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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

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•(1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Welcome to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is May 13, 2014, and this is our 27th meeting, which is televised.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are continuing our study of the human rights situation in Iran. This was something we've done in the past, and we referred to it as Iran accountability week; however, it has sort of become Iran accountability fortnight. That is, in part, due to the large number of high-quality witnesses we are able to bring before our subcommittee.

Today we have as witnesses two individuals from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. One is Mark Dubowitz, who has been here before. It's good to see you back again. The other is Ali Alfoneh.

Gentlemen, I assume that our ever-efficient clerk has explained the general process to you, but just to refresh your memories, we normally look for about a 10-minute presentation. We do not hold you to it strictly, but just to state what is obvious to us, and should be obvious to anybody, the briefer your presentation, the longer and more fulsome the question and answer session can be. I will determine how much time is available for each question and answer based on how much time remains at the end of your testimony.

With that being said, I assume that you'll just divide the time between yourselves as you see fit. I encourage you to begin.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz (Executive Director, Foundation for Defense of Democracies): Thank you very much.

Honourable members of this subcommittee, I am privileged to appear again before you today to discuss the issue of Iran's nuclear negotiations, Iran's human rights abuses, and the intersection between the two. It's a great honour to appear beside my colleague from FDD, Ali Alfoneh.

As many of you know, American officials are optimistic about the possibility of reaching a final nuclear deal with Iran before the summer, but the west must be careful not to let their wish for a deal blind them to Tehran's tactics. Iran's leaders want a bomb and they want sanctions relief, and they want us to ignore their vast system of domestic repression. But a flawed nuclear deal, based on a

complicated technical compromise that will likely permit Iran to retain essential elements of its military nuclear infrastructure, may end up giving them all of these things.

Confident that a deal is nigh, Washington has gone from a policy of disclose and dismantle—essentially insisting that Iran come fully clean on its military nuclear activities, coupled with demands to dismantle key elements of its military nuclear infrastructure—to defer and deter.

This new approach involves punting on some of the tougher issues, such as demands for full disclosure on Iran's nuclear weaponization activities before any nuclear deal is signed, and relying heavily on international weapons inspectors to stop the regime from achieving its decades-long objective of building a nuclear bomb.

U.S. participation in the upcoming negotiations isn't premised on an expectation of Iranian veracity. If it were, Mr. Obama wouldn't conclude any deal with Tehran until it had come fully clean about its past deceptions. Instead, the west has lowered its nuclear demands in the face of Iran's insistence that key elements of its nuclear program, and indeed its terrorism track record and human rights abuses, are non-negotiable.

We know that the interim deal reached in Geneva recently, number one, concedes to Iran an enrichment capability on Iranian soil, despite multiple UN Security Council resolutions that called on Iran to suspend all enrichment activities. Number two, it permits Iran to continue advanced R and D work on centrifuges, therefore increasing its ability to enrich uranium. Number three, it drops the previous P5+1 demands that enriched uranium be shipped out of the country and that the Fordow enrichment facility and the Arak heavy-water reactor be shuttered. Number four, it doesn't demand that Iran halt its ballistic missile activities that could deliver nuclear weapons—again, in contravention of multiple UN Security Council resolutions. Unless a final deal requires all of these conditions among others, and doesn't replace them with technical fixes that are too easily reversible, Tehran appears poised to retain a military nuclear infrastructure.

The French, who undoubtedly would like a deal, are quite familiar with Iranian nuclear mendacity. They are much less confident that a technical algorithm can solve what is a strategic problem, which is the essential nature and conduct of this regime, certainly exemplified by its human rights abuses and its support for terror abroad and terror at home. They rightly believe that if Tehran refuses to come clean on its past nuclear weaponization activities, there can be no confidence in any Iranian commitments in the future and no way to design an effective verification and safeguards regime to stop Iran from building a bomb.

What explains this diminishment of western negotiating leverage?

Among numerous reasons, it's the Syria chemical red line debacle that undercut the credibility of Mr. Obama's insistence that the use of military force is on the table against an Iranian nuclear weapons breakout. It is also the White House's recent panic attack about a recent bipartisan Senate bill mandating more sanctions if the nuclear talks fail or if Tehran engages in further terrorism. Iran had threatened to walk away from the table if the bill moved forward, and Mr. Obama, anxious to keep Tehran at the table, turned his fire on senators, including from his own party, accusing them of undermining diplomacy and risking war. This anxiety tells everyone, including Iran's Supreme Leader, that Mr. Obama is not serious about backing up his diplomacy with real teeth. But it doesn't end there.

Mr. Obama downplays the sanctions relief he has offered to Tehran. I ask you, shouldn't one always overvalue the concessions one gives to the other side?

• (1310)

Well, Iran's negotiators understand the wisdom of undervaluing the relief package that they received so that they can ask for more at the end of the first six-month period of the Geneva interim deal, which is set to expire in July.

According to a new IMF report, the Iranian economy is experiencing a modest albeit fragile recovery, with positive GDP growth after the Iranian economy lost over 6% between 2012 and 2014, a halving of Iran's 40% inflation rate, and the stabilization of Iran's previously plummeting currency.

The Obama administration is loath to admit this modest Iranian recovery lest it provoke the ire of Congress after promising that sanctions relief was "limited, temporary, and reversible". Tehran's reprieve for what could have been a more severe sanction-induced economic crisis, thanks to the de-escalation of sanctions in 2013, has given the Iranian regime some breathing room.

Now, Mr. Obama claims that he can turn sanctions pressure on and off like dials. Even a modest recovery reduces U.S. negotiating leverage. That leverage is eroding further as international companies begin to test the boundaries of western sanctions relief.

As Juan Zarate, a former treasury official, warned, "single-mindedly fixated on getting a deal at all costs," can too quickly reduce critical financial leverage without understanding that it can be "impossible to put the genie fully back into the bottle," once sanctions-induced pressure is relieved.

Tehran senses a desire in Washington for a nuclear deal at all costs and is pushing its advantage through negotiations to retain enough of its nuclear achievements for an atomic weapon at a time of its choosing.

The United States, on the other hand, seems increasingly fooled by these false divisions within the regime between so-called moderates and hardliners about Iran's nuclear program.

Abandoning the long quest for atomic weapons would be an extraordinary humiliation for all of Iran's ruling class. That's not going to happen unless Iran's Supreme Leader and his Revolutionary Guards know with certainty that their regime is finished if they don't abandon the bomb.

What can the Canadian government do about this? There are ongoing risks of Iran's military program, and the Canadian government can continue to play an important role in preventing Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon. I have three policy recommendations.

The first involves counter-proliferation. Iran's military program is still dependent on illicit procurement networks. In the event of a nuclear deal, Tehran may continue its long-standing track record of building clandestine nuclear facilities and may continue to source dual-use goods from countries like Canada. The Government of Canada needs to improve gaps in Canadian enforcement with respect to Iran's ability to buy parts and components for its nuclear program and its ballistic missile program. As nuclear expert David Albright recently noted in an April 24 report, Ottawa is not doing enough to stop Iranian exploitation of Canada "as a source of sanctioned goods and as a transshipment country for goods originating in the United States."

Second, on the issue of human rights, the Government of Canada should build on its global leadership on Iranian human rights by establishing the importance of linkage between any nuclear agreement with Iran and an improvement in Tehran's atrocious human rights record. During the Cold War, western negotiators linked certain arms control agreements with the Soviet Union to demands for Moscow's adherence to human rights under the civil rights portion of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. The Canadian government might support a nuclear agreement but should do so with qualifications, and it would be a tremendous achievement for Canada to have the Ottawa accords, accords that are actually founded in Ottawa, linking arms control negotiations with Iran to continued improvement on Iran's atrocious human rights record.

Third, and finally, in December 2012, the Government of Canada added Iran's Quds Force, the overseas terrorist arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to the list of terrorist organizations under Canada's Criminal Code, a very important step in recognizing the IRGC's threat to international peace and security.

As I urged the subcommittee in prior testimony, the Government of Canada should take the next logical step and designate the IRGC in its entirety, both under Canada's Criminal Code, for its terrorist operations, and under SEMA, for its role in violating the human rights of the Iranian population. Human rights abuses by the Iranian regime fulfill the basic criteria under subsection 4(1) of SEMA, which has already been used to sanction human rights abuses by Syria's Assad regime, by the Government of Zimbabwe, by the Government of Burma, and by the Government of Sudan, among others.

It would be of profound, symbolic, and practical importance for the Canadian government to designate the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij Force for their human rights abuses.

• (1315)

On behalf of Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for inviting me to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alfoneh, go ahead.

Mr. Ali Alfoneh (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for providing me with this opportunity to share my analysis with you.

Allow me in particular to express my gratitude to you because you do something that most politicians and statesmen in the west do not: you make a linkage between violation of human rights and terrorism and the nuclear issue. What we usually see is that western governments express their concern about Iran's nuclear program. They, of course, also express their concerns when it comes to the Islamic republic's support for international terrorism, but when it comes to the human rights violations inside of Iran we do not hear very strong condemnation from abroad.

I believe that this hearing, and your deeds, certainly send the right signal to the Iranian population. Until now, the Iranian public was under the impression that the west does not really care if the threats emanating from the regime are not targeting the west but are only, and solely, targeting the Iranian population. Now the Iranian public know that they have friends among statesmen and elected officials of Canada.

Looking back at the past year, where we have seen the emergence of President Hassan Rouhani, I would like to address two questions: What is the state of human rights in Iran under President Rouhani? What is the state of the Islamic republic's sponsorship of international terror under President Rouhani?

When it comes to the state of human rights, the truth is that Mr. Rouhani, in his political campaign prior to the election, was not focusing that much on it. There was some discussion about Iran, and the Rouhani team proposed a citizens' charter of rights. Now the charter has been published, but we see some very bad signals from the Rouhani camp being signalled in the charter.

What we see is that the charter in reality is condoning institutionalized acts of discrimination against members of the Iranian public, particularly when it comes to women and religious

minorities. For example, in the charter, Mr. Rouhani says that he is against "inappropriate discrimination". Thereby the charter in reality says that there is something called "appropriate discrimination". An example of that "appropriate discrimination" is the fact that in Iran, women's legal testimony, particularly in courts, has half the value of a man's legal testimony.

When it comes to religious minorities that are recognized by the state, those religious minorities cannot enjoy the right of running for president in Iran, like Mr. Rouhani. Of course, the fate and destiny of religious minorities not recognized by the Iranian state is much worse, particularly the Baha'i community, those who declare themselves atheists, but also supporters of mystic interpretations of Islam that do not pursue the same line and do not share the interpretation of the Iranian state when it comes to what the religion of Islam is.

Apart from that, Mr. Rouhani very clearly, in the charter of citizens' rights, writes that he wants to operate within the body and framework of existing legislation. In practice, it means that, yes, Iranian citizens would have freedom of speech, but they would not have freedom after speech. That is one of the consequences of the charter of rights that Mr. Rouhani is proposing, because according to Iranian legislation, there is no freedom of speech unless it has been through all the censorship authorities that exist in the Islamic republic. Freedom of association, the right to form political groups, all those freedoms, of course, are restricted, and Mr. Rouhani is not proposing anything in order to improve those issues.

The report of Dr. Ahmad Shaheed is familiar to you. He is documenting the deterioration of the state of human rights in Iran under President Rouhani. The number of executions has actually gone up to more than 600—624—in the course of the past year. The number of Baha'i citizens being imprisoned solely because of their faith has increased.

• (1320)

We have imprisonment of political activists who actively promote the cause of ethnic minorities in Iran, labour unions, student unions. All these parameters have changed for the worse, not for the better, under President Rouhani.

There are those who support and defend Mr. Rouhani. They say that the deterioration is not because of Mr. Rouhani. The chief proponent of this theory is former President Ayatollah Rafsanjani. They claim that Mr. Rouhani is on the right side. He wants to do the right thing but institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards and the so-called hardliners are against it. If we take a look at the track record of both Mr. Rafsanjani and Mr. Rouhani, in the entire course of their political careers these two gentlemen have never been proponents of the rights of man—never, never. These two gentlemen are firm believers that Iran's economy should develop, but they do not believe in political development. They would not be ready to give political liberalization to the Iranian public.

Simultaneously, they are also very fearful of Iran having the same destiny as the Soviet Union. What they say is that Mr. Gorbachev started a political reform process in the Soviet Union that only accelerated demands for political freedoms. Mr. Rafsanjani and Mr. Rouhani, back in the days of Mr. Khatami, the reform president, when he came to office they called Mr. Khatami “Ayatollah Gorbachev”. What does that mean? It means that Mr. Khatami, too, was a believer in the system but he was starting a political reform process that could prove extremely dangerous for the survival of the regime. These people, they want economic development; they would like to have sanction relief, but they are not ready to give political freedoms.

In order to stop and control the Iranian public, they believe in the use of terror as an instrument of power; yes, an instrument of power. They fundamentally believe they can control the Iranian population by terrorizing them. Mr. Rouhani is not against violation of human rights. He is effectively using terrorism against Iranian citizens as an instrument of control. Unfortunately, Mr. Rouhani's administration, and in particular the Revolutionary Guards, are also firm believers in terrorism as a foreign policy instrument. They believe that by using terrorism they managed to force the United States to leave Lebanon during the civil war in the 1980s. They believe this. They believe that the Khobar Tower bombings in 1996, according to Mr. Rouhani, created such a fear in America that the Americans no longer believed they had a safe haven in Saudi Arabia. This was Mr. Rouhani on the record analyzing the impact of the Khobar Tower bombings in 1996. After the 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States, Mr. Rouhani's analysis was practically similar. He believed that the United States was more or less in a state of terror, only because a very, very small group had managed to commit those terrible crimes.

Now that Mr. Rouhani is not going to deliver, what policy recommendations would we give to the Government of Canada?

First of all, most unfortunately, I have to confess that I expect another wave of Iranian refugees leaving Iran and trying to find a safe haven abroad. The Government of Canada has been most gracious, most hospitable, and very, very guest friendly toward my countrymen. I also hope that in the future the Government of Canada can provide Iranian citizens fleeing from injustice in Iran a new home in Canada.

I also hope and urge the Government of Canada to follow up on designating the Quds Force as a terrorist organization. The Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards has many front organizations. One of these organizations is called the Imam Khomeini Aid and Relief Organization. They claim they are practically the same thing as the Red Cross or the Red Crescent in Iran, engaging in aid activity outside of Iran, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in reality, unfortunately, this is a front organization of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards.

If the Quds Force is sanctioned and designated as a terrorist organization, those organizations providing material support to the Quds Force should also be designated.

•(1325)

I would like to add to what my colleague Mr. Dubowitz expressed, the wish that not only the Revolutionary Guards' acts of terrorism against western citizens, not only their engagement in the

development of a nuclear bomb, but also their activity in suppressing the civil rights of Iranians inside Iran be on the mind of Canadian parliamentarians whenever they think about designating organizations as violators of the rights of man.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Alfoneh.

Thank you as well, Mr. Dubowitz.

Just so members of the subcommittee know, Mr. Dubowitz's written presentation has been circulated, but Mr. Alfoneh's has not been yet because it has to be in both official languages, but it will be shortly.

We're going to start with Ms. Grewal. Given the amount of time that our presenters have taken, we'll have time for five-minute question and answer rounds.

Please begin, Ms. Grewal.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for your time and your presentations.

Mr. Dubowitz, President Rouhani recently stated that Iran will not accept nuclear apartheid in light of the recent talks in Vienna concerning a nuclear deal. In addition it appears that Iran wants full sanction relief, which the international community of course is reluctant to give.

Given these facts, do you believe that a nuclear deal can be reached by the July target date, and what would such a deal imply for the future of human rights in Iran?

•(1330)

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Thank you very much for your question.

I believe that a nuclear deal is possible, even with this regime. I'm skeptical that a deal could be reached by July 30 unless it's a bad deal. If there's a bad deal it could be reached very quickly.

The fundamental condition—there are many conditions of a good deal—the *sine qua non* of a good deal is the ability of the international community to verify and inspect Iran's nuclear facilities, to have unfettered access by the IAEA anywhere, any time. Iran's record of nuclear development is one of nuclear mendacity. This is a regime that lies profoundly; it lies persistently; it lies pervasively; it lies perniciously.

The only guarantee that we have against a future nuclear weapon is the ability of the international community to go anywhere any time. That requires Iran to fully come clean on the past military dimensions of its program, to provide all documentation to the IAEA, to answer all their questions, and then to permit the IAEA, with that information, to design a verification and inspection regime that is unfettered, that goes anywhere, any time. Without that, I fear that a nuclear deal would be fundamentally flawed, and we'll be merely punting on the question of Iran's nuclear weapon, not solving it.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Alfoneh, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has made several proclamations about its centrality in the Iranian economy. Do you believe Mr. Rouhani has a desire to limit the power of the corps and its influence on the Iranian program?

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: I think that because of the short time we have for our discussion, we present the decision-making process in Iran as if it is monolithic. That's not the case. There certainly are many conflicts among the group Mr. Rouhani represents and the mafia that is the Revolutionary Guard and the Supreme Leader.

I see the Iranian leadership as a triangle. The Rouhani government may want the bomb in the longer term, but right now they are opting for some kind of a negotiated solution that gives the government access to cash. The Revolutionary Guard has everything to lose if there is a negotiated solution, because they want the bomb. They look next door to Pakistan, and they see the Pakistani military being the custodian of the nuclear bomb. They also are aware of the prestige that the Pakistani military is enjoying because it is the custodian of the bomb. Therefore, the Revolutionary Guard seems to be against any kind of negotiation. Mr. Khamenei is somewhere in the middle. He's oscillating between the two poles. In his statements, if you take a careful look, every second statement is in defence and support of Mr. Rouhani; every other speech is in defence and support of the Revolutionary Guard, because he, too, knows that he cannot afford to alienate the Revolutionary Guard. He knows the Revolutionary Guard suppressed and crushed the anti-government uprisings in 2009; therefore he cannot alienate them. This is why Mr. Khamenei is oscillating.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Chair, do I have some more time left?

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I'll pass my time to Mr. Schellenberger.

The Chair: If you like, Mr. Schellenberger, we can come back to you. I'll add those 45 seconds then.

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

The Chair: Okay. That sounds good.

Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Chair, I have to advise you that I have to leave the meeting shortly, because I have a statement.

Mr. Alfoneh, we get background on the witnesses who come before us. You're classified as an expert on Iran and the inner workings of the regime. What is that expertise based on?

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: It's based on open source analysis, sir. What we do is we systematically analyze any data that is available in the open source. We read not only current affairs, not only the newspapers, but also historical records.

For your information, the interesting thing about the Iranian political system is that there is a relative degree of openness. It is not like North Korea. Statesmen write their memoirs. From the memoirs you can extract information and data. That information gives you a wealth of data.

Mr. Wayne Marston: So it's from research, then.

•(1335)

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: Absolutely.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I was wondering if perhaps there had been some direct connection in Iran that you'd had, but okay, we can move on. There are other things I want to ask you.

Professor Akhavan gave public testimony before this committee. I don't know how long ago it was, but it must be at least a year, if not more. You were talking about unfettered internal political development. He told this committee that his belief was that for change to happen in Iran, the western nations had to be removed from the equation, not part of it.

What do you think of that statement?

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: I believe western countries can provide access to information to the Iranian public. I believe western countries can also punish those members of the political elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran who are suppressing the rights of man in Iran. I believe western countries can provide asylum to the victims of those who are persecuted in Iran.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I would take it that you don't quite agree with his statement. I wanted to see what the balance would be between your observations and his.

Mr. Dubowitz— did I pronounce that right, even remotely close?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Yes. You're exactly right.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I'm notorious for my English thick tongue.

There's one thing I'd like to put to rest. You talked about Iranian front groups, and that's an accusation that could be pointed by some at your group. How is your group funded?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Sorry, sir. I have to say that the acoustics are not great in here.

Is the question about Iranian front groups?

Mr. Wayne Marston: No. You talked in your statement about front groups that operate out of Iran. Negative people would ask, okay, are you a front group, and how are you funded?

I'm just giving you a chance to clarify the record.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: First of all, if you want an exposition on Iranian front groups, I'm happy to provide that. I don't think I actually have provided that in my testimony, but—

Mr. Wayne Marston: No, I think you missed my point.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I hear your point.

The organization that I head as executive director is a non-profit organization based in Washington. It's a non-profit and it's funded by private North American donors. We don't get any money from foreign governments. We don't get any money from corporations. We get money from individuals.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Good. You've put that on record.

You also spoke extensively about nuclear ambitions in Iran. Do you see a direct link between those nuclear ambitions and the mistreatment and the human rights violations within Iran?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I do. I think there's a fundamental link. This is a regime that depends for its survival on fear, creating fear abroad and creating fear at home. The nuclear weapon is the ultimate weapon of fear for creating fear abroad. The vast system of domestic repression that the Iranian regime has set up to abuse its own people is the instrument of fear and torture at home. You join those together and the regime is a formidable and fear-creating government.

I think the lesson is that once a country has a nuclear weapon, the rest of the world is even more reticent about holding that country's feet to the fire on human rights issues.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's where my next question would go. Some have said and believe that the U.S., in chasing and trying to stop the development of that nuclear weapon, has started to turn a blind eye to the abuses within the country.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I think that's exactly right. I think the Obama administration's conception of these negotiations is these are arms-control negotiations. They're not even arms control; they're nuclear negotiations, because ballistic missiles seem to be increasingly taken off the table.

In light of that, the administration has been very reluctant to hold the regime to account on human rights issues. The most classic example of that was the democratic counter-revolution in 2009, where millions of Iranians were on the street yelling, "Death to the dictator. President Obama, are you with us or are you with the dictator?" The Obama administration made the decision that instead of standing with the Iranian people, it would stand with the interlocutors back in Tehran, who it believed were sincere about reaching some kind of nuclear compromise, or at least testing their sincerity.

I think it was a big mistake. I think the administration has acknowledged that it was a mistake. I think Canada can really play a fundamental role in ensuring, like in our arms control negotiations during the Cold War, that human rights and arms control are inextricably linked.

The Chair: Mr. Schellenberger, you have five minutes and 45 seconds.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you. I get extra time.

Should the U.S. not realize that you cannot trust all countries and governments the same as you do your allies? I don't think they can all be trusted the same. Take a look at what's happened with Russia, Syria, Iran. Do you feel the U.S. has to change the direction that they seem to have taken lately?

Either one of you can answer.

• (1340)

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I'm a supporter of always talking to your enemies. I think it's important to talk to your enemies. I think that Reagan's dictum is an important one, which is "trust but verify," although I would argue that in the case of the Iranian regime, we shouldn't trust and we absolutely need to verify.

I think the administration doesn't trust the regime. I think the administration understands that it's dealing with a mendacious regime that has a decades-long record of duplicity. I think the administration believes that there is a technical algorithm that can

solve a strategic problem. The strategic problem is the nature and conduct of this regime.

I think that is where we disagree. We don't believe that some technical compromise on centrifuges is ultimately going to deal with the fundamental nature and conduct of this regime, which has spent decades lying about its nuclear program, decades brutalizing its own people, and decades sponsoring terrorism abroad, that all of a sudden a verification inspection regime of limited duration and limited scope is going to stop this regime from ultimately pursuing its long-standing objective of building a weapon.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Various communities within Iran are known to have been victims of persecution or serious human rights violations. Can you identify these communities and elaborate on the types of human rights abuses they face, stressing the differences and similarities of treatment? In particular, can you elaborate on the situation or treatment of the Baha'i community, other religious minorities, minority ethnic groups, who are, I think, being persecuted primarily because of sharia law?

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: Yes, sir, particularly when it comes to the Baha'i community. The Baha'i community is the most persecuted religious minority in Iran ever since the revolution of 1979.

The religious leadership of the Islamic republic believes that the Baha'i faith is a direct challenge, a theological challenge, to Shia Islam. They have the support of many members of the Shia clergy and even some parts of devout Iranians. This is why the Baha'i community has been suffering most.

However, 35 years after the revolution there are many Iranians who are questioning the right of the Shia clergy to rule Iran. After all, they promised the Iranian public justice in this world and salvation in the next. Of course, nobody has returned from the next world to tell us if there was salvation for them, but if there is one thing that the Iranian public knows very well, it is that there is no justice for them.

There is particular injustice for those members of Iranian society who do not belong to the Shia faith. There are particular hardships for members of the Sunni community, and again, within the Sunni community, the Sunni Arab community is persecuted because it is accused of receiving funds and political support from Iran's regional rivals. In some cases that may even be true, but there is absolutely no excuse for discriminating against members of those communities.

Among the religious communities there is one success story, and that has nothing to do with the government of Iran, and that is Iran's Jewish minority. The Jewish minority is not persecuted because of its faith. You cannot credit the government of the Islamic republic for that. Iran hosts the second largest Jewish community in the Middle East after Israel, and that is not because of the government. That is because of the generally tolerant nature of Iranian society. It has nothing to do with the government.

Other violations of human rights are usually directed against human rights activists, against lawyers who defend victims of human rights abuses in Iranian courts, against unions, particularly student unions and labour unions. In other words, the government on the one hand tries to dominate the union structure and infiltrates them by agents of various intelligence services, but at the same time also wants to crush them to the degree that is at all possible.

These groups are all overrepresented statistically among the list of political prisoners. I think a very good list of that is Dr. Shaheed's report, which was published recently.

• (1345)

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: If I could very quickly add to that, there's a certain amount of irony when President Hassan Rouhani claims that the international community is practising nuclear apartheid, when his very regime practises human rights apartheid. There's a certain amount of irony that should be appreciated there.

The Chair: Mr. Schellenberger, that actually is the end of your time.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Was that the end of five minutes, or five minutes and 40 seconds?

The Chair: Five minutes and 37 seconds.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I'm sorry. I had one really good one left. Thanks.

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

Professor Cotler, it's your turn.

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

I'd like to commend both of the witnesses for their comprehensive and fulsome testimony. You both have spoken of Iranian terror at home and abroad and Iranian human rights violations at home and abroad. Yet as the nuclear negotiations resume this week, they run the risk of overshadowing, if not sanitizing, both the human rights violations and the terrorism as really a matter of Iranian principle and policy.

How do we change this groupthink in the U.S. and Europe? There's this disconnect between the preoccupation almost exclusively with nuclear negotiations and the more than benign neglect, but almost sanitizing, as I say, of the human rights and terrorist violations.

I'd like maybe, Mark, you on the human rights and Ali on the terrorism.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Professor Cotler, it's exactly the right question.

The joint plan of action is very specific that there should be no new nuclear sanctions while these negotiations are taking place, but the administration is on record as supporting new human rights sanctions and new terrorism sanctions. The problem is, like diplomats everywhere, they become very invested in the process, and the Iranian regime has been very adept at using the scare tactic that they will walk away from negotiations if there are any new sanctions on any front.

I think it's actually incumbent upon the Canadian government and the Canadian Parliament to encourage an atmosphere through Canadian leadership that human rights and terrorism—terror at home or terror abroad—should be on the front burner, not on the back burner. I think you will find willing and committed members of Congress on a bipartisan basis who support that approach.

I would recommend that the Government of Canada, if there is a final nuclear deal on acceptable nuclear terms, accept that deal with the qualification that any enforcement of that deal has to start depending on Iran finally addressing the vast system of domestic repression in its country and the use of the Quds Force, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations in its terrorist activities abroad. In Canada, again, if you have an Ottawa equivalent of the Helsinki Accords, we could all meet back in Ottawa in a year's time and really put that on the front burner.

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: Recently one of the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards stated, "In Syria we have managed to create a new Hezbollah", which I think is a very interesting statement because it tells you that they believe they are on the winning side of history. They believe that they have managed to deter the United States from getting more engaged in the Middle East. They believe that western European countries do not have any appetite for engaging in the region, and they fundamentally believe that acts of terrorism and economic and military support to terrorist organizations in the Middle East region has, in reality, paid off. It has been a good investment, seen from Teheran, and that, of course, is very unfortunate.

Any nuclear deal should have other components as well. One part of the components could be the human rights violations issue. Another one could be terrorism. I believe that in reality most Iranians would tell you that the nuclear issue is the smallest of the worries of the Iranian public. The Iranian public is much more concerned about human rights violations inside of Iran, but also the fact that the Iranians are now being depicted in the entire Middle East region as supporters of terrorism, and that is very unfortunate.

The Chair: You still have one minute.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Okay, I have maybe a longer question than its answer.

Mark, you mentioned the joint plan of action, but it always appears to me that there was no real joint plan of action because of the disparity in the two positions. Can either of you maybe itemize some of those disparities?

• (1350)

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Well, the joint plan of action seems to be one of those agreements that's in the eye of the beholder. It's being interpreted very differently by the U.S. government and its P5+1 allies on the one hand, and in the Iranian government on the other.

It is clear from the public statements of Iranian officials that they have no intention of dismantling their nuclear program. It is clear from the public statements of Iranian officials that, while they promise so-called transparency in their nuclear program, that transparency will not extend to cover the entire territory of Iran; in other words, providing the kind of unfettered, anywhere, anytime IAEA inspections that are vital to ensuring that Iran is in full compliance with its nuclear obligations and is not building, as it has in the past, clandestine nuclear facilities.

It is clear that there is a fundamental difference in interpretation on questions of the kind of sanctions relief that Iran should be entitled to. You know, it's worth actually saying this in Canada. I mean, you have a banking system that you rightly should be proud of. You should also understand that the Iranian banking system in the entire territory of Iran has been declared by the U.S. government to be a jurisdiction of primary money-laundering concern. The U.S. government, Canada, and Europe have designated Iranian banks, because those banks have been involved in illicit finance supporting WMD, terrorism, money laundering and sanction circumvention.

It is absolutely incumbent that banks in Canada understand that right now there's no such thing as a good Iranian bank. The entire Iranian financial sector has been designated because it poses a threat to the integrity of the global financial system. A notion that we're going to have a nuclear agreement and allow all of these bad Iranian banks to be provided access to the global financial system really flies in the face of good banking practices and undercuts the very rationale for why those banks were designated. There is a fundamental misinterpretation and disagreement between the U.S. Department of the Treasury on the one hand and the Iranian regime on the other about how quickly those banks should be allowed back in.

Professor Cotler, I could take hours to illuminate the differences in understanding. My fundamental point is and my concern is that we are setting ourselves up for a bad nuclear agreement, because Iranian expectations about what they should be getting as part of this agreement stand at odds with yours, not only U.S. policy but with multiple UN Security Council resolutions that are clear in what Iran has to do in order to satisfy international obligations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cotler. We let that one go over for a little bit because it's such a fulsome answer.

Mr. Sweet, you're next.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Dubowitz, by the way, the other thing that is memorable about President Reagan is that he not only said "trust, but verify" but all through the vast majority of the negotiations, he never stopped saying that it was an evil empire that he was negotiating with, until he was challenged in Reykjavik, but that's another story. It brings to mind the reality of how you have to go into these negotiations with the whole mindset of what's really happening on the ground. We've sustained our sanctions at the level that they've always been in Iran. All of this unwinding of sanctions from this administration in the U.S. is primarily to get a deal.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Well, the U.S. administration will claim that they have yet to unwind the sanctions, that they've provided only limited direct sanctions relief in a few key areas. I think those key areas with respect to oil shipments, petrochemicals, auto parts and the release of about \$4 billion in trapped oil revenues has provided a not insignificant boost to the Iranian economy. What has fundamentally changed the Iranian economy's trajectory—from 2012 when it was in a deep recession and heading downwards to 2014 looking forward where the economy has stabilized and is now experiencing a modest, albeit fragile, recovery—is that the decision was made by the administration in mid-2013 not to intensify the pressure, not to double down on sanctions but, indeed, to stop the escalation of sanctions.

The net result is that oxygen has been introduced into the Iranian economy. Rouhani and his economics team have more space to operate now, and sentiment has changed. The sentiment has gone from despair to hope inside Iran. Outside Iran it's gone from fear of sanctions to greed as companies try to be the first in line to come rushing in. The net result of this is that we, the west, have diminished our negotiating leverage vis-à-vis Iran, and the net result of that is that we have retreated from our red lines with respect to Iran's military nuclear infrastructure as the Iranians increasingly have said, "No, no, no, not negotiable".

• (1355)

Mr. David Sweet: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...substantial oxygen actually, enough to rebound the entire economy, and that's troubling because it adds credibility back to this regime in the hearts and minds of regular Iranian people. That's a big concern.

You had talked about the Revolutionary Guard and sanctions in that regard. Are there members of the Revolutionary Guard who serve without option?

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: Right now the Revolutionary Guards are engaged in a fierce battle with the Iranian government. Mr. Rouhani wants to subject the Revolutionary Guards to political control. One of the things he has been doing systematically is to cancel contracts that the previous administration, Mr. Ahmadinejad's presidency, signed with the Revolutionary Guard-owned companies. That of course makes the Revolutionary Guards fear improvement of relations between the United States and the Rouhani government even more.

As I see it right now, they have no stakes in any kind of negotiated deal, but I think that they are also biding their time. They know that Mr. Khamenei sooner or later is going to depend on them again and will need their support. Let's say in a couple of years from now when the immediate crisis has passed and Iran's economy has stabilized, that foreign companies begin returning to Iran, then Mr. Khamenei could actually go back, when it comes to the nuclear negotiations and say that this and this and this part of the negotiation he does not recognize, and actually support the demands of the Revolutionary Guards. Put simply, his domestic survival also depends on the repressive muscle and arm of the Revolutionary Guards.

Mr. David Sweet: Could you just speak about the conscription of the Revolutionary Guards?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Yes, I think that's what you were getting at. You were getting at whether Iranians are actually forced to join the Revolutionary Guards or whether it is—

Mr. David Sweet: Are there some that are?

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: Yes, I'll let Ali talk to this because he's a Revolutionary Guards expert.

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: The conscription issue is that all Iranian males over 18 years of age have to show up for conscription. The military service is slightly more than one year long. The Revolutionary Guards have the first pick when it comes to selection of individuals who show up for the draft. Those people do not have a real choice if the Revolutionary Guards recruitment officer wants them to serve there. But there are also many who actively try to serve their military service in the draft with the Revolutionary Guards because they have better benefits and higher pay.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I would add to that, clearly entering the Revolutionary Guards is your ticket to upward mobility, particularly given the Revolutionary Guards' increasing control of the Iranian economy. Based on our assessment of the Iranian economy, at least half to two-thirds of the entire Iranian economy is controlled by the Revolutionary Guards. You get conscripted to military service, but then it is absolutely within your interest, your career interest, perhaps your financial interest, to volunteer your service for the Revolutionary Guards.

I think this conscription issue has been overstated as a reason not to actually designate the entire Revolutionary Guards. Ultimately, the Revolutionary Guards are a system of vast domestic repression. They control Iran's overseas terrorist activities, and they are the custodian of Iran's nuclear weapons program.

The Chair: You're out of time, Mr. Sweet. You're actually about a minute and a half overtime.

Mr. Benskin, please.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Getting back to human rights, the nuclear negotiations and so forth should be better linked, but for me the issue is human rights in Iran.

Mr. Alfoneh, you mentioned, for example, that the Jewish population in Iran is not one of the target populations. You stressed that that was not thanks to any government efforts; it was the people of Iran. Would it be safe to extrapolate from that and say that the persecution of other religious minorities is not something that is supported, by and large, by the population of Iran, but is something that is generated from the top down?

• (1400)

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: My answer, sir, would be that the government has an easier time persecuting the Baha'i community because many devout Shia Iranians have bought into the clerical argument that the Baha'i faith constitutes an ideological threat to the survival of Shia Islam. The Baha'i faith, in their viewpoint, more or less negates the entire theology of Shia Islam. If you are a devout Shia Iranian, and if you are exposed to this type of propaganda every single day, there is some of it that works on you, and therefore the government of the Islamic republic has a slightly easier time persecuting the Baha'i community.

The reaction to persecution of the Jewish community would have been much harsher because the Jewish community in Iran.... Most Iranians consider Iranian Jews first and foremost as Iranians and then as Jews. This, I believe, can be documented by the fact that Iran has the largest Jewish community in the Middle East after Israel.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

We've been talking about sanctions. Sanctions, as necessary as they may be, so many times on the political level inevitably affect Joe and Sally on the ground. Ultimately, any change in regime is going to have to come from the ground up.

What kind of incentives, what kind of actions, can the west take to help support and strengthen the people on the ground, Sally and Joe, in order to educate them more to make those changes from within?

Mr. Ali Alfoneh: First and foremost, I would very much like to use this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister of Canada and in general the political elites of this country for extending moral support to the Iranian population, moral support that the Iranian public did not receive from President Obama back in 2009. Back in 2009, according to the mayor of Tehran, three million people went into the street chanting, "Death to the dictator". At that time President Obama was too busy doing back-channel diplomacy with Islamic republics, rather than making statements in support of the democratic movement. Moral support is important. Do not underestimate the importance of leaders of democratic countries like Canada offering public supports in favour of Iranian democratic movements.

Apart from this, one of the issues for any democratic opposition is to mature. The way you mature in democracy is through open, public debate. You need a forum. One of those fora is the public media, media that is not censored by the regime. Even, let's say, respectable public broadcasting organizations like the BBC in reality are very, very careful not to antagonize the regime in Tehran, which, of course, creates a problem for members of the opposition who actually would like to have an open debate and question some of the atrocities committed by the regime in Tehran.

Communication and moral support are, I believe, some of the first steps that can be taken, but of course they are not the only ones.

Mr. Mark Dubowitz: I would just add to that, sir. I grew up in South Africa, actually in South Africa under apartheid, and the argument was made that sanctions against South Africa would be disproportionately felt by black South Africans in the townships of Soweto, while white South Africans comfortably ensconced in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg would not feel the impact. Despite this, almost every anti-apartheid leader, including Nelson Mandela himself, has publicly supported sanctions as a tool that helps change the calculus of South Africa's Afrikaner government.

There is no denying that sanctions will disproportionately hurt the average person and will rebound, at least in the short term, to the advantage of the Revolutionary Guards and those who are connected to the regime. But ultimately sanctions—economic sanctions, political sanctions, human rights sanctions, terrorism sanctions—undercut the economic power and the political legitimacy of bad regimes. They don't have a perfect track record. They don't work in isolation. They're not a silver bullet. President Rouhani is at the table negotiating with the P5+1 because he was elected by the Iranian people as a result of sanctions inflicting serious economic costs on this regime. Whether that leads to a comprehensive nuclear deal that stops Iran's nuclear bomb, one will wait to see. But sanctions have been a vital instrument of coercive statecraft.

● (1405)

The Chair: Unfortunately, that concludes the amount of time we have for you, Mr. Benskin. I allowed that to go over as well.

Thank you to our witnesses. You've provided additional feedback for us. As you know, we've been following this issue in the subcommittee for several years now, and getting this kind of update indeed is very helpful to us. We're very grateful that you were able to make the time to be here today.

Thank you.

We are adjourned.

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