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Chairs

**Mr. Dean Allison
The Honourable Peter Kent**

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1100)

[English]

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC)): Good morning, colleagues.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and motions adopted by the standing committees on national defence and foreign affairs earlier this week, we are assembled here for a briefing on Canada's response to ISIL.

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): I just want to introduce our witnesses here today. We have the Honourable John Baird, who is the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Honourable Rob Nicholson, the Minister of National Defence. Accompanying them today we have Daniel Jean, who is the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs, and General Thomas Lawson, who's the Chief of the Defence Staff.

Welcome, gentlemen.

I believe we've decided how the order of rotations are going to go. We're going to start with the list.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): We will begin with opening statements by our ministers.

Mr. Nicholson, you have 10 minutes.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence): Thank you very much, Chair, and honourable members.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee today to provide you with an update on Operation Impact.

[English]

You are already aware of the magnitude of the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL. As I have emphasized in my first briefing to the committee, this terrorist group stands against everything we, as a country, believe in. As the Prime Minister has stated, “[T]hey dream of destroying the kind of open, diverse, and free society that [Canadians] have chosen.”

ISIL is not only a threat to the region, it also poses a serious danger to Canada and the world. ISIL has called on its sympathizers around the globe to target those who do not agree with its ideology, using any means, no matter how barbaric. We've seen in recent weeks just how much damage appeals like these can cause, as terrorist attacks have rocked Paris and dozens have been arrested in France, Belgium, and Germany in connection with suspected terrorist plots.

Furthermore, ISIL has specifically threatened Canada and Canadians, urging its supporters to harm disbelieving Canadians in any manner. Canadians are justifiably worried about this situation, and they expect their government to take strong action. That is why our government committed the Canadian Armed Forces to the broad international coalition against ISIL.

As you know, our military efforts began last August when our C-17 Globemaster and Hercules aircraft delivered more than 1.6 million pounds of critical military supplies donated by other countries to the Iraqi security forces. In September we deployed several dozen military advisers in an advise and assist role. In October we committed to a six-month mission in which the Canadian Armed Forces are supporting and contributing to the coalition's air campaign against ISIL in Iraq.

By the end of October, Canada's air assets—our six CF-18 Hornet fighters, our two Aurora surveillance aircraft, and our Polaris refueller—had arrived in theatre, and approximately 600 Canadian Armed Forces members are now deployed as part of Operation Impact, supporting and conducting air operations and providing tactical and strategic advice.

The international coalition's ultimate goal is to enable the Iraqi security forces to defeat ISIL on the ground. The coalition is therefore taking a staged approach. First, it responded to Iraq's call for aid. Next, it took action to blunt ISIL's advance. Now it is looking to degrade and disrupt ISIL's capabilities.

I'm very pleased to report that through our combined efforts we have met success in achieving those goals to date. ISIL's advance has been halted and contained. Despite a recent failed attempt to go on the offensive, it is now operating in a largely defensive mode. Its freedom of movement and ability to communicate have been reduced. Iraqi security forces, with coalition air support, have retaken important ground in western, northern, and central Iraq, as well as near Baghdad.

•(1105)

[Translation]

Canada's military contributions are playing an important role in the success of the coalition's efforts.

[English]

Our CF-18 jet crews have carried out more than 200 sorties and more than 25 strikes against ISIL targets, including heavy weapons and equipment, improvised explosive device production facilities, bunkers, vehicles, and fighting positions. By damaging or destroying assets like these, the Canadian Armed Forces are not only degrading ISIL's combat capabilities and preventing ISIL fighters from establishing safe havens, they are also enabling Iraqi security forces to operate more freely and safely. Furthermore, our Hornets were used to ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid by providing top cover for coalition transport planes as they carried out air drops to Iraqi civilians.

Another critical component of Canada's air task force is our modernized Aurora surveillance aircraft. These aircraft have flown more than 60 missions to date, collecting critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data, which is used to identify and strike targets as well as to assess battle damage.

Canada's Polaris refueller also plays a very important role. By delivering fuel to coalition fighter aircraft in the air, it allows these aircraft to lengthen their sorties and fly further into the battle space. Our Polaris have delivered more than 3.5 million pounds of fuel, helping the Middle East stabilization force to maintain pressure on ISIL throughout Iraq.

[Translation]

Taken together, Canada's air contributions are making a big difference.

[English]

We also have approximately 69 special forces personnel in an advise and assist role, who are providing vital training and assistance to Iraqi security forces. The peshmerga need training in things such as equipment use, maintenance and repair; ground navigation; battlefield skills; communications; command and control; and combat medical care. They also need direct advice and assistance with strategic and tactical planning, particularly when it comes to integrating the air support provided by the international coalition.

Let me be clear, our special forces personnel are not at any point seeking to directly engage the enemy, although if they should come under fire, our men and women in uniform, of course, maintain the right to self-defence, just as they do on any mission.

We have been clear from the start that while this mission is low risk, it is not without risk. If ISIL terrorists fire at the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Armed Forces are going to fire back. Again, all of their activities are consistent with the advise and assist mandate given to them by the Canadian government.

Before I conclude, it's also important to acknowledge the enormous efforts of our support staff both in the Middle East and here at home. They maintain a 10,000-kilometre air bridge to Canada, conducting regular sustainment flights to supply our Joint Task Force-Iraq with spare parts, equipment and ammunition, as well as providing medical, personnel, and planning and logistics support.

Due in large part to their tireless efforts, Canada's task force became fully operational within three weeks of the government's decision to deploy, a truly remarkable achievement.

Colleagues, I am very glad to have been able to share with you today the progress made through Operation Impact to date. I think Canadians would agree that under no circumstances should their government ever stand on the sidelines while our allies act to deny terrorists a safe haven, an international base from which they would plot violence against us. This is why our government has taken action.

Again, the results have been crucial. ISIL has been pushed back and is showing signs that it is overextended. Iraqi security forces are growing in strength and capacity. Coalition efforts to assist them are helping to provide the space, skills, and confidence that they will ultimately need to defeat the enemy on the ground.

The Canadian Armed Forces have proven that they are trained, ready, and able to contribute to the Middle East stabilization force in a meaningful way. Our collective successes to date demonstrate that it is possible for the Iraqi security forces, with international support, to achieve success on the ground if we maintain pressure and momentum.

I would like to commend our men and women in uniform for their commitment and bravery as they carry out this important mission, as well as our military families for their unwavering care and support.

● (1110)

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much, Mr. Nicholson.

We will now give the floor to Mr. Baird.

The Honourable John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs): Thank you very much.

Good morning. I'm very glad to have the opportunity to update this committee and to discuss the way forward on one of the most important issues of our time.

This time last year, I was at the Geneva II conference aimed at bringing an end to the bloody civil war in Syria. During that summit, which was unfortunately unsuccessful, I worried about the potential for ISIL, or Daesh, to become a threat to the wider region. Sadly, since the summer, we've all watched with horror as this cancer has spread across the border and embedded itself in a broad swath of Iraqi territory.

At the same time, we've also seen the cancer of Islamist terrorism manifest in many other corners of the world—places like France, Belgium, Australia, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines—ongoing terrorist attacks in Israel, and of course closer to home in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu. We even saw it on the other side of that door in this “infidel Parliament”, as the ISIL spokesman described it this week.

This threat isn't going away on its own. That's why Canada has taken decisive action to help curtail ISIL's expansionist agenda and to protect and assist its victims. Since our last committee meeting, I've spent a lot of time engaging regional partners, such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt, and of course our partners in NATO. Our actions and those of our allies are focused on five main lines of effort that are interrelated and tremendously important: military operations, foreign fighters, terrorist financing, humanitarian aid, and countering narratives. These areas of focus were agreed on at the last NATO summit. I'll run through them quickly so we can get to questions.

First is military operations. I believe my cabinet colleague Mr. Nicholson has covered this—ably covered it.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Thank you.

Hon. John Baird: I would just add that these efforts are recognized by our allies. The Kurdish government expressed this again this week, and Iraq's vice-president did so last week. The same goes for our regional partners, and of course our traditional allies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. I wanted to pass that on to the members of the committee.

Second, we are working with partners to impede the flow of foreign fighters. This is an incredibly important component. These fighters pose a risk to the countries they travel to as well as to their countries of origin. We're funding regional efforts to limit the movement of foreign fighters into both Iraq and Syria. On the domestic front, we have also strengthened our laws to limit the ability of radicalized Canadians to become part of the problem.

Third, Canada is actively contributing to international efforts to disrupt and prevent ISIL financing. Domestically, ISIL has been listed as a terrorist organization under Canada's Criminal Code.

Fourth, we are working with partners to address the humanitarian needs in the region. Over the past year, Canada has contributed over \$80 million in response to the Iraq crisis. That assistance is helping to provide food for 1.5 million people, shelter and essential household items for 1.26 million people, and 500,000 displaced children will have access to education. Many Canadians were horrified by the level of ISIL's depraved acts of sexual violence. We're leading efforts to deal with that by contributing over \$13 million to humanitarian organizations on the ground. This funding will help protect the women and girls most at threat, provide support and assistance to victims, and investigate these barbaric crimes so that the perpetrators are held accountable.

Finally, there's a fifth area where coalition members, including Canada, need to increase their involvement. This is countering and undermining ISIL's poisonous narratives. This terrorist organization systematically distorts Islamic values, yet it presents itself as the defender of true Islam. We must find ways of countering ISIL's

message and exposing its true nature. Again, we are doing this at home and we are working with regional partners abroad, such as the Hedayah centre in the United Arab Emirates, to counter extremism.

There are grounds for hope in Iraq. With the support of the coalition air strikes, Iraqi security forces have started reversing some of ISIL's territorial gains. On the Syrian side, it was also encouraging to see the retaking of Kobani this week. The new Iraqi government is legitimate and more representative, even if more must be done. This is an important one: Iraq must have a true government that is inclusive of all of Iraq, including its Kurdish minority and its Sunni minority.

● (1115)

Much progress has been made on the Kurdish side, some progress has been made on the Sunni side, and we will continue to engage with our friends and allies, the Iraqi government, in this regard.

It has taken steps to address the country's security challenges and to curtail sectarianism and corruption. These elements are positive, but the Iraqi government must accelerate the implementation of these reforms. A strong, democratic, and inclusive Iraq is absolutely essential to regional stability. Good governance and inclusiveness are also the best protection against terrorism.

In the long term, we are committed to helping Iraqis build the social and economic foundations for recovery and growth. In June, Iraq became one of Canada's development partners. At the same time, Canada will continue to build its diplomatic and commercial relationship. To do this we can build on our excellent reputation in Iraq, especially with our recently opened mission in Baghdad, and our presence in Erbil.

As I conclude, I think it's clear that we're taking a well-rounded approach in our response to this threat, and we can be proud of what Canada is doing. Canada's playing its part in partnership with over 60 nations, indeed taking a genuine leadership role. I'm conscious that there is always more that can be done, especially with a challenge of this scale. We may not be able to do everything, but we should do everything that we're able to do. As I said during the debate about committing to air strikes, when our house is on fire you have to call the firefighters as well as the ambulance.

I believe in a Canada that is strong and compassionate, and in these times we certainly need both qualities.

There are legitimate questions about the nature of our engagement and how we can make it even more effective. We will try to answer those as clearly as we're able. But as we have a constructive dialogue, let's not lose sight of the nature of the threat. After all, the issue is bigger than that, this House is bigger than that, and in my view Canada is bigger than that.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions and comments.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Thank you, Minister Baird and Minister Nicholson.

We will proceed now to the first round of questions. We have seven-minute segments, beginning with Ms. Gallant, please.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Canadian public has been kept up to date on the number of sorties or fighter jets that are flying, and been told about the targets that they're hitting. But what actual examples can you share with us where the coalition is actually making headway?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: You've made a very good point there, Ms. Gallant, about the number of sorties that we have undertaken and the amount of cooperation that we have given to our allies.

I did touch upon the successes that are being made on the ground in terms of the containment of ISIL. They have in many instances gone underground. They have retreated in some areas. Stabilizing what has taken place on the ground and supporting Iraqi forces is an essential part of what has to happen. This war has to be won on the ground, and Iraqi forces need the support that they require in terms of the sorties you mentioned. This is extremely important for them for success on the ground.

You have a map before you that you can see. If you compare that to where we were four or five months ago, you'll see that considerable progress has been made. I can tell you that I've been quite optimistic about this.

I was at a meeting in London last week with a number of our coalition partners. We had the opportunity to have the Prime Minister of Iraq join with us. The feeling I came away with was very good in terms of us being on the right track. We're doing the right thing and we can be very proud of the men and women who are serving us as part of our armed forces.

At the same time, I also came away with a good feeling that the progress is being made on the ground because it has to be made on the ground. When you have a look at the maps, when you see how rampant ISIS was—we were just talking about that—just a number of months ago, the containment of it and the withdrawal of ISIL in that part of the world, I think, gives us all a confident feeling and reinforces that gratefulness we have for the outstanding job that is done by our armed forces and our allies.

• (1120)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Great.

What's remarkable about this particular mission is the low, if any, casualties of civilians during the air strikes. How are the Canadian Armed Forces personnel mitigating the risk of collateral damage?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: These are very precise missions that are undertaken by our armed forces and in particular our CF-18s. They have flown a number of sorties, and not always in each of those do bombs get dropped, because they want to be very careful, they want to be very targeted, and they want to be effective. Taking into consideration and doing everything possible to avert civilian casualties is a priority with our armed forces, and it's so consistent with the way our armed forces always behave when they are in a theatre of operations. I am of course very supportive and proud of that, because I hear from them on a regular basis that they make great efforts to not inflict civilian casualties.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Matthew Fisher had a piece in Postmedia this morning. The byline was "Allow Canadian special forces privacy to do necessary task in Iraq". It highlights some of the work that our coalition partners are indeed doing on the ground.

I found this article interesting in that it confirms that the Canadian Armed Forces are not alone in accomplishing their activities under the advise and assist mandate. Can the minister comment on this article?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: I—

Hon. John Baird: His father was a good man. I think he was an NDP MP.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Rob Nicholson: I don't know about that, and I don't comment on the operations of our allies. My focus of course is on the special forces that Canada has deployed and the approximately 600 members of the Canadian Armed Forces that are in support of our air strikes out of Kuwait. As has been widely reported, those air strikes from Kuwait involve the support of our coalition partners. I indicated in my opening remarks that the refuelling is not just for the Canadian CF-18s, but for our allies as well.

This is a coalition effort, and that was underscored by the meeting that we had in London last week. About 20 of our coalition partners were there and all of them expressed their support and their conviction that this terrorist threat must be met and that we all have a stake in it. The message that came out loud and clear, certainly in that, is that this terrorist group is a threat to that part of the world, but it's a direct threat to Canada as well. So it again reinforces that commitment that we all have to this.

• (1125)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Minister, you made reference to a map, in that we had regained ground that had previously been taken. Is that denoted by the white around the currently occupied area? It says, "Government Controlled Area". Had that previously been under ISIL control?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Yes. These are attempts to ensure or to let people know exactly where the progress is being made or what's happening in that particular area. As you've pointed out, the white area is the area that has now been retaken by the Iraqis and underlines the success they are having on the ground. It's not an easy task, as you know. It's challenging, and there will be setbacks, but overall we can see that the progress has been made. All of us want to work to make sure that progress is continued.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Thank you. That's time, Ms. Gallant.

Mr. Harris, please, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

You won't be surprised that I am concerned about the focus of the mission and the mandate. I'll read from the mandate passed in the House of Commons on October 2, wherein one of the three elements of the actual vote, item (b), says:

note that the Government of Canada will not deploy troops in ground combat operations;

Of course we've all seen references recently to the statements of the Prime Minister on September 30 that the role is to advise and assist but not to accompany the Iraqis into combat.

I guess, General Lawson, that's why you could say with great confidence in October, to national media in answer to a specific question about pinpointing targets, that "our contingent of 69 over there [the ground troops] are entirely employed in training up counterterrorist agents...so they will have nothing to do with that. As far as we know, all coalition troops that are on the ground in Iraq are being used in the same role of advise and assist, but not accompany and not engage in direct combat."

Also it would be assumed, consistent with what *The Wall Street Journal* would have been assured by the Department of National Defence in December, that no troops were targeting for missile strikes or were present on the front lines.

So I think, General, what was told to Canadians by Generals Vance and Rouleau last week, specifically that one of the three main objectives was to assist Iraqi security forces in the defence of Iraqi positions and in the prosecution of offensive operations by enabling air strikes from the ground, was referred to as some sort of evolution subsequent to your statements in October.

My question is where the orders to change that came from and when that decision took place.

General Thomas Lawson (Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you for the question.

Through the chair, first I think we should be very clear about what a combat operation is. It is, defined in military doctrine, a military operation in which the use of force is essential to accomplish a mission. A non-combat operation, which is exactly what we have a mandate for in advise and assist, is one in which the military, and certainly our special operation forces, carry weaponry but it is used only in self defence.

When I made my comments in October, those were based on 15 years as a fighter pilot working with tactical air controllers. The tactical air controllers I worked with had always been on the very front. What I had not anticipated in October was that those tactical air controllers would be able to develop techniques that would allow them, from the relative safety of their advise and assist positions, to be able to help the peshmerga, Iraqi security forces, to bring weaponry of coalition bombers to bear. So in fact I provided them, within the advise and assist mission, the authority to go ahead with that well within the mandate given to us by the government.

• (1130)

Mr. Jack Harris: That does, however, contradict the statements that were made and the assurances that were given by the Department of Defence that they would not be at the front lines. We have them there.

General, the other question I have is on the number of sorties that our CF-18s have been flying in Iraq. The most recent information from the government's website says 262. As Minister Nicholson said this morning, only 25 of them involved air strikes. So we have more than 90% of the sorties performed by the CF-18s not resulting in air strikes.

We also of course have reconnaissance aircrafts, the CP-140 Aurora, doing reconnaissance work.

It strikes me as a layperson that this is not a particularly good use of resources if it's supposed to be an air combat operation. We had said at the beginning that our concern was that there would be a shortage of targets very soon. We were advised of that by military experts, and I think you and others said the same thing after the mission started.

Is spending on this kind of operation a good use of resources when there are so few air strikes involved?

Gen Thomas Lawson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the question we get to is this: what do we use as measures of effectiveness?

In the case where there are very few troops on the ground putting pressure at this point in the campaign on ISIL forces, one of the measures of success is how many targets our aircraft are finding. When that number is low, in fact what that's indicating.... Compared with when we go back to five or six ago when there were masses of armour and vehicles of ISIL roaming at will across Iraq, what we find amongst our aircraft now is that those have all disappeared, and therefore, ISIL finds it very difficult to mass and to bring their forces to bear. So I think one of the measures of effectiveness would say that those aircraft being there, delivering weapons or not, have been very effective.

Mr. Jack Harris: Just to go back to your discussion about what's a combat role and what isn't, we have seen a direct response from the American Department of Defense with U.S. advisers being removed from actual or expected combat situations as part of our advise and assist mission in Iraq. They're designed to ensure they are not inadvertently put into combat situations and the U.S. trainers have not accompanied Kurdish and/or Iraqi troops to the front lines as part of their effort to advise and assist.

I suppose one might say the first time they were engaged in a firefight at the front lines may have been inadvertent, but we have continued to put these Canadian troops in the front lines in the role of tactical air operators, exposing them to danger again and again. That seems to be inconsistent with not only what I believe to be the mandate given here but also with what other coalition partners and the coalition leader of the United States is doing. Why are we outliers on that front?

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): That's all the time we have, but I will ask for a quick response.

Gen Thomas Lawson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What I think we're seeing is an evolution in the mission that has our special operations troops, together with the Iraqi security force that we're helping, the peshmerga, becoming very effective. About 80% of the time we're back in the classrooms with them. The way that evolution we spoke about has happened is that they are now through those basic skills, which the minister outlined that they've been involved in, and are looking at the lay of the land with an idea of putting pressure on ISIL.

We in no way put our special operations troops anywhere near where we believe they will come under fire. That's why, even though they spent what's been referred to as 20% of the time up forward, there have only been three indications of fire that came to bear. So although the risk is low, and we continue to think it's low in that role, it is not zero.

• (1135)

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much.

We're going to turn to Mr. Anderson for seven minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the gentlemen for being with us here today.

Canada has a reputation that is not just for stepping up militarily but also, probably even more so, on the humanitarian front. Mr. Baird, I'd just like to have you comment on Canada's role in providing humanitarian assistance in Iraq. How are we doing? What commitments have we made to this point?

Hon. John Baird: Thank you.

As of today, our total humanitarian assistance to Iraq has amounted to about \$67.4 million. This makes us the fourth-largest contributor of aid to the humanitarian crisis since the beginning of 2014. I can speak to some of those highlights.

Just this month Minister Paradis announced \$40 million, and \$10 million of that went to the World Food Programme to help provide food assistance to about 1.5 million people. I believe we are the second-largest contributor to the World Food Programme. The United Nations World Food Programme does excellent work.

We have given \$9 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to help about 1.3 million displaced people in accessing legal assistance, blankets, warm clothing, heaters, and 50,000 emergency shelters. We have provided \$5 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross for safe water, sanitation, food assistance, financial assistance to some 77,000 people, and supporting three hospitals and nine health centres.

In October Minister Paradis announced \$8 million to UNICEF. This is to support the No Lost Generation initiative in Iraq. This initiative will reach as many as 200,000 at-risk children in Iraq and will focus on education in emergencies, child protection, and social cohesion. In September I announced \$5 million to provide emergency shelter and emergency relief supplies to the people of northern Iraq and \$2 million for urgent health care services to support the victims.

Other humanitarian assistance in 2014 included \$7.4 million in humanitarian assistance to Iraq; \$6.5 million was provided in March in response to the yearly humanitarian appeals, and some \$900,000 to various Canadian NGOs and the Canadian Red Cross through pre-approved rapid response drawdown funds, including the costs of deploying those supplies to Iraq. This is obviously a tremendously important part of the response. There is no doubt though that while the humanitarian assistance we're giving is important, we have seen humanitarian aid workers summarily executed by the terrorists. So I think the biggest humanitarian assistance we can provide is to stop

the expansion of ISIL into new areas where more people would have to flee their barbaric practices and so that far fewer people have to live under their barbaric regime.

Mr. David Anderson: We know the disruption has been massive for a lot of people and in spite of the international efforts the humanitarian situation is still desperate in many areas. At the foreign affairs committee we've heard that people obviously would sooner stay in their homes or be able to return to their homes in peace, but the unfortunate reality is that a lot of people are going to have to be resettled; the United Nations commission has said around 100,000.

Can you comment on Canada's plans to accept Iraqi and Syrian refugees and where we are on that?

Hon. John Baird: I think the Minister of Immigration has spoken to these issues. We have accepted 10%, about 10,000. That is tremendously important. Many people who have been displaced would like to stay in the region. When I visited one refugee camp in northern Iraq along with some of our colleagues, I met a Christian family who literally in less than five minutes had to flee their homes to save their lives. One of their neighbours had ratted them out to the terrorists. They want to stay in the region. They don't want to return to Mosul, but they would be quite happy and prefer to resettle in Erbil. So those will be some of the initiatives that Canada will have to explore as well.

Mr. David Anderson: You mentioned the persecution and displacement of religious minorities. I'd like to have you address that a little because that has probably been one of the most visible consequences of ISIL and their activities in the area. We've established the Office of Religious Freedom to address some of these issues, and I'm just wondering if you could talk about what the Office of Religious Freedom has been doing and what it is committed to in the area, to deal with the present situation but also to deal with that fifth component you talked about—delegitimizing the message that ISIL seems to have been sharing with us.

• (1140)

Hon. John Baird: We've provided to the Office of Religious Freedom some \$800,000 to assist religious minorities. One of the key elements in the values that we promote abroad in the department under this government is religious freedom. That, in many ways, exemplifies the pluralism that we have built in Canada, where people of different faiths can live in peace and harmony and build a strong country together.

This is one of the real breakdowns that we see in Iraq, where you have a central government that has not governed for all Iraqis in the past. They've made significant progress in recent months. A lot more work remains to be done, but I think they're going in the right direction.

The reports of Christians, Yazidis, and Shia being summarily executed in large numbers horrified the world. This is I think one of the important areas where Canada's voice and our action can play a constructive role. That's why we established the Office of Religious Freedom.

I think the same could be said within Syria, where we had real concerns a number of years ago whether a new government represented by the opposition, should Assad fall, would govern for the whole country and govern in a pluralist way. We initially had concerns that they might single out and target religious minorities, you know, and with large parts of the opposition we now have a concern that religious minorities could face slaughter, so this is a tremendously important issue for us. This is why Canada was one of the only major western countries that didn't recognize the Syrian opposition as the sole and legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Obviously, those same concerns unfortunately are manifesting themselves with ISIL in Iraq. Religious freedom is important. Pluralism is, I think, a tremendous gift that Canada can promote around the world.

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much. That's all the time.

We're going to complete the first round with you, Mr. Garneau, sir, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Let me say very clearly that we in the Liberal Party support entirely what our special forces are doing and have been doing for the past five months. They're helping to prepare the peshmerga to defeat ISIS. We're in their debt for that. We supported their involvement, in fact, from the beginning, starting with the 30-day deployment that was announced last September.

But that is not the issue for us today. It's about the government levelling with Canadians about what's actually going on, and this government has failed to do that. Remember that it was this government that decided to make public what the special forces were doing, so it opened that door.

My first question is for the Minister of National Defence.

Minister, the Prime Minister told the House of Commons that our special forces role was quite precise. He said, "It is to advise and to assist. It is not to accompany." This week, you said that you were "not sure we could train troops without accompanying them." So who's right? You or the PM?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: We have been very clear that we are not in a combat mission, and the Prime Minister and all of the government have been very, very clear. We have taken on an advise and assist role, and as you heard from the Chief of the Defence Staff a few minutes ago, that's completely consistent with what we're doing in all our activities.

I'm pleased that you've pointed out as well how transparent and accountable we have been. This is the second appearance for me and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. You've had four technical briefings in the month of January so far, so we believe in making sure Canadians know, because we believe that Canadians support what we are doing in that part of the world and that they're very proud, as we are, of our men and women in uniform and our armed forces.

We are pleased to talk about this, to appear before the committee, because we can't thank our armed forces enough for what they are

doing and what they have done. Yes, they are assisting and they are advising, and you've heard about that, and the air strikes that are coming out of Kuwait are absolutely a vital part of the coalition's efforts to succeed in this area.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Minister, if I may...?

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

It's no surprise that committee members and the public are confused. Words such as "advise", "assist" and "accompany" are being used in a military context.

Could you enlighten the committee by telling us exactly what those words mean?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Well, I can give you some examples. You've heard exactly what we are doing. We have been providing them everything from advice with respect to medical care, training, the operation of weapons, that type of thing, and helping them to get the job done that they have to do. And we have been doing this consistently. They are the ones that are going to be, and are, in the combat mode, so they are the ones that need the assistance and advice. That's exactly what we have been doing.

Mr. Marc Garneau: With all due respect, I don't think you've clarified the situation.

General Lawson, I have a question for you. You talked about combat operations. I'm going to read you something directly from DND's defence terminology bank. It says that a "combat operation" is:

A military operation where the use or threatened use of force, including lethal force, is essential to impose will on an armed opponent or to accomplish a mission. The actual level of force used will be in accordance with specified rules of engagement.

Is this not what we're doing in Iraq?

Gen Thomas Lawson: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, it is not. Under the advise and assist role, we are able to provide the peshmerga the ability to heighten the accuracy of the weapons they are calling in for their combat role—not our combat role, but their combat role.

What we would require to be in combat would be this term "accompany", and you are right to mention that the word "accompany" in everyday language is quite clear; it means "to be with". But in military terms—as you're quoting doctrine—it has a very clear other meaning, and that is that you are now up front with the troops that you have been assigned to, with your weapons being used to compel the enemy. So there is no confusion with our special operators on that "accompany" role.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

Minister Nicholson, when did Canadian forces begin accompanying Iraqi and Kurdish forces on the front line? What was the date that Canadian forces began painting targets?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, this has been an evolutionary process, working with them right from the start. We have been there over the last three to four months working with them, assisting them with their strategic and tactical planning, particularly when it comes to integrating the air support provided by the international coalition.

One of the points that has been made here is that we are making progress from when we first landed there. They have made progress in pushing back ISIL and helping to contain ISIL in Iraq, with the support of our air strikes. But this has been an evolutionary process because this has been a success; they're moving forward. That's why we are very proud and pleased with what they've been doing.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Minister, I was hoping for an initial date.

Last Friday you said that the government didn't put limits on our special forces' ability to advise and assist the Iraqis. Does that mean that cabinet did not approve rules of engagement for their mission, or that the approved rules had no limitations as to what they could engage in?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Garneau, what they can do is everything necessary to protect themselves if they are fired upon. Their assist and advise mission is very clear.

With respect to the fact that there were a number of occasions when they were fired on, they have the complete right, as Canadians would expect, to fire back in self-defence. We have been very clear on that. This is not a combat mission, but if you fire on Canadian forces, whether it's here, in Iraq or indeed anywhere around the world, you can expect Canadian forces to fire back. That's completely consistent with the rules of engagement and international warfare and common sense. We are not going to be there and not take every effort to protect ourselves, which is exactly what they have done.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Well, I don't think anybody would disagree with somebody defending themselves.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): That's your time, Mr. Garneau.

Thank you, Minister.

We'll move now to the second round of questioning, five-minute segments, beginning with Mr. Norlock.

• (1150)

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to start my questioning with Mr. Baird, and there's a reason for this.

But before I do, I find this disheartening, having worn a uniform for 30 years. Here we have a small contingent of Canadian soldiers whom we've asked to assist in Iraq, the people fighting for the freedom of Iraqis, the people who are fighting to be able to protect Canadians. Ultimately that's why we're there. That's going to be the direction. Just as we're becoming successful, Her Majesty's third party and loyal opposition seem to want to throw a damper on things when we're beginning to see some success. I just find that and I believe most Canadians find that very strange, when we should be

there supporting our men and women when they're doing what we asked. I just don't think that we....

The reason my question is going to be to Minister Baird is that his constituency is in the city of Ottawa. In October the city of Ottawa saw some very terrible things happen. Two people in this country, whose only sin was to wear the uniform of a Canadian soldier, were killed. These very halls here were invaded by somebody who was infected by the warped Islamic belief of a very few. We know in this country that many people like this, some of these extremists, are being funded by people like ISIL. The reason we are there is to protect our own citizens here, which is the most important thing a member of Parliament has to do, and that's the health and safety of our citizens.

I wonder, Minister Baird, if you can talk about that, how it affects the average Canadian, why they appreciate what their government and more especially the sacrifice of our men and women—very few of them—are doing in Iraq right now, and why they need our unequivocal support.

• (1200)

Hon. John Baird: I often speak of the threat we face and the threat the civilized world faces from terrorism. I look at the experience of my grandfather who left Canada in 1943. He was in the war for two years and then stayed in the Canadian Forces for 25 years after that. The great struggles of his generation were fascism and then communism.

In the 21st century the great struggle of our generation is terrorism, and this most recent example with ISIL probably represents the most barbaric, evil form of it we have seen. This requires us to be up to the challenge.

I believe one of the most important responsibilities a Parliament has is to keep Canadians safe. That's why we're in Kuwait on a combat mission with the air force. We're advising and assisting with the 69 men and women providing help there. We're working on the financing with Bahrain. We're working on a counternarrative, and we're working on humanitarian aid because Canadians expect their government to do its share of the heavy lifting. But we're not simply there to hand out warm blankets, when we're facing this great struggle. I think Canadians can be tremendously proud of the mission our men and women in uniform are taking on, on behalf of all Canadians.

But unfortunately, I don't think it will end in Iraq. We saw, whether it was the Air India bombing or the terrorist incident we had just outside these halls that we need to be strong and to have 21st century tools to take this fight to the people who are fundamentally at war with modernity and our way of life. I can tell you when I'm at international summits and meetings people look at Canada as a country that won't get up from the table when the cheque is presented. We're up to the challenge and we do our share of the heavy lifting. Canadians can be very proud of that.

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you very much, Mr. Norlock. That's all the time.

We're going to move over to Mr. Dewar, sir, for five minutes.

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

On this side, as the official opposition, let's start with a couple of things. This isn't about who can say they support the troops more than any other. Mr. Baird, you wanted to have a different tone. I'll go down that path. This isn't about who can have the highest rhetoric and ballyhoo. This about our job as parliamentarians in providing transparency.

Frankly, unlike our friends down the way, the Liberal Party, we wanted to have accountability and transparency at the beginning, for the very reasons that we have concerns right now. We wanted to have a debate and a vote in Parliament on the deployment of our troops. So what did we get, Mr. Chair, from our government at the beginning? I went with Mr. Garneau, with Minister Baird, and did a fact-finder. We didn't hear from one person in the meetings to send in air strikes. They didn't ask us to put in special troops. They asked us to help with the peshmerga, yes, and humanitarian assistance. That's what our policy was. That's what our amendment to the motion was, and our party put an amendment to the motion because we disagreed with the direction.

But we could not get from our government how many troops were going. You remember that, Minister? There are hundreds. We finally got 69 out of you and our Prime Minister, but we couldn't get what they were doing.

Also, I'll have to suggest, with respect, that we're playing semantics, when the Prime Minister says we're not going to accompany and we're accompanying.

It must confuse the heck out of you, as the Chief of the Defence Staff. My heart goes out to you, because at the end of the day when you have soldiers on the ground in the front lines, whether you call it a combat mission or not, they're in combat. We just heard about that. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's a duck. It is about soldiers in the field. They're in combat.

We're trying to get some honest answers and some transparency. What's the cost of the war? We went down this path in Afghanistan when we sleepwalked into Kandahar without having a defined mission and proper parliamentary oversight. That wasn't your fault; it was the previous government's fault, but let's learn some lessons.

So if we don't have clear answers from you, our Prime Minister, and then our Chief of the Defence Staff, the men and women—I agree with Mr. Norlock—whom we put into harm's way are left to try to figure things out on their own. That is not correct. We need oversight.

To that end I want to ask you, Mr. Nicholson, if you understand why we need to have stronger oversight in the mandate. You need to be clear about the cost of this war, like our allies the U.K. and the U. S. have costed the war. When you don't put parameters on where our soldiers go, they will end up in combat and firefights. That's your job: to make sure it's clear, because right now it's not. Why not provide us with some clarity on the cost of the war and the parameters our soldiers are going to have in theatre?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, there has never been stronger oversight for any mission undertaken by the Canadian government in Canadian history, quite frankly. We have been forthright, transparent, right from the start.

Mr. Paul Dewar: How much is this war costing us? How much?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Just a second, Mr. Chairman. I will complete this.

We put this matter before Parliament—

Mr. Paul Dewar: You don't know.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Mr. Dewar, please.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: The honourable member says he wants stronger oversight. Decisions to deploy Canadian Armed Forces can be made by the executive. They're part of the prerogative of the crown. We, as a government, having taken a decision on this, put this matter before Parliament. This is exactly—

Mr. Paul Dewar: You promised that you would go to Parliament before we sent our men and women into combat. You failed on that.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Mr. Dewar, order. Allow the minister to complete his answer.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes, but he's going to—

Hon. Rob Nicholson: I'm entitled, Mr. Chairman. If he says he wants stronger oversight, I have already pointed out that we have had four technical briefings just in the month of January alone, never mind the ones in 2014.

Mr. Paul Dewar: How much is this war costing? You can't answer that.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Mr. Dewar, please.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: My colleague and I—

Mr. Paul Dewar: What's the point of a briefing if you can't answer a basic question?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, my colleague and I are here before this committee—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Answering nothing.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Mr. Dewar.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Again, all costs with respect to this will be provided in the normal way, through the supplementary estimates.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Oh, great.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: I can assure this member that with the budget we already have passed, our equipment is there, our aircraft is there, our men and women are on the ground with our special forces.

I'm going to tell you, Mr. Chair, we should look at the human cost of not doing anything, which is what the NDP wants us to do. They don't want us to do anything—

Mr. Paul Dewar: What about when they come home?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: —and that is unacceptable to me and to our government and to the people of this country.

Mr. Paul Dewar: What's unacceptable is that when they come home you don't take care of them.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Thank you, Minister. That's your time, Mr. Dewar, please.

Folks, we're going to take a momentary technical time out to correct a glitch in our digital data. As soon as I'm advised that we're back, we'll proceed with this round of questioning.

I would remind members to maintain civility in their questioning of the ministers, and would thank them for allowing the ministers to respond. I think what we've just seen, Mr. Dewar, was a fairly fulsome question on your part.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It was, but it was a direct question without a direct answer.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): We are now back, so we'll proceed with the second round of questioning.

Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for being here.

I don't know what my car is going to cost to run next year until I'm finished, so I would suggest we won't know what the cost of a war is going to be until we're finished.

I want to go back to a couple of comments to follow up. We can split semantic hairs all day long, but Minister Nicholson, when we assign the military a mission—and General Lawson, pipe up if you wish—do we babysit them every day or do we trust their experience, judgment, and professionalism, for which the Canadian military have been known for so long, to get the job done and do it right?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: You made a very good point. Nobody does a better job than the Canadian Armed Forces when they are deployed outside this country. Whether it is this mission, or all the previous engagements that this country has been involved with, we can all be very proud. It's one of the reasons why I am so proud to be Canada's Minister of National Defence, to be associated with our Canadian Armed Forces, and their record of standing up for what's right in this world and coming to the assistance of those whose freedom has been threatened, and to those who are feeling oppression. We have a record that is as good as anybody's in the world. Nobody has a better record than we have of doing that.

So, this is exactly what we are doing. Yes, we have confidence. I have confidence in our men and women who are deployed right now in Kuwait as part of the air strike force, our special forces. I have that confidence, and I believe that I'm with just about all Canadians who say they support and are very proud of the record they have and what they are doing.

If the General has anything to add...

Gen Thomas Lawson: Thank you.

I need to say that the orders I gave to our members in the operation right now were developed based on a very clear understanding through a discussion process with the government on what exactly the government is approving. That was an advise and assist role, which is a non-combat mission.

A combat mission is very different, but as has been pointed out, actions like combat can appear in any mission, very much to the members involved. Our peacekeepers over recent decades came under fire. It would be tough to convince them that they didn't feel as if they were in combat. That notwithstanding, a combat mission is

very different. It would see us directing our fire power against ISIL, which is not what we have the mandate to do.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: So a sniper's individual rounds would not fall under the category of a firefight. Would that be true?

Gen Thomas Lawson: I don't believe we have a doctrinal determination of a firefight. I've just been thinking about your question. I'm not sure of that. It doesn't fall into the definition of a combat mission.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Minister Baird, the kinetic air and ground operation against Daesh is important, as is the humanitarian aid that we're providing right now. Ultimately and hopefully, the fighting will stop and we'll get on to more political and diplomatic solutions.

Can you talk a little about how we're engaged diplomatically in Iraq right now to build that capacity?

Hon. John Baird: Our bilateral relationship with Iraq has been strengthened considerably in the last two years. I visited Baghdad about two years ago. I met with my counterpart, with the Iraqi Prime Minister, and a number of representatives of the government and Parliament. Our ambassador has been there for more than a year now. He has strengthened the relationship with Iraq considerably as the situation has become demonstrably more complex in recent years. We have a physical presence now, which we didn't have in the past, and he obviously makes a lot of visits to Erbil.

We have made it a country of focus for development, which I think is important. I think one of the most important parts of tackling the problem in Iraq is ensuring that the central government in Baghdad is truly representative of the entire population. Inclusiveness is tremendously important. I think one of the real tragedies with ISIL is that there was such a strong degree of dissatisfaction, particularly among the Sunni minority, with the central government in Baghdad, that it found some fertile ground. An inclusive government, a government with an inclusive program is tremendously important.

That's not just the case with the Sunnis but also with the Kurds. Because the Kurds have the KRG, the Kurdish Regional Government, they have an institution with which to have a relationship with the central government in Baghdad. The deputy prime minister and the minister of finance are both Kurds. So good progress has been made there. I think they've begun to make good progress with respect to the Sunni minority. This is absolutely essential, and we regularly engage with senior officials in the Iraqi government to work collectively with the United States, with European countries, and with our Arab allies in this effort, particularly in the Sunni Arab world, to press this. It is tremendously important. I think the new government in Iraq has welcomed Canada's active role and engagement.

• (1205)

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you, Minister. We're going to have to cut you off there. We're out of time.

Thank you, Mr. Hawn.

We move back over to Madam Laverdière for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Nicholson, you are talking about our evolving role on the ground. That evolution does not seem to be forced by the situation in the field. This shift in our involvement is very worrisome.

We are now accompanying Iraqi forces, although the Prime Minister clearly stated, on September 30, 2014, that accompanying the Iraqi forces on the ground was out of the question. We are suddenly learning that some of our soldiers spend 20% of their time on the front lines. We are also learning that some of our troops are exchanging fire with the enemy, and Canada is the only country to have that kind of involvement. Even the U.S. is systematically avoiding that sort of conflict.

Minister, do you expect our involvement to continue to evolve? Do you have any other surprises in store for us?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Madam, I want to assure you that we want to see an evolution of what's happening there because we want the Iraqi forces to be successful. When we first arrived there, in many instances there was chaos and disorganization within the Iraqi forces. They needed help in so many different areas. I'll just give you one example, the use of military equipment. They needed training in that area and if I'm asked whether they evolved so that now they can use that military equipment, I can tell you, yes, they can. They're in a much better position than they were a few months ago and we have our special forces to thank for that. Do I hope they continue to evolve? Yes, of course, I want them to. I'm hoping you would be onside with that.

We want them to be successful. We want them to continue to take back their own territory, consolidate the areas that they have now and continue to push back ISIL, because this is a measure of the success that we will have in this fight against this terrorist organization. We all have a stake in this, and yes, we do want the Iraqis to continue to improve their ability to protect themselves because ultimately this is a fight that has to be won on the ground by the Iraqis. Yes, I certainly hope they continue to improve.

• (1210)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Minister.

I'm sorry, but I think you misunderstood my question.

My question was about the evolution of the mandate, which goes against the motion adopted by the House of Commons and the Prime Minister's assurances. You have not returned before Parliament to debate that motion again. I am talking about the fact that our troops are on the front lines and exchanging fire, and that Canada is the only country in that situation.

Minister, what worries us is this lack of transparency.

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: I don't comment on what other countries in particular are doing, but we were before Parliament and the main

component of that, quite frankly, were the air strikes that we are involved with. I've indicated to you that we have approximately 600 Canadian members of the armed forces who are in support of those air strikes. I have been very impressed by their effectiveness. Those are the reports. I had the honour of representing my colleague here in London with the foreign affairs ministers of the coalition last week in London. We heard it from everyone, from the Iraqi Prime Minister to others, that the coalition is being effective in containing and pushing back ISIL from where they're at.

We've come before Parliament... I appreciate this didn't happen under some administrations. They didn't put, for instance, the Afghanistan war before Parliament. But we felt very strongly about that. We appreciated getting the endorsement of the House of Commons on that. I believe it's a reflection of how Canadians feel about the importance of this and the threat not just to the region—we talk a lot about the threat right within Iraq—but to Canada and its allies, which I believe helps motivate everyone in this important mission.

Yes, most of the discussion was with respect to the air strikes and that's exactly what we're doing.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Thank you, Madam Laverdière. That's your time.

We will move now to Mr. Williamson, please, for five minutes.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you, Chairs.

Ministers, Monsieur Jean, and General Lawson, thank you for joining us today. It's very good to hear from all of you.

I'll get to a question in a second, but first I want to take issue with some comments that Mr. Garneau made off the top in suggesting that the Liberal Party and his Liberal colleagues support the efforts of our Canadian Armed Forces in this mission. They do not. They voted against the mission when it came before Parliament.

Now, I concede that no member of Parliament wants to see any harm befall our men and women in uniform, but to suggest that you're in support of what's happening in this area is false. We had a vote on this in Parliament. If you wish to recant your vote or use an opposition day to vote on this again, that's your prerogative. But when I go home, I'm responsible for the votes I take in Parliament on any issue across the board, and I'm held accountable by my electorate. Going forward, the same thing is true of your members as well. That vote was taken, and I believe you were on the wrong side of that issue.

Minister Baird or Minister Nicholson, I'd like to ask if you could maybe give us an idea—

Mr. Marc Garneau: Point of order...

An hon. member: I hope it's genuine.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Go ahead, Mr. Garneau.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Yes. I believe that I'm being misquoted in the comments made by Mr. Williamson. I would like—

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): I'm afraid that's debate, Mr. Garneau. We'll proceed. The ministers' time is valuable and I think this committee wants to hear their answers to our questions.

Mr. John Williamson: I'd like to hear your insight on what life is like in some of these cities in the red zone. We've heard, for example, from Minister Baird about how he has spoken to individuals on the ground about what their needs are, and from Minister Nicholson as well about some of the military requirements and the assistance we're providing to Iraqi and other soldiers.

What's life like on the ground for the citizens who are under ISIL in these areas? I've heard talk of a religious tax, for example. Clearly, there are many people who have been displaced. Could you give us a picture of what's happening in this red zone?

• (1215)

Hon. John Baird: There's been a lot of discussion about what you call it. Do you call it ISIS, or do you call it ISIL, or do you call it Daesh? In many respects, it exhibits all the attributes of a cult, even a death cult. Anyone who doesn't subscribe to their view of Islam, to their view of the world, is an enemy. The horrific crimes undertaken against women—women being sold into slavery—and against people, with as many as hundreds at a time being summarily executed.... It must be, for some, a living hell.

In some parts of the country you are seeing ISIL providing government services, perhaps in a way that the central government of Baghdad didn't. That's why it's tremendously important for us to try to liberate the people in these affected areas by cutting off the funding to ISIL and stopping more foreign fighters from making their way there, by the air mission, for example, the training mission, and the advise and assist role to help the Iraqi forces to be able to liberate these people on the ground.

But again, I come back to that inclusiveness. It is tremendously important. We have to try to detach the Sunni minority from anyone who has any sympathies with this death cult. It's tremendously important. The role of the Shia militias is incredibly counter-productive and has done the opposite of winning friends.

I think the most scary part, not just for the people who live in these areas but for the rest of the world, is that ISIL, through using new communications technologies, through the Internet, is seeking to recruit and inspire people around the world, whether they be here in Ottawa, or in the streets of Paris, or in Belgium. That poses a huge risk, frankly, not just to the people of Syria and Iraq or the people of the region but to the civilized world. In many respects, it's a war against modernity, and anyone who doesn't accept their view of the world is living in fear.

Mr. John Williamson: And it's not just Christians who are persecuted. It's Muslims killing Muslims in many cases as well. It is a regime of terror, of evil, attempting to subjugate the whole area and to impose an evil doctrine.

Hon. John Baird: The largest number of victims are fellow Muslims who may not share their view of Islam. That's why it is so tremendously important that there be strong Arab participation in the coalition. I think you have to give President Obama credit for building a very expansive coalition in this regard. It's not easy but he has done it. That's why the support of the Emirates, of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain is tremendously important.

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have five minutes.

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Thank you very much.

I want to thank both of you for appearing before us this morning.

Minister Nicholson, I heard you say earlier that all Canadians support this mission. I suggest you listen and really talk to Canadians. In my riding of Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, and elsewhere in Quebec, many citizens have questions and concerns. I am hearing a different story. The government does not have unilateral support—far from it.

To be honest toward Canadians, you must answer certain questions. I have not yet heard you say anything about the costs incurred so far for this mission. I understand that you cannot tell us how much the mission could cost because, so far, I have not heard you define a single criterion of success, either. I have not heard you clarify when we might withdraw from Iraq. For all I know, we could be there forever.

I don't expect you to inform us of all the costs involved, but I am asking you to be as transparent as the U.S. and Australian governments are toward their citizens. The same goes for the United Kingdom, where people have an idea of costs to date.

My first question is the following. How much money has been spent up to now, since the beginning of the mission? If you are unable to answer this, your department has a serious problem with managing public funds.

What is the government's definition of success for the overall mission in Iraq? General Lawson talked to us about certain elements to illustrate the mission's progress, but I have still not heard a definition of what your government would consider a successful mission in Iraq.

I would like you to elaborate on these two questions, please.

• (1220)

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: First of all, with respect to your opening comments I should be very clear. I believe Canadians overwhelmingly support the fight against ISIL and what we are doing. I appreciate some Canadians do not support this and I know the New Democratic Party does not support this and the Liberals have a different view than we have with respect to this. Everybody's entitled to their own opinion. I'm of the opinion that we are on the right track in opposing ISIL and confronting them, but that being said, we all can have different opinions on that.

The question of costs is certainly a moving target as this mission evolves. We have fixed costs, as you know, with respect to, for instance, our CF-18s, the costs of employing our men and women in uniform, equipment that we've already allocated, and we have a process in Parliament through supplementary estimates so that when costs become finalized or when they become clarified, we present them. I can assure you we will continue to do that.

With respect to the second part of your question, I can tell you we are in an advise and assist role. This is what we are doing. Any mischaracterization of that as some sort of a combat role is not correct, as you heard from the Chief of the Defence Staff. We are there to assist them. You asked whether we'd be there.... You said, "Are we there for eternity?" We have been very clear. As a government we said we have a six-month mission and we have come before Parliament and had Parliament either endorse or not endorse what we are doing. This mission goes till approximately the seventh of April, which is I think the six-month mission date, and we have been very clear up to this point that we'd like to have the support of Parliament, and I'm hoping this time the NDP will have a look at this.

You ask, "How do we measure success?" It's the kinds of things we've been talking about. When you push back ISIL, I believe that's part of the success.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud: Minister, as you refuse to directly answer my questions, I ask that you let me use the short time I have left to discuss another topic, and I hope to obtain much clearer answers.

At the summit that was held in London last week, Secretary of State John Kerry announced a number of training initiatives, some of which are intended for Syrian opposition forces—moderate forces, in this case.

Does the Canadian government plan on participating in the training projects announced last week by Secretary of State Kerry?

[English]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Our focus is on the mission that was approved by the government and confirmed by Parliament. Our focus is on Iraq, specifically with respect to the air fight that we are conducting out of Kuwait and with the mission of our special forces.

[Translation]

Hon. John Baird: I met with John Kerry on Saturday morning, and he did not ask for Canada's support in that area.

[English]

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): That's time. Thank you very much.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank Ministers Nicholson and Baird for being with us. To the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Lawson, it's good seeing you. Please take back to all members of the Canadian Armed Forces how proud we are of them, and that this committee and Parliament support them in every way, shape, and form for the great work they're doing, not just in Iraq but around the world and here at home.

It's interesting listening to the opposition and Liberals saying they support the mission. They don't support the mission. You can't have it both ways. You can't double-speak. You guys voted against the motion. You didn't support the mission. Marc may have said at one point in time that he did support it and he had to change his position.

They are not behind our troops in Iraq, either special operations or the air task force.

When you talked about how this has changed, Minister, I think you used the term "evolutionary process". The evolution has been that we've gained territory back, and that the training we've done, the advising we've done, and the military planning we've provided have resulted in Iraqi security forces, the Kurdish peshmerga, gaining territory and liberating villages and people.

Can we talk about how that has specifically been a positive and that we're going to continue to do that in our efforts to stop ISIL, get them back on their haunches, and ensure that they cannot bring their terror to the rest of the world or spread it throughout Iraq?

● (1225)

Hon. Rob Nicholson: In answer to the preamble to your question, about taking back and expressing the pride that you and most Canadians, I believe, have in this country with respect to the efforts of their armed forces in that part of the world, that's one of the easiest things you could ever have asked me to do. Like you and so many millions of Canadians, I have nothing but the greatest admiration for and pride in what our armed forces do.

I have to tell you that this gets reinforced everywhere I go. A year ago August, I was in Afghanistan. The first thing that struck me when I started talking with the Afghan defence minister and others was how appreciative they were of Canada's armed forces. I've been to Kuwait a couple of times. There, when we talk about the different issues, they always start off by telling me to take back with me how pleased they are that Canada has been so loyal and supportive of the efforts made on their behalf. This is recognized throughout the world. We've had this discussion in Europe; wherever you go, you get that from Canadians. So Canadians can and do take wonderful pride in their armed forces. This is matched throughout the world, the admiration for Canada.

You talked about success. This is not an easy operation; you know that and you understand that. But when we have a look and we get updated on this, we see that they are making progress on the ground. This is part of what the Iraqis are doing, and they have to do that. They appreciate the training and the assistance they get from the special forces from Canada. They appreciate getting assistance to be able to push back, to reclaim their territory, and that's exactly what is taking place. We want to support that.

Our air strikes are a huge part of that. They're a huge part of containing ISIL, pushing them underground, stopping their advances, and quite frankly, I'm sure, demoralizing them. Every time they stick their heads up, they're being targeted by air strikes. This is a measure of the success we are having in this. It's all our hope—it's the hope, I believe, of everyone—because the terrorist threat in Iraq, again, is not just a threat to that region and to Iraq. It's a terrible threat, but it's a direct threat to Canada and its allies. They have made that very clear, as we have seen in this country. We have a great stake in this and we're going to continue.

Mr. James Bezan: I have a final question, before we adjourn.

Operation Impact, of course, was empowered by Parliament through a motion. Does the directive, through Operation Impact, reflect the spirit as well as the context of the motion that was passed by Parliament?

Hon. Rob Nicholson: There's no question about that. One of the things that was pointed out is how quickly we deployed, how quickly we got involved with this. We have a mission up until the first week of April approved by Parliament, but Canadians can rest assured that our Canadian Armed Forces mobilized immediately to get our special forces and our fighters, along with the support they needed, into Kuwait.

As I've said many times, nobody has a better record of stepping up to the plate than Canada does. Again, it's another ground for being so proud of the work they do.

•(1230)

The Co-Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Bezan.

To the foreign affairs committee, just before we adjourn we were going to have some committee business. We don't need to take care of that today; that's been dealt with. We'll get back to it on Tuesday, okay?

The Co-Chair (Hon. Peter Kent): For now, thank you, Minister Baird. Thank you, Minister Nicholson. Thank you, colleagues.

This joint meeting of the standing committees of National Defence and Foreign Affairs is adjourned.

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