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

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, April 30, 2015**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**



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

Thursday, April 30, 2015

• (1305)

[Translation]

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

Today is Thursday, April 30, 2015. Welcome to the 67th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today's meeting is televised.

[English]

Colleagues, we have a problem. As you're all aware, we have three witnesses today, two of whom are in the room with us at the moment. However, we anticipate that the bells will start to ring in about five minutes for a vote. Under our rules, committees like this one automatically suspend as soon as the bells start. Realistically, by the time we get back from the bells there will be just a couple of minutes left before question period.

I want to ask if there's unanimous consent to do the following: Once the bells start ringing, the clerk and I will keep an eye on the clock. We'll suspend once we are at five minutes before the time of the vote, after about 25 minutes. As a practical matter there will be time only for testimony, not for questions and answers.

I suggest we agree to that.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** My apologies to our witnesses, as these things are entirely beyond our control. Had we known, we would have scheduled things differently. I apologize, because it's often the questions and answers that are the most useful part. I know your testimony will be very good for us.

I'm going to ask you to begin. Given the amount of time we have, about 10 minutes each is all you're going to get. I don't know which of the two of you would like to begin first. May I inquire if you have discussed that amongst yourselves?

**Mrs. Marina Nemat (Author, As an Individual):** I will go first.

**The Chair:** Ms. Nemat, please begin. Thank you.

**Mrs. Marina Nemat:** First of all, please allow me to express my gratitude to all of you for giving me your precious time. I know you're all busy.

I am here to speak about my experience as a political prisoner in Iran.

I grew up in Iran. I am a Christian. I was born to a Christian family, and when I was born, Iran was not an Islamic republic. It was during the time of the Shah in 1965. My father was a ballroom dancing instructor and my mother a hairdresser. I grew up among the sounds of the cha cha and the tango, and women with puffy hair. We had a cottage by the Caspian Sea, and I was just your average teenager. Back then, Iran was governed by secular laws. I wanted to become a medical doctor.

Then the revolution happened and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. I became a very unlikely activist, which I say because I'm not political. My family is not political. There had never been any political people in my family.

I was only a teenager back then, but I had grown up in bikinis on the beach and a miniskirt. I had grown up having fallen in love with Donny Osmond because his show was my favourite.

When the revolution happened, all of the above became illegal. My father who had brought modern dance to Iran had to shut down his dance studio, because dancing had been declared evil and illegal. I took ballet lessons and they were shut down. Wearing the hijab became mandatory.

What about our liberties, our personal liberties? The revolution promised us freedom, democracy, and political liberties, but it did not deliver. We lost even our personal liberties, and this upset us. As a girl who had grown up in a miniskirt and could no longer wear it—and the uglier you looked, the happier the government was—I protested. We were on the streets of Tehran, not because we were political, but simply because we wanted to have fun. Every single protest rally was attacked by the revolutionary guard.

The wave of mass arrests of young people in Iran began in the spring of 1981. My first friend who was arrested was named Shahnush Behzadi. She was 15 years old. She was afraid of spiders. We had been classmates since the third grade. I was a trouble maker. I was a loud mouth. I was always protesting in school. But she was one of the quiet ones and she was the first one to disappear. Every day you would go to school and there would be an empty desk. There would be somebody missing, and we would look at each other and ask, "How bad can it get? I mean, they are arresting 15-and-16-year-olds. How bad can it get?"

There aren't many stupid questions in this world but this one is really stupid: "How bad can it get?" Well it got really bad.

They came for me on January 15, 1982. It was about 9 or 10 o'clock at night. I was at home. I was about to take a shower. I had just turned on the water. I was waiting for it to heat up. The door bell rang. My mother called my name. I opened the bathroom door and there were two really big guns pointed in my face. People have asked me if I was scared. No I was not. This is not because I'm brave; I'm not brave at all, but I entered a state of shock. A state of shock is like body armour but it doesn't protect you against bullets; it protects you against emotion. I lost the ability to feel. I'm afraid that once you enter a state of shock, it's very difficult to get out.

The guards put me in a car and drove me north to Evin prison, which is still 100% operational. It's still working 35 years later. They blindfolded me upon arrival; that's what they do to prisoners. It's an intimidation technique. They walked me along hallway after hallway after hallway. Eventually they told me to sit down. I sat down. Eventually—I don't know how many hours later; I cannot tell you how long I was sitting there—somebody called my name. They took me into a room. I still couldn't see anything. I was still blindfolded.

A man asked me if I had attended protest rallies against the government. I said yes. It was common knowledge. I didn't wear a ski mask on the streets of Tehran. Of course I attended protest rallies. My principal knew. I was 16 years old. My teachers knew. My friends knew. Of course I attended protest rallies.

Then he asked me, "Have you written articles against the government?" I said, "Yes, I have written articles against the government in my school newspaper." Then he asked about the whereabouts of a girl who was a friend of a friend of mine. I had met this young woman once but I had no idea where she was. If I had known, I would have told them. I was not a member of any organization. I had not been trained on how to behave under interrogation. If I had known, I would have told them. I just didn't want to be there.

They didn't like what I said. They took me to another room and they took off my blindfold. I was in a small room with two men, Ali and Hamed. They handcuffed me. When they handcuffed me, they laughed because—it was funny—my hands would have slid out of the cuffs. I was 90 pounds back then. So they put both of my wrists into one cuff, and as it clicked my right wrist cracked. The torture had not even begun.

They tied me to a bare wooden bed. I was lying down on my stomach. They took off my socks and my shoes. I had Puma running shoes and I had paid a fortune for them. It's funny because I was 16 and I was thinking about my shoes. They took off my socks and my shoes and they lashed the soles of my feet with a length of cable. When I say cable, I mean cable. I don't mean wire. It's about an inch thick. It is heavy rubber. It's heavy stuff; and they lashed the soles of my feet.

This is the most common method of torture in the Middle East. Why? It's because our nerve ends are in our feet. With every strike, your nervous system explodes and is magically put back together; and you're wide awake for the next. I started saying a Hail Mary. I forgot the words to it. I started to count. I got to six. I forgot what was after six. If the devil had appeared and offered, "If you sell your soul I will take you back home to your mother," I would have sold my soul with whipped cream and a cherry on top. I would have done

anything, anything I mean it, to get out of that room. I wasn't proud of it but it is the absolute truth.

They gave me documents to sign. I signed everything. I didn't read what they said. If they had asked me to confess I was Jesus Christ, I would have confessed I was Jesus Christ.

To make a long story short, I was given the death sentence. Back then and still today, it's very easy to get a death sentence in Evin. My sentence was reduced to life in prison and I was sent to the cell block with hundreds, maybe thousands of other girls.

Six months after my arrest I was called for interrogation. My interrogator Ali was there. He closed the door behind us. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "You had the death sentence. I reduced it to life in prison. You're going to be here forever and nobody cares." Well, I knew that much. Then he said, "You are going to become my wife, or I will arrest your parents and your boyfriend." I knew he was not kidding.

I was forced to marry my interrogator. I was 17 years old. This didn't mean that I was released. They moved me to solitary confinement in the 209 section of Evin prison. I was raped over and over again in the name of marriage and it was absolutely legal. There was nothing I could do about it.

This is my story in a nutshell. My friend Shahnush whom I mentioned earlier was executed in October 1981. We don't even know where she is buried. She was executed before I was even arrested. I have her photo on my desktop, and every once in while when I get discouraged by what's going on in the world—it's quite easy to do. I guess you would agree with me—I just click on her photo and I bring it up, because she remained 15 and I'm now 50 years old. I'm now more than old enough to be her mother. This is not fair.

In Evin prison, I became a witness, no more, no less. As I said, many of the girls are buried in mass graves, and in Iran there are no memorial walls to remember the names of the dead. One day there will be. But until then, it is my duty and the duty of all who survive to carry not only the names but also the stories.

Thank you so much for your time.

• (1310)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Nasrullah, I guess you'll be going next.

**Mr. Shakib Nasrullah (Student, As an Individual):** Mr. Chair, my name is Shakib Nasrullah. I am an Iranian Baha'i currently residing and studying in Montreal. It is my honour to stand here before you to explain a portion of what has happened and is happening to my wife, my family, and me.

For the purpose of this presentation, I will focus on only two broad areas of discrimination that we have been subject to. The first is the denial of access to education and my imprisonment related to that. The second is economic pressure.

Like all other Iranian Baha'is, I was not allowed to enter any university in Iran. I followed courses offered by the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, BIHE, an education initiative started by the Baha'i community as a response to the fact that Baha'is are deprived of access to higher education, but the history of persecution related to education in my family runs across all the elementary and secondary school years.

Each year at the time of school enrolment, my parents worried that they would not be able to enrol us because we were Baha'is. It has happened in the past that expressing our religion in the classroom would result in expulsion. School was never a safe place for me, as teachers and administrative staff every now and then would disseminate hatred and lies against Baha'is.

To mention just one example, I clearly recall how I was frightened by one of my grade 7 teachers. This particular teacher repeatedly bragged about how they attacked the Baha'is of their city in Yazd, and either killed them all or forced them to leave the village. He went on to include details about how Baha'is are not human and in fact have tails and hooves. I never revealed my Baha'i identity to my very few school friends and never invited any of them over, fearing the unknown consequences.

In 1999, knowing that as a Baha'i I could not enter any university, I decided to take the psychology courses offered through BIHE. It was the first year after the massive coordinated attacks on the BIHE when intelligence service officials ransacked approximately 500 Baha'i homes across Iran. The program had still not fully recovered from these attacks, and we had to take extra caution when going to our classes, which were held in private homes.

After finishing my bachelor's degree, I was amongst the very few students who came to Canada in 2007 to start a master's level program. In 2009, right after finishing my master's in counselling psychology from McGill University, I went back to Iran to start teaching for BIHE and support this initiative. Since I was a Baha'i, my McGill diploma and my previous education were not recognized by the Psychology and Counselling Organization of I.R. Iran and, therefore, I could not officially work in any clinic or private practice.

I had just married and was under so much financial pressure. Through the help of a friend, I was lucky to find a clinic in which I could unofficially work as a psychologist. All of this fell apart when, in May 2011, the intelligence service of Iran attacked BIHE once again. I was with a client when my friend came in and told me that they had attacked the houses of many Baha'is. Within a few days, they called me and asked me to present myself for interrogation. My interrogator requested that I sign a sheet saying that I would no longer help BIHE or help Baha'i students to obtain higher education. I refused to sign.

A few days later, he called me and three other friends of mine and summoned us to the notorious Evin prison. The Canadian Iranian journalist Zahra Kazemi was arrested in front of this same prison and finally tortured and killed. All of us who were entering Evin were psychologists. Two of us were graduates of the University of Ottawa, close to here, and I was a graduate of McGill University. Our official charges were acting and colluding against the regime, acting against national security, and membership in a Baha'i institution. The first

two charges are the exact same charges for many Baha'is who are currently in prison in Iran, including many of my friends.

• (1315)

While I was in solitary confinement in Evin, my interrogator claimed that he could keep me there forever and I would no longer see my wife and family unless I did as they said. The physical torture was limited to slaps and kicks, but the extent of the emotional and psychological tortures was much more extreme.

Even though my charges were those of acting against national security and colluding against the regime, all the interrogation questions were focused on my membership in the Baha'i community, working as a Baha'i in the clinic, and teaching psychology to Baha'i students. Specifically, the interrogator was keen to know why I wished to stay in Iran when I could easily go back to Canada and live there. I will quote what he once said: "If you have a master's degree from a Canadian university, why don't you go back there and stay there? I assure you that I will never allow you to work even in the furthest and the smallest villages of Iran." My answer was, "I am an Iranian and I wish to stay in Iran and serve Iranians." But apparently this was not what he wanted to hear. He in fact kept his promise and made sure that I would be fired from the clinic.

I was fortunate to leave Evin after 10 days, but my three friends are still in prison on the same charges. As I left Iran in 2012 to pursue my Ph.D. studies at McGill, the revolutionary court issued a sentence in my absence. The exact details of my sentence of imprisonment are unclear to me, since Iranian officials refuse to give Baha'is any written documents, probably in an attempt to eradicate any trail of these persecutions.

Mr. Chair, when I left Evin, I had lost my job, just like my dad had right after the 1979 revolution, both of us solely because we are Baha'is. My wife and my family were on a constant state of alert and were traumatized by phone calls from the intelligence service of Iran. My family members in Iran are still receiving these calls and are under constant pressure to pay the bail that my father set for my temporary freedom. For my dad, paying that amount of money is equal to selling his business.

This is a summary of a portion of what has happened to me and is happening right now to many other Baha'i friends of mine in Iran.

Thank you very much for your kind attention, Mr. Chair.

• (1320)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Nasrullah.

Professor Akhavan, please.

[Translation]

**Dr. Payam Akhavan (Professor, McGill University, As an Individual):** Mr. Chair, distinguished committee members, first let me thank you for inviting me to appear before you today.

[English]

I am honoured to appear before you again. I thank all of you for your long-standing commitment to making sure that the issue of human rights in Iran is not forgotten. I say so at a time when the nuclear question has all but eclipsed the question of human rights in Iran.

I would like to begin by addressing what has happened in the past two to three years under the presidency of Mr. Rouhani, the promises of reform, and the progress that has been made in trying to achieve some sort of solution to the nuclear issue.

Of course, nobody would say that diplomacy should not be given a chance. Nobody would say that war or sanctions are by any means desirable or viable solutions for solving this problem. But as I have said before this committee for many years, the problem in Iran is not that of nuclear capability but the nature of the regime. There are many countries in the world with nuclear capability about which we have very little concern. It's the nature of a regime that rules through terrorism, through violence, and through an extremist religious ideology that is cause for concern.

The question is this: under the shadow of nuclear negotiations and the wager that by ending Iran's isolation one will incentivize some sort of domestic political transformation—the empowerment of the so-called pragmatists moving Iran into the mainstream of international community—what has happened on the domestic front, even as President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif, and others have engaged in their charm offensive and in making pragmatic concessions on foreign policy fronts?

I will begin by speaking about the human rights situation in Iran. To give you just a glimpse of what I believe is a summary of the reality of the human rights situation in Iran, one could say that, at best, despite all the promises of President Rouhani to adopt some sort of bill of rights and to relax many of the restrictions on Iranian citizens, at best the human rights situation remains as it was before under the presidency of Mr. Ahmadinejad. At worst, it has actually deteriorated. As the regime makes concessions on the foreign policy front, the message of the hard-liners to Iranian citizens has been that they should not get the false impression that the concessions that have been made to the international community will translate into meaningful reform at home.

The United Nations Universal Periodic Review made a number of recommendations to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic undertook to accept 126 of those recommendations. According to reports prepared by reputable human rights organizations, of those 126 recommendations, five—only five—have been fully accepted. The reality is that the rate of executions in Iran remains alarming. It is still the highest rate of per capita executions in the world. This year the rate of executions is the highest it has been in the past 12 years. The execution rate today is worse, believe it or not, than it was under President Ahmadinejad.

My friend Marina asked, can things get worse? Well, apparently they have. Censorship and repression of the media and civil society remain as before. The imprisonment of the leader of the Green Movement, Mr. Mousavi, is still in force. He has been under house arrest for close to five years now, with no formal charges. The persecution of ethnic and religious minorities has intensified. I will address this issue in light of the broader regional context.

When we look at this reality, we have to understand what I would call the trilogy of human rights abuses, authoritarianism, and hyper-corruption in Iran.

• (1325)

It's remarkable that Mr. Larijani, head of the human rights council, recently warned those who exaggerate the extent of corruption in the government—this is from the report of the UN special rapporteur for human rights, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed—and instructed the law enforcement authorities to pursue individuals who expose corruption.

Now, why do I say this? I say this because while Canada is going before the United Nations General Assembly—commendably, as it has for so many years—sponsoring the resolution on human rights in Iran, Canada has become one of the biggest money-laundering centres for Islamic Republic insiders. You will recall some years ago the case of Mr. Khavari. Mr. Khavari for many years was the head of Sepah bank. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Sepah bank is the “financial linchpin” of both Iran's nuclear programs and its overseas terrorist operations, including the operations of the Quds Force as well as Hezbollah.

Through a simple Internet search, you can see that Mr. Khavari was head of the Sepah bank during the years when he qualified for Canadian citizenship under the Immigration Act. How much does it take to figure out that, notwithstanding his very questionable past, he was not physically present in Canada for the minimum three years that is required under the Immigration Act? Why has the government not taken action against Mr. Khavari? What credibility do we have when we allow such massive corruption to enter our own shores? Do we not appreciate, human rights aside, the security implications of the tremendous network of influence that money buys in this country? This is an issue I've raised over multiple years. I've raised it personally with our Minister of Immigration and with our Minister of Foreign Affairs. We need to think long and hard about how seriously we're committed to dealing with this issue.

I want to briefly also address not just the human rights situation in Iran but the human rights situation in the region at a time when we've seen an alarming deterioration of the situation in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. All of this has happened under the shadow of the nuclear negotiations. It's under the shadow of the nuclear negotiations that Iran has expanded its influence throughout the region.

Now, we're not here to talk about geopolitics, we're here to talk about human rights. Countries have a right to extend their influence by legitimate means, not through atrocities against civilians. That is the only issue I wish to look at.

In the same way that the Islamic Republic rules at home through terror and violence, it is also extending its influence in the region through the same means through proxy wars, through allies and insurgents over which it has complete control, and through the direct operation of the Quds Force. The Quds Force is the branch of Iran's revolutionary guards that is involved in overseas operations—the same Quds Force whose banker is Mr. Khavari, a Canadian citizen, and the same Quds Force that was involved in the 1994 bombing of the Jewish cultural centre in Buenos Aires, in which some 90 people were killed. We saw recently what happened to the star witness in that case, who was mysteriously assassinated in Buenos Aires.

The question of Syria and Iraq from a human rights point of view directly implicates Iran. The United Nations independent commission of inquiry has on many occasions referred to the role of Iran's revolutionary guards and Hezbollah without which the Assad regime would never have survived and which forces have had a direct role in atrocities against civilians.

We are now all caught up with the story of the ISIS barbarians who like to advertise their beheadings on social media, but let us not forget that despite the barbarity of ISIS, the killing of civilians by ISIS is still a small fraction of the more than 200,000 civilians that the Assad regime has killed. Perhaps the Assad regime doesn't advertise its mass murder on YouTube, but it is still by far the biggest menace in terms of human rights in Syria.

• (1330)

The situation in Iraq also has to be considered in light of the fact that the Shia militia, such as the Badr Brigades, which are leading the charge against ISIS, are also implicated in human rights atrocities against Sunnis. That is certainly not going to be the solution to any lasting stability in Iraq.

Why do I say this? Because the Middle East is now at the precipice. What is happening, in effect, is a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia that is expressed through ideological extremism, through the instrumentalization of the Shia-Sunni and Persian-Arab divide. This will have catastrophic consequences.

Getting back to my what my friend Marina Nemat said, can things get worse? Things can get much worse as this cleavage between Shia and Sunni Islam does not just rip apart Iraq and Syria but spills over into the kind of ethnic religious politics that we see within Iran and Saudi Arabia. Let us not forget about the Arab minority in Iran. Let us not forget about the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia.

I would simply appeal to this committee, while being most grateful that you continue to raise this issue at a time when it is being swept under the carpet in the name of so-called pragmatism, to appreciate that the situation could get far, far worse in the Middle East. Canada and the international community must broaden the conversation and not just look at ISIS and not just look at the nuclear issue. They must understand that until there's some sort of solution to this increasing radicalization and these wars of identity, we will be meeting here again in the near future with even more tragic stories to share.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Professor.

To all our witnesses, thank you.

Colleagues, I said I would let you know when 25 minutes was up. We are at 23 minutes and 50 seconds, so unfortunately we will have to adjourn the committee, as I said, without having the opportunity to ask questions.

We apologize to our witnesses.

Professor, you came in as I was explaining what happened. The bells are ringing for a vote. We require unanimous consent to even hear your testimony. We now have a vote that will take place in the House of Commons in just a couple of minutes. Unfortunately, we have to end our meeting before we can go to questions and answers, and that is despite the fact we have had what I thought was a particularly high quality of witness testimony today.

Professor Cotler?

**Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.):** Yes, just for 10 seconds, Mr. Chair.

I agree with you that it was a particularly high quality of witness testimony. I just want to say that at 7 p.m. in the Commonwealth Room, we're going to have a public forum involving our witnesses. Those of us who are able to be there this evening might be able to put some questions to them.

**The Chair:** That's just out in the south corridor?

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** Yes. It's at 7 p.m. in the Commonwealth Room.

**The Chair:** All right.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Colleagues, thank you very much.

To our witnesses, thank you very much as well.

We are adjourned.







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