The previous prime minister of Iraq has been accused of fuelling the sectarian tensions and is alleged to have marginalized Iraq's Sunni minority. This seems to have caused all kinds of difficulties and problems straight through from the governance of the country to the military itself, to the security, to having a combined effort of forces being brought to bear.

With the new unity government that was sworn in as of September last year, have there been some dramatic improvements? Is that enough time to see it materialize into any real leadership improvements and cohesion? If so, has it gotten down to the most elemental of security and military forces, to bring back the kind of Iraqi cohesion and the way they were approaching things in the past?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: I would like to come back to the point of how we got here. You mentioned the point in the speech where we talked about how the previous government under Prime Minister al-Maliki had marginalized and in fact created the conditions for a good percentage of the population to be feeling totally disenfranchised.

I was ambassador to Iraq during this period, under the al-Maliki regime, and I served in a previous assignment in Syria. What I can tell you is that both of these societies are fundamentally moderate. They're very progressive. They're incredibly diverse. ISIL is not an entity that would naturally, under normal circumstances, enjoy the support of the population.

The new government in Iraq is truly an inclusive one, with representatives, cabinet ministers, from all the major parties—Sunni, Shia, Kurd. There's even a Christian minister. It has articulated a platform that is inclusive, which is entirely what the international community has been calling on them to do. But it is early days to point to whether or not they have succeeded. They've had some promising starts, but there's still a long way to go in terms of rolling out that platform in a meaningful way that has an impact—for example, ensuring that the armed forces are not only representative of the population but also effective. We've seen that they have a lot of needs before they can truly play that role.

The government itself has outlined a progressive agenda in terms of eliminating corruption. They have a promising start, but there's still a good deal of work to be done before we can claim victory on that front.

Mr. Peter Goldring: In terms of the various countries that are involved in assisting, the 25 countries you identified, is Turkey an active participant in helping at this stage?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: I don't want to characterize Turkey's role; I think it's for them to do so. They are an important player in the Middle East. They're certainly part of a broader effort to bring a successful resolution to this problem.

In terms of characterizing how big or small a role they're playing in the coalition, that's a separate question.

• (1200)

Mr. Peter Goldring: Here in Canada we tend to think of the separation of church and state, yet in many of the countries in the Middle East there's very little separation. I think that would be fair to say. What other countries...? Predominantly in the 25 countries, is Russia sharing a role in this too, out of concern for what is happening?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: Again, I don't want to speak for the Russian government.

As you and everyone know, Russia has played a significant and visible role in terms of supporting the government of President Assad in Syria, and that's obviously not an approach that we would share. We have been encouraging others to see that President Assad has lost his legitimacy in Syria, among his people, because of the brutality of his regime. We've been encouraging others to understand that we need a change there.

In Iraq, I think even the Russians would admit that the new government is something worth supporting. It's a new government that wants to govern for all Iraqis, and we and almost everyone else want to encourage that.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We're going to do a third round, starting with Mr. Anderson.

Sir, you have five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to follow up on what Mr. Dewar brought up about the goal or the interest being degrading ISIL. I'm just wondering if you can tell us a little bit about the impact of ISIL in the area. They had made some threats in Egypt and towards Jordan and had put some

pressure on Lebanon. I'm wondering if you can give us an update on whether their influence is growing or diminishing. What threat do they or their groups hold over those nations right now?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: We believe they pose a threat not only in Iraq and Syria but also to the whole region. Indeed globally, they're a threat to all of us.

I remind the committee that ISIL is an extremist Sunni group whose goal is the establishment of a single transnational Islamic state based on sharia law. They want to replicate the caliphate of more than a thousand years ago, which spanned every country in the Middle East, from Spain right through to the subcontinent. That is their stated goal.

They have had, more or less, some success in other countries of the region. There is adherence here, there, and everywhere, including in Canada, as we know. But I believe that militarily they've been stalled. The military intervention has worked in the sense of stalling their forward assault and in some cases has rolled them back. Again, on that front, on Thursday I'd like to let the ministers speak to just how much success has been achieved against ISIL.

Mr. David Anderson: Can we switch over to Kurdistan then? We've had some testimony about the area. We had, actually, some conflicting testimony from the Yazidi community. We had some groups that seemed to be very happy with the reception they received. We had one group that was not as happy with the reception they got as they moved into that area. Christian communities seemed to be fairly happy to be able to find safe sanctuary there.

I'm wondering if you could give us an update on the on-the-ground reality in the Kurdish region as winter is progressing.

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: Kurdistan for many years, including during the time I served there, between 2010 and 2013, was a place of refuge for thousands and thousands of Iraqis who felt they needed a haven. That's only been augmented by the recent crisis.

I don't know that I would characterize one community as being happier than another. My experience has been that the KRG, the Kurdistan Regional Government, has been most welcoming and most tolerant of all communities and has offered support above and beyond what even they were capable of providing. That is why people have chosen to flee there. They know it is a place where the threat is reduced.

My colleague will speak to the ways we have been assisting these communities.

Leslie.

• (1205)

Ms. Leslie Norton: Currently 40% of the internally displaced in Iraq are residing in the KRG region. That's actually down from 47% later last year. However, it's still a remarkable number of people who are either residing with host communities or living in churches, mosques, and unfinished buildings. About 33% are living in that type of context.

In terms of our assistance, as I said, humanitarian assistance is being provided through partners in this region. When I visited Dohuk, we went right up to the Turkish border. At that time we saw Syrian refugees coming across. They had made their way into Turkey. They had been bused to this part of Turkey, and then they were being brought into the Kurdistan area.

Apart from the internally displaced people—

Mr. David Anderson: Was the Turkish government facilitating that?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Yes, they were facilitating that.

Apart from the 40% of the internally displaced people who are residing in this region, there are also over 200,000 refugees from Syria, and the government continues to be very generous and open to receiving these people who require assistance.

I had also met with the governors in both Erbil and in Dohuk, and they continue to maintain an openness and a generosity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move over to Mr. Saganash for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too would like to greet the witnesses who are here today and thank them. I will use my time to ask two short questions.

First, Mr. Gwozdecky talked about our long-term engagement with Iraq because it is in our interests. I think that is what he said. The official opposition called for an increase in the assistance provided to minorities, refugees and victims of sexual violence in the region.

Every day on television, we see the damage that bombings have caused to infrastructure, bridges, hospitals, schools, and so on. Based on what you know about the situation on the ground, has an assessment been done of the long-term assistance needed in the region to meet the basic needs for housing, food, health and education? Do you have an idea of the type of assistance that the region will need in the medium and long term? I am particularly concerned about that issue.

[English]

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: Thank you very much for that question.

In the long term, I don't believe that Iraq will be in need of external assistance, because it is a wealthy country. Under normal circumstances, it's a country that can provide for all its own needs. Under the current circumstances, it does require help from its friends and foreign partners. That's what we're engaged in right now.

Do you have anything further to add, Leslie?

• (1210)

[Translation]

Ms. Leslie Norton: In a crisis, we provide humanitarian assistance first. When the conflict ends, we focus on rebuilding and long-term development. We are not there yet, but when the time

comes, we will enter discussions with the World Bank and the UNDP. They play a role in development.

We are working on scenarios, but everyone recognizes that now is not the time to start rebuilding in the parts of Iraq where infrastructure is lacking.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I would like to ask Mr. Bennett a question.

I believe that, in the United Nations Security Council resolutions 2170 and 2178, the UN calls on member states to work with educational, cultural and religious institutions to counter incitement to terrorism.

Earlier, you briefly talked about your work and efforts both over there and here. You also talked about a round table held in Toronto. What are we doing for the at-risk groups in Iraq and Syria? What work is being done on the ground? Are efforts being made in the region?

Those questions are for Mr. Bennett.

[English]

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: In terms of on-the-ground types of activities, as I mentioned previously, we're trying to work as much as we can with countries in the region that have an openness towards advancing religious freedom. Again I would reference the Jordanians, in particular Prince Ghazi who has been very active in advancing reform efforts within Islam.

One of the great activities that the Jordanians have had under way for some time now is the Amman Message, which seeks to work within Sunni Islam to have a common approach that is open to pluralism and open to religious freedom in terms of how sharia and Islamic interpretation is undertaken. We will be engaging with the Jordanians on that particular initiative.

We have, as was previously announced, a new project in Iraq with Minority Rights Group International, which will seek to work with different communities to build greater interconfessional dialogue, because one of the problems that we see with religious persecution is often a breakdown in that dialogue. Our office always tries to look at what some of the foundational issues are that need to be addressed, so as to avert or limit the degree of religious persecution. That means encouraging that type of dialogue and supporting education that does not demonize the other but rather seeks to advance a pluralist understanding.

As Mr. Gwozdecky mentioned, both Iraq and Syria are very diverse, multi-faith societies. When we're advancing religious freedom from the Canadian perspective we do so from our pluralist perspective. These are countries that are perfectly well suited to that type of engagement. But right now there are obviously these significant crises under way that we're trying to grapple with, together with our allies in the region.

We are currently also engaging a number of different faith communities and NGOs that have the capacity to partner with us in those countries in the region, such as Lebanon and Jordan and also in Israel and other parts of the region, to try to create the environment whereby we can promote things such as dialogue, broader education, and advanced pluralism, often in very small types of projects that can have a broader impact.

We continue to engage with different religious communities, including those that have the capacity to do that sort of work such as the Mennonite Central Committee, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. We continue to reach out to them for new approaches.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going to finish off the third round with Ms. Brown for five minutes.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much, Chair.

Ambassador Bennett, I am just going to follow up on that question with a couple of comments and then your thoughts.

Back in December we had Thomas Farr who is the director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University here as a witness. You would be very happy to hear that he said in his comments that our policy in Canada on religious freedom is so important and he said that we should resource the Office of Religious Freedom and give the ambassador everything he needs to develop policy. I'm sure you are happy to hear that.

He commented about the need to train diplomats and that we should be training all of our diplomatic service in issues of religious freedom. He said that diplomacy, if successful, would ensure peace. Now, on the other hand, in that same meeting we also had Jonathan Halevi and he was from the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He made the comment that the objective of ISIS is to conquer Rome and the Vatican as the centre of Christianity.

So if we want to train our diplomats the way Mr. Farr said we should—he talked about it being the linchpin—how do you see that happening? What training should we be giving? How can your office assist? Is there more Canada can do?

•(1215)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I always knew that Tom Farr was a very wise man, so this confirms that.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: The importance of training diplomats has been recognized by a number of countries including Canada in terms of the area of religious freedom. This comes back to something that not only our offices but also many of my colleagues have observed when they've been engaged in postings overseas or even through their work here in Ottawa. When they look out into these countries, the vast majority of countries in the world have a very strong religious sense. Religion and religious faith dominate or have a place not only within a perceived cultural dialogue but also within a socio-economic political dialogue, whereby religion and religious faith have a very prominent role within society.

We live in fairly secularized societies. There's been a recognition, I think, by my colleagues and by me, and also by colleagues in other countries in the west that if we don't understand this reality, these countries where religion plays a dominant role—a lot of the time for good but also sometimes for ill—then we risk developing a very serious diplomatic blind spot. So, from the beginning of the office's existence, we have engaged in developing training modules for our diplomats.

At our first full-day training session, which was last year, we sought to highlight the importance of advancing religious freedom within the context of international human rights, and also in the Canadian context of advancing pluralism and supporting democracy and democratic development in the world. We hope to expand that training to a two-day program this year, since it was oversubscribed to last year in Foreign Affairs, to give diplomats a chance to engage in various case studies. This year I think one of them will be on the situation in Iraq and Syria, and how you confront very entrenched conflicts that are often not simply a product of the current environment but that also have some historical antecedents that are important for us to understand.

Each year I also speak to outgoing heads of missions. We discuss religious freedom and how to approach it when we engage in countries where there are serious violations of religious freedom. Our allies, including the Americans, the British, and those in a number of other countries, now have in place training programs that recognize the need to equip diplomats even with the language to talk about religion, and not to be afraid about engaging religion, even though we're often conditioned in our own sort of secular society to not talk about it. In these countries we need to have that understanding, so we certainly see training and enabling our diplomats to engage in this way as being very crucial.

The Chair: That completes the three rounds.

We have another 10 minutes or so. Does everyone want one more round, then? Does that make some sense?

Why don't I start with Mr. Dewar for about four minutes or so, and I'll finish with Mr. Scarpaleggia? If we have shorter questions, we can finish.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Maybe I'll just continue questioning Mr. Bennett.

I was happy to hear that a lot of the aid that was pledged has been delivered, but our concern is the priorities that we make in terms of the military versus the humanitarian side. I'm just wondering if you can help us here, because a lot of resources are needed immediately on the ground, and getting rapid action to get quick results is important. I'm wondering what point your budget is at.

The last time we had a conversation with you, a significant amount of your budget wasn't allocated. I would argue that there's a need on the ground not to do workshops per se—I have nothing against those—but to protect minorities, the Yazidis, Mandaeans, and others. Where are you within your budget? In 2013-14, I think you had 69% that wasn't allocated. Are you getting the money out the door and investing on the ground, or is that still an issue for you?

•(1220)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Just to clarify, those were the 2013-14 numbers.

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's correct. Sorry, I misspoke. That was 2013-14. I mean more currently.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Right. When the office came into existence in February 2013, as I reported to this committee before, we had to take some time to get the programming operations up and running. We had to develop the business process and a number of things, so we did lapse a good portion of our money for that fiscal year. This year we're pretty much on track to spend most of our allocated \$4.25-million religious freedom fund. Obviously, we're finalizing a few projects towards the end of the year, so we certainly hope to have most of that money allocated.

Some of it is in multi-year projects, so some of that money will certainly be spent this year, but then there will also be some for subsequent years. The minority rights group project in Iraq is included in that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Where are they out of, by the way? I just want to clarify where they are centred.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I'd have to get back to you on that. I can't remember off the top of my head.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Okay. I note that we used to have a very robust institution, Rights and Democracy, who used to do that work from here. I'm just curious, because you mentioned the Tony Blair foundation and I'm not as *au courant* on what they're doing; I would like to know what this group is doing.

But perhaps you could pass that on to us, because I think I've run out of time.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Yes, we'd certainly be happy to do that. I'd be happy to talk to you.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: I'll let Mr. Schellenberger go ahead.

The Chair: Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you very much to our witnesses.

There have been reports of religious taxes being put in place in some ISIL-controlled areas. Can you elaborate on these taxes?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Certainly. These reports were coming out very early on as ISIL advanced through Iraq and into Syria. It was a tax that would be imposed on Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities. There were basically three options for people in minority groups, for Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans, and so forth: convert to Islam, pay a tax, or die. It was a very blunt option for these communities. As we know, many people paid with their lives through very horrific torture and horrific deaths at the hands of ISIL. Others fled. The Yazidis, as we know, fled up into the Sinjar Mountains. Christians fled up into the KRG region. They fled to join already existing diaspora communities in countries such as Syria initially, but then certainly into Lebanon and Jordan.

It comes down to this question: will I remain loyal to my faith? Certainly in the international understanding of religious freedom there's the freedom, obviously, to practise your faith and the freedom to be free from coercion to change your faith. Conversion has to be a free act of free will.

So yes, there was a tax that ISIL was imposing on those members of religious minority communities who had refused to convert, but often it was a question of dying rather than paying a tax.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: What effect is this religious persecution having on countries that neighbour ISIL-controlled territories?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Perhaps you could elaborate a little bit.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: When the refugees leave and go to various other countries, whether it be Turkey or Lebanon or wherever, is it impacting the religious freedom in those areas?

•(1225)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: The religious freedom picture in the region is quite varied. Certainly countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, as I've indicated, have a very high degree of religious freedom, a very high degree of tolerance. These countries have welcomed large numbers of members of religious minority communities.

Again, we would encourage you to consult our colleagues at CIC on this, but certainly from the reports I have through the Office of Religious Freedom, these minority communities have been welcomed and have been accommodated for in those countries of proximate migration. Now, there is a great need; it's obviously putting a strain on the resources of both Jordan and Lebanon. That's why some of the programming that we hope to do through the office will be through such partners as the Mennonite Central Committee, as I mentioned, or the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and various groups that we've been consulting on an ongoing basis. Nothing has been finalized, but we continue to consult. We hope to provide some assistance with these displaced minority communities to ensure that they can continue to maintain their religious practices and to live out in these countries of migration.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I've also been told that various Christians have gone to Iran. I don't know how welcome they are in Iran, but apparently they're not persecuted in Iran; it's only those who convert in Iran. Is that correct?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I could certainly look into that issue for you. I'm not aware of significant numbers, or even smaller numbers, of Christians fleeing into Iran to escape the situation with ISIL in Iraq. But certainly Iran has one of the worst records in the world in terms of religious persecution, and certainly Christians suffer greatly, along with Baha'is and Zoroastrians and Shia Muslims who don't accept the Iranian regime's ideology.

I'm not aware of any significant groups, but I'm happy to look into that for the committee and for you, Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schellenberger.

We're going to finish up with Mr. Scarpaleggia, please.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Very briefly, we hear a lot about the need for Canada and other countries to help strengthen or shore up Iraq's political institutions. I'm just wondering if you could shed a bit of light on how we can contribute to that process.

I believe that way back Bob Rae advised Iraq on its new constitution. I could be wrong, but I believe the constitution is still in place and operational. What other measures or steps could Canada take to strengthen Iraq's political institutions?

Mr. Mark Gwozdecky: I can say that Canada and Canadians have been involved in that regard for some time. The one action that I'm most aware of comes through an Ottawa-based group called the Institute on Governance, which had for many years, even ongoing now, a contract with the UNDP to support the Iraqi government's efforts to understand and to implement federalism along the lines that we do in Canada. Under that program, the institute brought several study groups of senior Iraqi officials to Canada to learn about our model of federalism. There's tremendous interest in it.

I used to often joke to people. I'd say, "Answer this question: a country of about 30 million, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, with a very strong energy-based economy, and a region or more that are aspiring to autonomy, which country would you say that is?" It applies to both Canada and Iraq. They feel like they have a lot to learn from us, and they have indeed, under this program, benefited greatly.

There are other interventions being considered, but that's the one that I think would be the flagship at the moment.

The Chair: Thanks to our witnesses from the Department of Foreign Affairs. Thank you very much for your time this morning.

I'm going to suspend the meeting so that we can go in camera and clear the room. Once again, thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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