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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

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•(1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please.

I welcome you to the 20th hearing of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on this Thursday, April 3, 2014.

[*English*]

Today we are continuing our study into sexual violence and the persecution of religious minorities in Syria. In particular, this time we're having a discussion that relates to the request made by a number of members that we hear about the situation regarding Armenians in Syria.

We have three witnesses with us today. Ani Mardian, Hagop Arslanian, and Roupen Kouyoumdjian are here to testify.

I'll leave it up to you to decide how you divide your time. When you've completed your testimony, we'll go to a series of questions, with equal amounts of time for members from each party.

Please feel free to begin your testimony.

Ms. Ani Mardian (Representative, Government Relations Office, Ottawa, Armenian Church Diocese of Canada): Thank you.

Good afternoon. My name is Ani Mardian. I'm here on behalf of the Armenian Church of Canada. I'm here with the director of the government relations office, Deacon Arslanian. Together we bring you greetings from Archbishop Nathan Hovhannisian.

Thank you for the invitation to appear today and for the opportunity to present this very crucial issue for your consideration.

We are here before you to ask the Government of Canada, through the House of Commons Standing Subcommittee on International Human Rights, to join the international condemnation of the recent violence that is endangering the historically Armenian community of Kassab.

We seek immediate action to aid the Armenian population and also safeguard it and the other vulnerable minority ethnic communities.

It is vital that an expression of condemnation and a call for action against the unprovoked attacks by Canada, as a defender of minority

and human rights, be heard amid the wider international response. There is an urgent need to reach out to safeguard the lives and future of the population, who are now in desperate need for protection and aid.

The town of Kassab, whose inhabitants by a high majority are of Armenian origin, have been compelled to save their lives by fleeing to the city of Latakia, where they have found refuge and are now huddled in a small church and a few schoolhouse rooms.

They not only require protection against terrorist groups but also are in dire need of supplies to sustain them during a vulnerable period, as they have been forced to evacuate their homes leaving behind their clothes, their supplies, and all their worldly goods.

Fearing a far worse fate from the hardline rebel groups who play a prominent role in the Syrian uprising, the minorities had gathered behind the government of President Assad for protection. They have not participated in the fighting but remain neutral and now consequently are not in a position to defend themselves.

From the pre-war Armenian population in the major cities in Syria, only a small fraction remain in their homes. The majority, those whose situations allow them to be able to leave, have moved to other countries or at least to what they believe to be a safer area of Kassab and Latakia within Syria.

Kassab, in northern Syria near the border of Turkey, was settled by the Armenians from the 14th and 15th centuries and to this day has been home to some 2,000 Armenians. The town of Kassab is a postcard-pretty coastal village on the Mediterranean. But more importantly, this region has stood as a symbol of Armenian history and has nurtured the Armenian identity for centuries.

According to the reports of the Associated Press, the Syrian rebels who attacked Kassab are from an array of rebel groups, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front based in Turkey. The militant groups have been reported to have attacked Kassab under the cover of Turkish artillery strikes. The attacks are now engulfing the area and targeting the residents because of their religion and ethnicity.

On March 21, the armed rebels attacked the heavily populated region by crossing the Syrian border from Turkey into Syria. Under threat of slaughter, the entire population was forced to flee. Regrettably, not all were able to escape, and some have since brutally lost their lives.

The long history of Armenians in this region, populations growing from ancient Armenian principalities, is fraught with persecution and loss. Notwithstanding their history, the Armenian people's persistent nature and their adaptable character had allowed those who remained to rebuild a flourishing life in this ancient homeland. Sadly, we are now witnessing the third expulsion of Armenians from this region.

The President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, said Kassab was attacked by Turkish militants in 1909, and in 1915 the Armenian population was deported by the Ottomans, resulting in their deaths as they marched into the deserts of Syria. The current forced flight has deep meaning for all Armenians. The mass exodus from Kassab is reminiscent of the early days of the Armenian genocide under the cover of World War I.

Mr. Albrecht, Canadian Armenians thank you for bringing the issue of deliberate targeting of religious and ethnic groups to light by raising your concerns about the plight of the Armenian community in Kassab, on March 25 in the Parliament of Canada.

Mr. David Anderson, parliament secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, responded to your question on behalf of our government.

Mr. Anderson acknowledged that the violations against the citizens based on their religion and ethnicity are a violation of their basic human rights. As Armenians who are now dispersed throughout the world and who today constitute a large international diaspora resulting from the gravest violations against those human rights, we appeal to you with heightened urgency to help our community in Syria.

Please provide hope through direct aid and security so that they will not again be the forgotten group in a time of crisis. As we all can attest from history, the wrongs of the past are difficult to undo. The time to act is now and we can best make a difference now.

The Christian Armenian community is once again being uprooted from their homes and possibly their homeland as a result of recent accelerated and targeted extremist attacks. We strongly urge you to appeal on our behalf to the Canadian government to take all necessary means to help the Armenian community of Kassab without delay. It is our fervent hope that the exigent situation of the atrocities and the immediate local grim circumstances will grant a positive response.

On behalf of the government relations office of the diocese and its faithful across Canada we ask Canada to do specific work on two fronts: diplomacy and humanitarian assistance to Syria. From the generous pledge of the \$353 million of humanitarian assistance to Syria, we urge you to allocate some of the funds directly to the immediate needs of the Armenian families. We call upon you to work closely with your ally in the region—in this case Canada's NATO ally the Republic of Turkey—to seal the borders into Kassab region and prevent the al-Qaeda inspired extremist incursions on Kassab.

The Armenian Church Diocese of Canada is ready and will cooperate in all ways as needed to facilitate a viable and transparent mechanism to send any help that is made available for this cause.

In closing I'd like to read a quote from Albert Schweitzer, the German theologian and philosopher. He said, "Humanitarianism consists in never sacrificing a human being to a purpose."

Canada is a champion of human rights and freedoms and must stand up to its values to work to stop the ongoing bloodshed. Please provide the aid to secure the return of the Armenian community of Kassab to their rightful homes with dignity and with honour.

Thank you.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you.

Who would like to go next?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian (Executive Director, Armenian National Committee of Canada): My name is Robert Kouyoumdjian. I am the Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of Canada, Ottawa office.

If you have any questions, I am ready to answer them.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Arslanian, do you have anything to add? Did you want to make a separate presentation as well?

Mr. Hagop Arslanian (Director, Government Relations Office, Armenian Church Diocese of Canada): No, if you have questions then we'd be willing to answer.

The Chair: All right in that case we'll turn to questions. You finished quite early, so I think we have enough time here for six-minute question and answer rounds.

We'll start with Mr. Sweet.

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

First off thank you for being here and for your testimony. I was on the Syrian-Jordanian border myself just six weeks ago, and when I was there 700 refugees crossed at the time.

Ms. Ani Mardian: I'm sorry we're all a bit late in putting on our earphones and we're having difficulty hearing.

Mr. David Sweet: I was just mentioning that at the end of January I was on the Jordanian-Syrian border and at the time 700 refugees came across while we were there. Many of them had been bombed out of their homes months before, and bombed out of their friends' homes, and then finally just had to leave because the forces that were at play there—as you mentioned several different factions—drove them out.

So I wanted to ask you specifically, are the Armenians being targeted to a greater degree than the Greek Orthodox and the Catholic community there? Are there specific atrocities that Armenians are dealing with compared to the other persecuted minorities who are there where you find the extremists stirring up anti-Christian sentiment in order to bring about persecution upon them and torture, and of course in some cases, death?

[Translation]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: The persecution of Christians is a very particular situation. We cannot say that only the Armenians, Greeks or other Christians were persecuted. The last incident, which was the attack on Kessab, is one very specific element of that persecution.

As you know, Turkey is holding municipal elections. The presidential election will follow in August 2014. In 2015 there will be general elections. Currently, there is enormous confusion in Turkey.

Since I was born there and lived there for 31 years, I know what is going on very well. When there is a problem inside the country, the best way of dealing with it is to direct people's attention outside the borders. That is what happened.

The latest target was Kessab. This village lived in peace for years. In fact, its residents were all retired people. The village of Kessab was chosen as a target. The residents finally took refuge in Latakia.

I don't know if you are aware of that situation. We sent you a memo last week. That memo is a transcription, a sort of leak from the cabinet in Ankara. At that meeting the Minister of External Affairs was present, as well as the head of national security and the chief of staff of the military. The fourth person present was the second-in-command at External Affairs. Apparently the opposition, which is fighting the current government, was behind this leak. Everything that was recorded was put on YouTube.

The leak shows very clearly that the head of national security made a proposal. He said that they would send four or five guerillas or volunteers to Syria who would send rockets toward Turkey. He suggested that that could be used as a pretext to invade Syria. It is transcribed verbatim. You have it in your email. Last week we sent it to at least 350 elected representatives or official representatives of the Canadian Parliament. All of this is known.

That is why when you asked me about a very general matter which was an internal matter in Syria, I do not criticize the Syrian regime as such, and, how can I put this, I don't praise it either. However, the problem is that they are waiting for an opportunity. In the Middle East, they implement this type of game and scenario. This is not new. It has been going on for years.

To my mind, it is very clear. In 1915, the Armenians were massacred. This has been called a genocide, and the genocide is continuing. The last phase was the attack on the village of Kessab.

This always happens as the historic date of April 24 approaches. Is this a coincidence or not? I don't know.

Have I answered your question, sir?

•(1315)

[English]

The Chair: That uses up your time.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: Thank you.

The Chair: Colleagues, I've just been notified by the clerk, and also by Mr. Marston, that we're going to hear bells in a moment. These are 30-minute bells.

Do I have the permission of the committee—I need unanimous consent for this—to continue on until we have had a full six-minute question and answer from each of the two other parties at the very least?

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Yes, if we can fit it in. We need five minutes to get there.

The Chair: Yes, okay. So we'll make sure we do that, and then we'll wrap up.

Is that okay with everybody? All right.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Our witnesses may not know what the bells mean.

The Chair: We'll worry about that when it happens.

Mr. Marston, you are on. You have six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Okay, well, I'll grab the six minutes before the bells—

Mr. David Sweet: Just to be clear, before you start the clock, are you saying we won't be able to fit in six minutes for everybody?

•(1320)

The Chair: No, no, for each of the parties.... So we'll have time for two more.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I appreciate hearing your testimony. Having met with you last week and hearing your story, I find it's very concerning.

I'm going to play devil's advocate here because there are going to be some questions thrown back out.

Let's be frank. There's a lot of history here for many years and so there's going to be another side to this story, I'm sure, presented, at some point.

You mentioned the press release that brought this information. Whose press release was it?

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: It was a meeting—

Mr. Wayne Marston: No, I'm saying who were the people who issued the press release? Not the content....

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: The Armenian National Committee of Canada and the group working for the centennial.

Mr. Wayne Marston: This was a Canadian issue.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: That's it. Correct....

Mr. Wayne Marston: Just so we have it on the record so people are clear on that....

One of the things I recall and I may be mistaken is this. When we had a conversation, the suggestion was that the groups that crossed into Kessab were al-Qaeda inspired. Am I quoting you correctly? I want to be very cautious here.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: What's the evidence of that, that they're al-Qaeda inspired as opposed to there being some other inspiration or push behind them?

[Translation]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: It is because it was supported by heavy artillery.

A document was sent to you about three days ago. At that meeting four people—I am not going to name them again—said that they would find a way of blaming al-Qaida. Al-Qaida will not act alone and would not be backed-up by artillery.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: The purpose of my questioning is to put before the people observing this at home what your evidence is. You've supplied us with information and I think it's important if you have specific evidence that al-Qaeda was linked, or is this a group inspired by al-Qaeda? That's what I was searching for in the way I posed the question.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: I know that support is coming from Turkey. I am sure; there is no question about that. But the combination...I don't know because there are numerous snipers in the region, you know, but I know that

[Translation]

the plan was to have al-Qaida take the blame.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: This is different than the way it was presented.

You see, to say that it was an al-Qaeda sponsored event would be one thing. To say it was initiated by a different group who then blamed al-Qaeda for it when al-Qaeda hadn't been involved is another. So I just wanted to be clear on the message that you were bringing to us today because there was a bit of confusion around that.

My understanding at this point is that you're suggesting because of the leaked documents that the evidence in your mind is that it came from the Turkish government and that they were using al-Qaeda as a name to mask what they were doing.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: That's it.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Of course you will realize that people will be looking for evidence on that.

Those are the lights calling us to a vote that the chair spoke about before.

How's my time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's perfect.

So I was wanting to give you that opportunity to make that evidence clear because I'm sure, following this, there will be people with differing views to put before us and we wanted the facts to be as clear as possible.

I'm not sure what the government will say about the asking of aid, the \$353 million that's presented to Syria. I couldn't say. Perhaps the government can speak to how that's being administered and to whether or not it can be designated, portions of it apportioned to that area. I would suspect there's a reasonable chance of that.

You talked about diplomacy. Diplomacy between whom...? Between us and the Syrians, us and the Turkish...? How do you see that playing out?

• (1325)

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: The way I'm seeing that is the following.

[Translation]

These countries cannot get along. I know the situation and customs in the Middle East very well. Canada should play a leading role and not practice diplomacy for diplomacy's sake. It should be more active, and meet with people so as to put an end to this massacre which, I tell you, will continue.

Today, the people who were chased out of Kessab are in Latakia. If there is an intervention at some point by the army, there will be war between Syria and Turkey. However, who will pay for this?

That is why the Canadian government should adopt a much more effective and down-to-earth approach.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Professor Cotler.

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

Our meeting today with regard specifically to the questions of the Kassab population comes at a time when there have been a number of historical milestones—if one could say that with regard to what is happening in Syria—almost all of which have been announced this week or in the last 10 days.

The first is that 150,000 have now been killed in this Syrian war. The second is that 10 million Syrians are now in need of humanitarian assistance. The third was announced just today, that 1 million Syrian refugees have now passed into Lebanon alone with all the problems there of scarcity of water and food and the like. The fourth is that humanitarian aid is being blocked from delivery, and the fifth thing is that less than 20% of the pledges of humanitarian aid have been delivered.

All of this, taken together, is an unprecedented catastrophe. I haven't even talked about the other things, the testimony we've been hearing about sexual violence against women, etc.

My question, therefore, to our witnesses is that given that this isn't—and I had the pleasure of meeting with you as well to discuss the plight of the people of Kassab who have moved to Latakia. The question is how do we get a focus on the particular, and I'd say, compelling concerns of the Kassab community in the midst of all this humanitarian catastrophe as it's unfolding now in Syria?

How would we get the Canadian government to make this its focus when, in fact, we have difficulty here in terms of overall pledges of humanitarian assistance concerning refugee resettlement in Canada and the like?

[Translation]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: Of course I am not involved in diplomacy. However, I can see certain things. Turkey is an ally of NATO. It would be much easier to establish a relationship with the Turkish government than with Syria.

First, people have to be made to understand the gravity of the situation within the Turkish government. Second, we have to find a way to contact Syrian authorities to let them know that the current situation will soon become a problem of survival for all of the communities over there, especially the Christian communities, and a solution must be found.

To my mind, we have to start with Turkey.

[English]

Ms. Ani Mardian: If I may ask, I heard a two-part question there. You wanted to ask why are we more concerned about the army—

• (1330)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: No, that's not what I wanted to ask entirely—

Ms. Ani Mardian: Or did you want to ask how we could direct aid directly to the Armenians?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: No, I want the exact opposite. In other words, that given all the catastrophic occurrences with regard to tragedies in Syria which I tried to identify and which in the last week, the last 10 days, we've passed some tragic milestones of an unprecedented nature, how do we get a focus on the plight of the Kassab community when we can't get a focus on all the other humanitarian tragedies? That's my point.

Ms. Ani Mardian: The simple answer would be that Armenians have a great diaspora and we are very connected. The diaspora has sustained many of our older communities, our churches, our schools, our hospitals, our old age homes. These are all financed by contributions of worldwide Armenians. So the mechanism is already in place.

We have the.... We are now currently fundraising. We are currently donating. We are continuously doing this. There is never a period that an Armenian is not donating to an Armenian cause already because the need is great. So the mechanism is already in place.

We are here today to ask for help to make that help larger and also put the voice of Canada behind it if possible.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: My point is, as you can see, since I don't see the international voice on all the other issues and even on...with regard to....

Take Turkey. You speak to Turkey, they will ask you, why are you coming to us? We've absorbed more than 700,000 Syrian refugees from Syria. We need assistance with regard to the Syrian refugees.

My whole question is how do we make a distinguishable case for the Canadian government to identify this as a priority amidst all the other priorities that are being identified?

Ms. Ani Mardian: From my perspective as an Armenian, a Canadian Armenian, I see this as a subgroup within that larger group. This group has already, as I mentioned in my notes...this is the third expulsion from the area. The pain is very large.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I understand. Am I correct in saying that the community remains in Syria, that they are not part of the refugee community?

Ms. Ani Mardian: That's correct. That's my understanding.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Right, that is my understanding.

Ms. Ani Mardian: That's our understanding, yes.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: That's an important point, too.

Ms. Ani Mardian: And they can not be part of the larger...

Hon. Irwin Cotler: They're part of the internally displaced but are not part of the refugee community.

Ms. Ani Mardian: Yes and they will not...I'm not an expert in the field at all but I don't see how that could be possible.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Right.

Ms. Ani Mardian: It just could not be possible.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Right.

Ms. Ani Mardian: Which brings another facet to all of this.... Should they have to leave Latakia now, where would they go? Back to the history of the last century...? They would be walking back into the same deserts backwards. That's our history and that's our pain.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: And they're now internally displaced.

Ms. Ani Mardian: And now they're internally displaced with nothing, having left everything behind.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I let it run over a little bit because I thought it was a good exchange.

Colleagues, our clerk is keeping track of the time. So far we still have more than 20 minutes left. I did discuss with some of the committee members and we have their permission to continue on for one more question from the Conservatives, one more from the New Democrats and then we'll wrap up.

Ms. Grewal, would you go next?

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

And thank you to the witnesses for your time and your presentations. As you see, my time is really very short and I would like to ask my two or three questions at the same time and then you can answer all of them together.

My first is that one of the reasons the Assad regime has the support of many religious minorities is the relative safety they were granted during his rule. How were Armenians treated while Assad had full control over Syria and how did this compare to other kinds of Christian groups?

My second question is, should rebels succeed in cowing the Assad regime, what outcomes can be expected for Armenians in Syria? Which outcome, rebel or Assad retreat, is more likely to lead to a positive outcome for Armenians purely in terms of their security?

My third short question is this. A significant problem in Syria is the ethnic and religious cleavages that leave people and families feeling insecure in the presence of neighbours or other groups, so how has the Armenian community adapted to living with insecurity in Syria?

Thank you.

• (1335)

Ms. Ani Mardian: I'm only going to take your last question because that's my area.

Armenians are always used to keeping their head down, working hard, and not getting involved in politics. That is our nature and that is our history. So that's been very easy to do for an Armenian.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: Could you please repeat your second question?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Should rebels succeed in cowing the Assad regime, what outcomes can be expected for Armenians in Syria?

What outcome—rebels or an Assad victory—is more likely to lead to a positive outcome for Armenians purely in terms of their security?

[Translation]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: My answer would have to be long, but since I don't have enough time, I will be very brief.

First, I have to mention that after the 1915 genocide, all the Middle Eastern countries accepted these refugees. They were given a place. I won't say that it was a choice place, but they were given a place, as refugees. They worked in these countries, be it Lebanon, Egypt, Syria or anywhere else in the Middle East.

At this time, we are seeing the situation evolve in such a way that there is going to be war in Syria. Without wanting to accuse anyone, the Islamist movement may provoke that. Obviously minorities are going to pay the price. Throughout the Middle East, it is certain that the Christians are going to pay the price for this new philosophy or this new movement that exists in the Middle East.

The Armenians are in a very particular situation in Turkey. If there's the least turmoil the Armenians are always the first to pay. If there is to be war in Syria, that country will confront Turkey because there is no one else in this regard. All of the Christian minorities will pay the price, starting with the Armenians. That is a fact. In my opinion, that is crystal clear. That is what I experienced, that is what I saw, and that is what I am still seeing. I hope that I won't see the same thing next week.

That was the answer to your second question. Can you tell me what your first question was?

[English]

I would like to take the first one.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The first one was that one of the reasons that the Assad regime had the support of so many religious minorities is the relative safety he granted them during his rule.

How were Armenians treated while Assad had full control of Syria? How did this compare to other Christian groups?

[Translation]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: In a situation of total confusion like the one that exists at this time, I do not believe that any Christian community will be favoured over another. What I see is that the Armenians are targeted in this process. If there is a war, the first community that will be targeted by the Turkish army will be the Armenian one. That is something we know. I would not like to be in their shoes at this time.

• (1340)

[English]

The Chair: Unfortunately, we are just past your time now.

We turn now to Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you.

It's good to see you here. It's good to see you again. We did meet as well last week.

My questions are centred a little more around the logistics. The Armenian community has traditionally, and up until recently, been based in Kassab, right? Prior to the so-called Arab Spring what was the relationship like as far as the communities around Kassab and the Armenian community? Was it relatively peaceful? Were there any significant issues in the community?

[Translation]

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: If there were incidents, we were not aware of them. Normally, the region where the attack took place is a remarkably quiet, peaceful place, a holiday destination. There is absolutely no problem in that region in connection with the Muslim Brotherhood. Personally, I have heard nothing nor has anyone told me anything about that.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: There was the attack on Kessab last weekend. Was that the first attack on Kessab or were there others previously?

Mr. Hagop Arslanian: The first attack took place in Kessab and the second one in Latakia. The population that lived in Kessab was chased to Latakia, toward the south.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: But the first attack on Kessab took place two weeks ago? That was the first time Kessab was attacked. The Kessab residents are now in Latakia.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: Yes, they are in Latakia.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Is Latakia also an Armenian community?

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: There is an Armenian majority in Latakia.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: I see.

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: I don't know the exact number of Armenians who are currently living in Latakia, nor the percentage of the population they represent. I also do not know how many people stayed in Kessab. The village was emptied. I can't say how many people are still living there.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: I have a question about the information you have.

[*English*]

How does the information that the Canadian organizations get here reach you about what is going on in Syria?

Mr. Roupen Kouyoumdjian: It's very simple. We have newspapers everywhere in the world, so they are given the communiqués. I am able to read every kind of paper—English, French, or Turkish papers—and you have websites and everything else, so you can go in and get the information you need.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: My colleague asked you a question concerning the sources of the information.

[*English*]

I guess he was looking to get some clarity on the veracity of the information you're getting as to who is responsible for what.

In your statement, you said that—

Ms. Ani Mardian: —the Associated Press—

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: —it is your belief that it's the Turkish government that is using the name of al-Qaeda to divert attention from its own issues internally.

Ms. Ani Mardian: I got that information from the Associated Press, but anything that I referred to is referred to on the CBC, in *The Guardian*, and the American State Department has made a statement, and *The Atlantic* in the United States, a respected paper. So this is international press; it's not our Armenian press only.

• (1345)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: No, and I'm not saying it is. It's just a matter of making sure that the record is clear as to the sources of your information.

How secure does the community from Kassab now living in Latakia feel at this moment? Is there a feeling that the attacks that were made on Kassab will trickle down to Latakia, or for now are you feeling relatively secure there?

Ms. Ani Mardian: That is information that would be very difficult to ascertain at the moment, but I read a very small line that the Assad government is trying to go back to protect those people. What that means is very difficult to understand. Are they able to? To what extent are they able to? Are they able to stop it along the road somewhere, while those people are still held up in the church and schoolhouses? That's difficult to ascertain.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: So the fear and concern that you're having, if I'm reading it correctly, is from the various factions of—for lack of a better way of putting it—the rebel contingent in Syria. Is this where your greatest fear comes from, rather than from those supporting—?

Ms. Ani Mardian: We don't know where the next fear will come for these people. It's very difficult to say who will be there to protect them, at this point.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Over and above your determination to remain in your homes, which is very clear and is quite understandable, do you see yourselves at any point feeling that you will be pushed into a refugee state, as distinct from a state of being internally displaced?

Ms. Ani Mardian: As I mentioned to Mr. Cotler, that would be very difficult in our case because of the history. As I said, the majority of Armenians have left. Those who are able to leave are in Lebanon, they are in Canada, they're in the United States, in France, in South America.

These are the people who are unable to leave. They don't have the means to leave. This particular group, in Kassab and Latakia, didn't think they had to leave, because they're not in Damascus, they're not in Aleppo, they're not in the areas where the rebels have something to gain. This is a picturesque little town on the Mediterranean, away from everything. That's what the gentleman, Mr. Kouyoumdjian, was saying, that it's not a part of the fight. There's no reason for fighting to be happening there, except that it happens to be right at the border.

For that reason, I don't think these people anticipated; they didn't prepare to leave. Perhaps they don't have the means to leave at all, even if they prepared. These are smaller communities, villages. They're not the doctors and the lawyers and the manufacturers who live in Damascus and Aleppo. These are quiet, small villages. For the most part, they're summer home areas where the rich go. So people who are there are truly cornered.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, we are going to have to adjourn because we're getting close to the vote. We have about five minutes left, so I'd encourage you all to move back to the House of Commons expeditiously.

Thank you to our witnesses. I apologize for the fact that we have to wrap up. We have a vote in the House.

Your testimony has been very helpful to us and very informative. We are very grateful to you. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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