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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Thank you very much for being here today.

I want to thank our three witnesses. We have two who are here in person and one by video conference.

By video conference, we have Abid Shamdeen, who is co-executive director and co-founder of Nadia's Initiative. That is an organization dedicated to advocating for victims of sexual violence and rebuilding communities in crisis.

We also have with us Susan Korah, who is a representative of A Demand for Action, a global initiative that advocates for protection of Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Christians and other minorities in the Middle East.

Also here in person we have Matthew Travis-Barber, the executive director of Yazda, a multinational Yazidi organization that was established to support Yazidis and other vulnerable groups.

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber (As an Individual): Former—

The Chair: He's a former executive. Sorry, I stand corrected.

Today we will be hearing an update on the human rights situation of the Yazidis, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq.

You will each have 10 minutes, and then we'll do one round of questions of seven minutes each. We have a little bit of committee business to do at the end of the meeting.

I would like to begin with Abid. He is on video conference. In case we have technical difficulties, we would like to start with him.

Go ahead, Mr. Shamdeen.

Mr. Abid Shamdeen (Executive Co-Director, Nadia's Initiative): Hello. Thank you so much for giving me the chance to be with you today and to speak to you via video conference. I'm sorry that I was not able to attend in person. We have been very busy recently with the work we do for Yazidis and other minorities in Iraq.

I want to begin by reminding us of the situation and how we got here with the Yazidis. I know that you are familiar with the situation,

but I want to remind you in terms of numbers in Iraq from 2014 until now.

When ISIS attacked the Yazidis, it was, in my opinion, a planned attack, a systematic attack, to basically eradicate Yazidis from Iraq. The number was close to half a million Yazidis, with over 400,000 Yazidis in Sinjar, the ancestral homeland of the Yazidis. When ISIS attacked, they killed close to 5,000 Yazidis in August 2014. They enslaved about 6,500 Yazidi women and children. Most of the Yazidis that were killed were elderly women who ISIS did not want to take for slavery.

As for the Yazidi women and children, the children ended up being brainwashed. A lot of them were recruited for ISIS, to fight with ISIS. Some of them are currently fighting with ISIS in Syria.

Out of these numbers, about 3,000 Yazidis, mostly children, remain in captivity. The rest are women that have been in captivity since 2014. About 350,000 Yazidis remain displaced in IDP camps in northern Iraq and the region of Kurdistan. A few thousand Yazidis are in refugee camps, both in Turkey and in Greece.

So far, I believe, we have discovered about 67 mass graves that contain the remains of Yazidis. One was discovered just two days ago in the town of Tel Azer, south of Sinjar.

In terms of the areas in Iraq being liberated from ISIS, Yazidi areas were historically neglected by the government, both by the KRG and by the Iraqi government. After 2003, the Yazidi areas were mainly under the KRG and were controlled by the Kurdistan government, and after this genocide by ISIS, Yazidi areas continue to be neglected. As Mosul and other areas have been liberated, all eyes have been on Mosul. Most of the support has been shifted to Mosul. Most of the IDPs have returned home from Mosul to Tikrit and other areas, yet the Yazidis remain in the IDP camps.

This is because of the political competition, mainly, and the unwillingness of both the KRG and the Iraqi government to rebuild the Yazidi areas and to provide security for Yazidis. Part of the reason is that Yazidis were never involved in their own security and in their own local governance. This is what led to the genocide, but after the genocide, this continued to be an issue for Yazidis.

Today, as Iraq is liberated and people have returned home, Yazidis are forced, in my opinion.... I feel that Yazidis are held captive in these IDP camps, because, first, their areas have not been rebuilt; there is no security and the access has been blocked to Sinjar. The roads that lead to Sinjar from Kurdistan, from the IDP camps, have been blocked since 2014 on and off, but since 2016 or 2017 these roads have been completely blocked.

● (1310)

I have been in talks with both KRG and the Iraqi government. They both blame the closure of these roads on each other. We still don't get clear answers from either side as to why these roads are blocked, but we believe mainly because it's the issue of control. As you know, these areas are disputed, and each side wants to control the area. They do not want Yazidis to be back in their homes unless either side has full control of Sinjar.

We think that the involvement, for example, of Canada, and other western governments, does not help by just providing some sort of financial support to UN programs. Even when you fund these programs, it does not end up getting to Sinjar and other areas that are disputed.

We have tried to initiate a separate program. It's called Nadia's Action Fund. We have been in talks with mainly the French government. I was trying to get material printed for you. President Macron, whom we met recently at the Paris Peace Forum, pledged to support this initiative financially and he personally launched the fund for us.

Part of this is because we want to make sure that the Yazidis are part of the solution by empowering the community. If Yazidis are not part of the governance of their own areas, the reconstruction and the security, it is not going to work having someone come from Kurdistan, Baghdad or Basra to run Yazidi areas for them.

I think the problem is that we have failed and continue to fail to involve the Yazidis, and even Christians, in governing their own areas and managing their security.

We met also with Mr. Trudeau at the Paris Peace Forum. We have urged him to take action and help with some of these issues. I know that Canada has taken some Yazidis in, mainly survivors. I raised this issue the last time when I participated in the citizenship committee. We believe that since Canada has taken these families, they should continue to relocate the rest of the family members that remain in Iraq.

As I mentioned in the beginning, the very fabric of the Yazidi community was shattered. Families have been separated. Almost every Yazidi family has either lost some members of their family or has family members in refugee camps, IDP camps, somewhere. It's very important to reunite some of these families after relocating some of the survivors.

I'm trying to keep track of the time. If I run over time, please let me know.

The Chair: You have about a minute left.

Mr. Abid Shamdeen: I'm very glad that Matthew Barber is also with us. He's very informed on the issues with the Yazidis. He and I worked together in Iraq to help the Yazidi community in Sinjar.

I believe that the responsibility of some of the western governments is not, like I said, simply by contributing some funds to the UN. We need to take further action. You need to put pressure on both KRG and the Iraqi government to lift blockades on Yazidi areas, to involve the Yazidis in the local governance of their own areas, and to make sure that the Yazidis are able, like everybody else, to return to their own homes to help them recover from this genocide.

We have worked with the U.K. government and the U.S. government, as you know, to pass the UN resolution to investigate ISIS crimes. This resolution was passed in September of last year. I have been speaking with the head of the team, Mr. Karim Khan, of the UN. So far, the UN has not created a structure or team to go and collect the evidence of these mass graves, of the genocide that was committed against Yazidis.

● (1315)

The Chair: Could you please wind it up. You're at your time.

Mr. Abid Shamdeen: Okay.

I hope I will get time to clarify some of these things during the Q and A period. I feel that Canada, just like France, should get involved directly, not through the UN only. I think it's very important to empower UN institutions, but it's also important to get involved directly, empower these communities that face genocide, and help them run their areas by themselves.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Matthew Barber, our second witness, for 10 minutes.

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: Thank you so much.

I have eight minutes to tell you everything that's wrong with Iraqi minorities and a solution to fix the problem. I'll try to move as fast as I can.

Over the past three and a half years since the Yazidi genocide began, I have been repeatedly asked to give lectures, presentations, and briefings such as this one to members of parliaments and congresses and numerous government agencies on the status of Sinjar and on the question of how we can help the Yazidis and other minorities in Iraq. But the advice that I and other advocates have consistently given to the officials of western governments has never been followed. That advice is to get involved directly in the internal political morass in Iraq that is by definition the cause of the abuse, the discrimination, and the systematic disenfranchisement that afflicts Iraqi minorities and places their very future existence in their homelands at risk.

Operatives of the Islamic State organization, or IS, still exist in Iraq. Even if its organizational structure and ruling capabilities have been broken, the extremist ideology of religious intolerance continues to thrive within many segments of the society. This will remain a perennial problem for religious minorities.

While IS is certainly the most brazenly depraved actor in the region, IS is not the player that most jeopardizes the future of minorities in Iraq. The actors who are most responsible for endangering the survival and continuity of religious minorities in Iraq are not Islamist extremists but so-called legitimate political entities jostling for territory and power. This competition centres around the problem with the disputed territories, which include areas high in minority populations, such as Sinjar and Nineveh, that became contested between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government in the north after Saddam Hussein's regime fell in 2003.

In Sinjar, from the fall of Saddam to the Yazidi genocide in 2014, Baghdad was responsible for the budget for Sinjar's infrastructure and services, but Sinjar was controlled by Kurdish armed forces and security. These peshmerga forces are not a national Kurdish military but partisan militias controlled by specific political parties. Sinjar fell under the control of the forces loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP, the ruling party of former president Masoud Barzani. This party did not allow the central government to play a role in Sinjar's administration. Instead, the KDP unilaterally appointed most of Sinjar's administrative officials, without elections or any say on the part of the local Yazidi population. Further, the KDP began to use repressive techniques against political rivals in Sinjar, intimidating and jailing Yazidis who joined political parties that favoured local governance and direct engagement with Baghdad rather than the annexation of Sinjar to the Kurdistan region. This is all prior to the genocide.

Nevertheless, some Yazidis in Sinjar hoped that Kurdish rule might advance the status of the marginalized Yazidi minority. These hopes were irreversibly shattered on the day the Yazidi genocide began. This was one of the most egregious instances of disregard for an ethno-religious minority in our era. As the IS jihadists approached Sinjar, the peshmerga forces affiliated with the KDP, who were responsible for Sinjar's security, were ordered by the Kurdish authorities in Erbil to withdraw. These forces never engaged the enemy but withdrew prior to the arrival of the jihadists. Instead of facilitating an evacuation and providing cover to civilians, the peshmerga fled even before the Yazidi families could leave. They refused to leave weapons behind, even when the Yazidis begged them for weapons to defend their families. We all know the result: over 6,000 Yazidis enslaved, more than half of them female, and as many as 10,000 Yazidis killed.

Following the genocide, the overwhelming majority of Yazidis from Sinjar have understandably rejected Kurdish claims to Sinjar's administration. Since August 2014, Yazidis have consistently demanded that Baghdad work directly with their community to develop local non-partisan administrative and security institutions so that Yazidis can govern their own affairs within the framework of a united Iraq, just as Abid told us via teleconference.

The Yazidis and advocates like me have also repeatedly begged the international community and western governments to facilitate this process by working directly with Baghdad to support the process and hold them accountable. The survival of the Yazidi minority in their homeland depends on making Sinjar safe and stable. But instead of pursuing this form of action, countless world leaders have done photo ops with Nadia Murad, have made overtures about the

rights of Yazidis, and in some cases have designated certain funds for humanitarian relief.

Over four years after the genocide, Sinjar is neither safe nor stable. Instead, the Kurdistan Democratic Party has targeted Yazidis with increasing levels of abuse and political violence. Angry that the PKK-affiliated forces that defended Sinjar from the jihadists later established a permanent presence that has resisted KDP attempts to reassume control over the disputed territory, the KDP implemented an economic blockade that prevented the Yazidis who survived the genocide from transporting foodstuffs, household goods, school supplies, farm equipment, and reconstruction materials needed to rebuild their own destroyed homes.

● (1320)

In effect, the Iraqi Kurdish powers have deliberately prevented the reconstruction of Sinjar, and have prevented displaced Yazidis, who have been living in tents for over four years, from returning home and continuing their lives. Human Rights Watch reported on this blockade, but in almost three years since it was first implemented, the road from the Dohuk region to Sinjar remains completely closed.

KDP's security forces have arrested, beaten and intimidated Yazidis who have joined, or attempted to join, PKK-affiliated militias in order to defend their homeland. They have also expelled the destitute civilian families of young Yazidi men who join non-peshmerga Iraqi militias to help liberate Yazidi villages from IS jihadists. The KDP has at times prevented medicine from reaching Sinjar—I saw this personally—and has prevented NGOs from conducting humanitarian and reconstruction work in Sinjar.

Most recently, KDP security forces have threatened scores of displaced Yazidis living in camps in the Kurdistan region with expulsion from the camps if they vote for independent Yazidi candidates running in Iraqi parliamentary elections, i.e., Yazidis not affiliated with the KDP ticket.

The answer to the question of the status of Iraqi minorities post-IS, therefore, is that local political competitors continue to abuse them, and many of their homelands remain unlivable.

The situation of the Assyrian Christians is similar to that of the Yazidis. The KDP authorities use a number of manipulative and coercive tactics to impose unilateral control over the Nineveh plain against the wishes of the majority of Assyrians who, like the Yazidis, would prefer to develop forms of local governance and security within the framework of a united Iraq rather than see their homelands annexed to a Kurdistan region, whose leaders have sworn to pursue an end goal of secession from Iraq.

Unfortunately, western officials rarely hear the real voices of these minorities because of the clever strategy of the KDP's financial patronage system. The KDP co-opts significant Yazidi and Assyrian community figures, including priests, bishops, other clergy, university professors, tribal leaders and political elites, by placing them on the party's payroll. As soon as a tribal leader, or a bishop, for example, accepts a KDP salary, they have effectively eliminated their own ability to speak out in defence of the rights of the community. To criticize KDP policy would mean the loss of the financial patronage that they have come to enjoy. In this way, the KDP has managed to eliminate almost all public opposition.

When western governmental entities such as this committee solicit the recommendations of visible Yazidi and Assyrian political elites in Iraq, these figures are almost always KDP affiliated. They therefore deliver a message consistent with KDP ambitions rather than one that reflects the true sentiments of their constituencies. This strategy has had a tremendously destructive impact on the status of these minorities, who have effectively become sheep without a shepherd.

Most recently, the KDP and other political entities have exploited the minority quota system to elect their own appointees to the Iraqi parliament. There is a minority quota system in Iraq, whereby Assyrians are guaranteed a certain number of seats within the system. Yet, because the law is broken, voting for those seats is not restricted to Assyrians; technically, Muslims can vote for these seats.

What happened this year was that several non-Assyrian political parties, including the KDP, influenced thousands of Muslims, who have never visited Nineveh in their lives and who inhabit non-Assyrian districts on the other side of the country—places like Basra and Kirkuk—to vote for co-opted Assyrian figures running on the tickets of these non-Assyrian parties like the KDP. As of this year, despite a quota designed to guarantee that Assyrian Christians will enjoy a minimum level of political agency, the Assyrians of Iraq have virtually no government representation.

There is going to be a report released on this very soon that I recommend you read. On political patronage, there's a report that was issued last year. I was a co-author. It's called "Erasing Assyrians". It's easy to find if you google it. That gives a lot of information about the patronage system. The new report is going to be coming from the Assyrian Policy Institute. It's going to talk about all of these election fraud tactics.

I'm pretty much done.

I know that those of you sitting on this committee probably think this is quite sad but that it's difficult to do anything about it, especially if your focus is immigration to Canada and not foreign affairs. However, I want to emphasize that if we really want to do something to solve the situation of Iraqi minorities, which keeps coming up—even if it seems like a remote and minor issue compared to everything else that our constituencies deal with, it keeps coming up—it's going to involve direct political action.

I propose a commission, established by one or more governments that have influence in Iraq, that can work directly with Baghdad, which I think would be very receptive to this, to resolve the issue of

the disputed territories and create the local governance that is needed in Sinjar.

● (1325)

Otherwise, Kurdish parties will take over Sinjar again, and it will be back to the status quo prior to the genocide, and most Yazidis will continue to emigrate from the country to seek refuge in the west.

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

We will now hear from Susan Korah.

Ms. Susan Korah (Representative, A Demand For Action): That's going to be a tough act to follow.

Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here.

Just to introduce myself quickly, I'm actually an Ottawa-based freelance journalist. I'm not of Iraqi background myself, so I can't speak from a personal experience perspective; however, I'm a Syriac Orthodox Christian, which is a major denomination in Iraq, so I have lots of sources of information through that network.

For the past year, I have also been a volunteer with an organization based in Sweden called A Demand for Action, which was founded and is run by Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Christians who have immigrated to Södertälje. I also have some Yazidi contacts through my journalistic work.

To talk about Christians, the Christian population of Iraq, as you probably know, was estimated to be 1.3 million before the fall of Saddam Hussein, but the numbers have been in free fall since then. A Catholic NGO, Aid to the Church in Need, issued a report about a year ago. They described the forced exodus of Christians from Iraq as "very severe". This report also says there were 275,000 Christians in 2015, and in 2017 this dwindled to 150,000. According to the American magazine National Review, over half the country's Christians are internal refugees, and this report predicts that Christianity in Iraq could be effectively wiped out within 20 years if the population continues to decline at this precipitous rate.

Where are these internally displaced Christians? Living in UN-sponsored camps is not a viable option for these people. Many of my informants have repeatedly told me that it's virtually impossible for them to go to a UNHCR camp because they are attacked, intimidated and harassed by their fellow refugees just for being who they are. They have said that it's like a nightmare living there. I'd say it's something similar to LGBT refugees.

The organization I represent, A Demand for Action, has actually protested this in front of the UNHCR office in Beirut, Lebanon, but nothing has changed.

Until recently, these internally displaced Christians of Iraq were living in church-run camps and makeshift shelters. A colleague, journalist Jordan Allott, who is also a filmmaker based in Virginia, visited Iraq just this last September to film a documentary on persecuted Christians in different parts of the world, including Iraq. He has reported that, with diminishing financial support, the last church-run camp in Erbil, in the Kurdistan region, was dismantled, and these displaced Christians had nowhere to go.

Many of them are going back to their former homes in cities like Qaraqosh, which was once a thriving Christian city. Some of them are going because they have no option, but others feel very strongly that they have to go back and reclaim their homeland. To them, Mosul and the plains of Nineveh are sacred spaces. It's where they have practised.

They see themselves as a very distinct ethnocultural religious group, not as generic Christians who can be dispersed and continue their community and their language. They feel that their language, Aramaic, is a very precious legacy of Christianity because it's the language that Jesus himself spoke.

They fear a loss of culture and identity, and they have told me themselves that if they are scattered in diasporas all over the world, they will be lost as a culture and all traces of Christianity will be wiped out.

• (1330)

ISIS has already desecrated and destroyed many churches and historical manuscripts and made a good attempt to remove two millennia of Christianity in this region, but the challenges of returning home, as both these gentlemen have said, are not that simple. The challenges can be summed up as the need for guarantees: the right to equal citizenship under the rule of law, security and, economically, the ability to work and to raise a family in peace.

The churches in Iraq, all denominations, have been trying to coordinate reconstruction efforts and bring some hope to Nineveh's Christians. Much of this reconstruction work is carried out through the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, an interdenominational organization.

Some of these denominations see the answer as creating a safe homeland for themselves similar to the Kurdistan region, but there are internal arguments and dissensions. Others see that as creating a Christian ghetto, and they would rather be part of the citizenry of Iraq.

Iraq's remaining Christians are appealing to western governments, including Canada, not only to help fund the reconstruction of the Nineveh plains, but also to use their power in both Baghdad and the Kurdistan region of Iraq to guarantee the security of all minorities, Christians, Yazidis and others as well, to ensure equality of citizenship, including property rights and freedom of worship.

Christians are also appealing to the international community to recognize the atrocities perpetrated against them as genocide. So far, only the European Union, the U.S., the U.K. and a few countries in Europe have done this.

I have a little bit of information about the Yazidis, just to add to what Abid and Matthew said. I have been speaking with Dalal Abdi. She's the Canadian director of Yazda. She has a wish list, which basically complements what Abid said.

There are apparently at present less than 1,500 Yazidis in Canada, in London, Ontario, where Dalal lives and in Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. She's appealing to Canada to accept more Yazidi refugees, not only because family members are missing, but because it's so critical to the healing of all the trauma that people have been

through, especially women. She talked about women who just cannot be healed while they are worrying sick about mothers and sisters still being in ISIS captivity and horrible things happening to them.

She spoke about this blockade on the road from Dohuk to Sinjar. She mentioned that there have been floods lately, and that has really added to the misery of the people who are living in tents and so on. She was asking if Canada could do anything to speed up the process of forming an investigation team so the perpetrators of these atrocities could be brought to justice. I believe that a Canadian, William Wiley, has taken some steps in that regard to set up a team to investigate and bring these perpetrators to justice.

The final thing on the wish list was to support the rebuilding of the infrastructure in Sinjar.

That's all I have to say. Thank you.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Korah.

We will go to six-minute rounds just to ensure that we have enough time. Seven minutes? Okay, but try to keep it as short as you can.

We will start with Mr. Anderson.

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

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

I don't think we will be able to do a full job in seven minutes, but we will try.

Mr. Shamdeen, I want to ask you about women who were taken and raped. We heard accounts of their having children, being placed in families, and the creation of new families with their children. How many of them are still held? How many were trafficked to other countries? What efforts are being made right now to bring them back home?

Mr. Abid Shamdeen: As I mentioned when I started, thousands were taken into captivity. Most of those who were rescued were mostly bought by their own families or relatives or friends. Right now, as ISIS is being pushed from Syria, a lot of the jihadists, when they want to escape from Syria and need financial support for that, will offer some of the Yazidi women for sale to their families. They usually ask for \$25,000 or \$30,000, though, and that's money the families do not have.

The problem is that there was never a special task formed by the Iraqi and Kurdish governments. I think both were responsible for this genocide on Yazidis and failed to protect Yazidis. They did not form a task force to follow up and try to rescue these women and children. Most importantly, this coalition that was formed to fight ISIS, which I think Canada is part of, also did not follow up specifically on the issue of Yazidis held in captivity, especially in Syria.

Mr. David Anderson: Was this something that impacted the Christian communities as well?

Mr. Abid Shamdeen: I'm not sure about the numbers of Christians, but I think there were a couple of hundred. I followed up on that back in 2015 and 2016 through the state department, and we were able to get them some support. ISIS refused to negotiate about the Yazidi women and children, because they considered Yazidis infidels worthy of enslavement, but they negotiated about the Christians, and we were able to get them released.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. Thank you.

I was here prior to the 2015 election, and I was on the foreign affairs committee. We talked about some of these issues then. One thing we talked about at the time was trying to re-establish the local government structures that would need to be put in place. From what you're saying today, that has not been successfully done.

One component of that was talking about how we bring about justice. You talked about accountability and holding perpetrators accountable. There are a couple of models. One is that the world does it from outside. The second one, and I think the preferred one from our discussions with witnesses, is that people are able to somehow establish local control and local justice issues.

Has that been able to get started at all, or are these other things—the quotas, the political blockades, the military control—interfering even with the capacity to do that?

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: It's not so much that those things are interfering with it; it's that the government neglects this entirely. So you have the Kurdish Regional Government dominated by the KDP. They have their sights set on annexing Sinjar and they try to occupy it. The problem with Baghdad is that they're just completely neglectful. Nineveh governorate and Sinjar are remote to them compared with all the problems they have. In principle they claim that the disputed territory should be administered by Baghdad, but then they don't really lift a finger to do anything there.

• (1340)

Mr. David Anderson: Can I ask you a question, then? You mentioned that a commission to work with Baghdad would be well received by them. Is it primarily because they would see it as an opportunity to extend their control to this area—

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: Exactly.

Mr. David Anderson: —in any useful fashion, or do they just want the territory? Are they actually concerned about good governance in this area, or will it be left basically as it was before but they will control the territory?

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: I think the commission would eliminate the headache on their part of having to figure out how to create the infrastructural development and administrative institutions that have never really existed there. So it's not so much re-establishing administration as it is creating it for the first time.

The KDP finally left. They took all the peshmerga out in the fall of 2017. Since that time, over a year, we've had this vacuum, this perfect opportunity to develop these institutions. Yazidi activists have been calling for that. They've actually been meeting with officials in Baghdad, with the prime minister's office, frequently, asking that he would appoint a new kaimakam, who's the district head of Sinjar, who would then have the authority to start bringing in NGOs that could do reconstruction. The problem right now is that if

I'm an NGO and I want to do reconstruction in Sinjar, I don't even have a party to go through that can authorize my work.

Mr. David Anderson: Why is the international community so disinterested?

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: That's a wonderful question. I've been asking that question for several years now. I don't understand. It's heartbreaking, really. But here's what I would say—

Mr. David Anderson: Let me rephrase it. What do we need to do to get the international community re-engaged in this issue so that they will show some responsibility for redevelopment of this area?

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: The international community wants to give money to pre-existing entities, like UN agencies, that have a limited capacity to do the kind of thing I'm recommending. They don't want to get involved in internal Iraqi politics, because they call that state building and then they say that this is colonialism, that we don't belong there.

The irony is that western governments didn't have a problem signing up with the U.S. coalition to effect regime change in Iraq and invade and occupy the country. That created the instability that led to ISIS. Now that we need to rebuild it, suddenly it's colonialism to be involved.

What I'm suggesting is that a coalition go to Baghdad, propose a working relationship—not impose themselves on the country—and say to them, “Look, you have a problem with this genocide. The whole world is looking at Iraq. Iraq now has its first Nobel Peace Prize winner who is from the Yazidi population. You need to do something about this, so let us help you.” They would say that's great, that they can't really deal with Sinjar, that they don't have the capacity and that corruption is a big problem. This commission could then go to Sinjar, work with local Yazidis and create a real election, a fair election—it's never happened—to create a leadership system there. That would make it possible to start bringing in reconstruction groups.

Mike Pence now has said they're going to give a lot of money for Iraqi minorities. The problem I have with it is that you don't have a system in place on the ground that can use that money responsibly. Most Yazidis are still unable to get back to Sinjar, and there are all the problems that we've been talking about. Everything is “cart before the horse” right now. We need security administration there. It needs to be local people.

It's not about creating a new Kurdistan region for the Assyrians in Nineveh or for the Yazidis. All you have to do is create a governorate in Sinjar. It will have the same governor, just like Mosul has a governor and just like Kirkuk has a governor. Every directorate has a governor. Create that and let local people fill those offices instead of a political party with an army.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: I'm sorry for my long answer.

The Chair: We're over your time, Mr. Anderson, and we do have some committee business at the end, so we'll go to Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much, all of you, for your testimony.

Actually, Mr. Barber, this is a good segue. I'll let you finish your statement. You mentioned that governments need to be held to account and that actors must be responsible. In a conference in Kuwait not too long ago, they pledged \$30 billion to reconstruct Iraq, but Iraq has issues with corruption. I think this is what you were just talking about.

If we are pledging this many billions of dollars, how can we ensure that it's going to the right areas, that it's not going to just the central government but is actually widespread throughout all of Iraq so that everyone is rebuilding, ensuring that they are going back to their homes and they have security and safety? How do we ensure that corruption doesn't get in the way?

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: Iraq is a big country, and I can't offer solutions for the whole thing. The corruption there is a tremendous problem.

What I can say regarding these areas that are minority populated, like Sinjar and Nineveh, is that if you had these commissions where, say, several representatives of a few western governments were included in a small body that was present on the ground and monitoring the implementation of reconstruction and humanitarian work while working on the political side simultaneously, they could be coupled together: humanitarian work reconstruction and administration and institution building.

These groups would be on the ground watching how the money is used, supervising it, basically. I think that would be a tremendous boon. They could be interfacing with the Iraqi government, giving respect to them and making their officials feel involved, but also policing it in a soft way.

• (1345)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm going to share my time with MP Saini.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you.

Mr. Barber, you raised a very interesting point. I want to build on that, because I think some of what you've said is amenable to what I'm thinking.

In the geopolitical struggle that's happening in Iraq right now, you know that there are two types of governance structures. There's one on the ground and one internationally. This is just a proposal, but should we somehow get the geopolitical actors who have influence in Iraq but are not Iraqi to come to some conclusion, to conclude some sort of agreement which would put pressure on their surrogates on the ground? To me, it seems like a fractured sort of mishmash there, where different people are taking orders from different parts, different people or different entities, yet if we can get the entities on the top and say that this is the agreement we've come to and now please implement it...

Also, and I know this is a really quick question, one of the things that Oxfam and some of the other human rights organizations have done when it comes to aid is that rather than give it through an organization or a middle person, they give it directly to the people. They would fund whatever purchases they need to fund, either

through a debit card or a direct cash transfer. That way, you're eliminating the middle person, or the middleman, and you're providing aid directly to the people rather than having it go through another organization where it could be lost there or lost to corruption.

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: Quickly for the last point, when I was director of Yazda in Iraq for a period of one year, some of our staff created that very program specifically for Yazidi women who had been enslaved and had survived. It wasn't the whole community, but it was done with the Baghdad government through their directorate of women's protection and ministry of social affairs. It's a special card that gives them a monthly stipend for the rest of their lives; even if they leave the country and come back they will continue to get it. Any woman who was enslaved qualified for that.

Those kinds of programs could be expanded. What's bigger is that Yazidis don't just need continual handouts. We can rebuild the Yazidi economy. We did this by taking chickens and sheep and other things to Sinjar for families who had returned. They will start to survive and rebuild their homes. We should focus on reconstruction, not these indefinite cash handouts. We can help them build their lives.

For the geopolitical question, here's the problem: It is a fractured country with many players. Turkey has 20 military bases inside the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq right now. The KDP is a proxy of Turkey. The other side of the KRG alone, the PUK in Sulaymaniyah, is an ally of Iran. Iran also has influence in Baghdad. A lot of the small proxy militias that are active in these disputed territories are loyal to one of those different sides. The alignments get very complex. I've written diagrams and mappings of that in the past.

The U.S. relationship with Turkey is very poor right now. The relationship with Iran doesn't exist, and our President has made sure it will get worse. That seems like a no-go area right now. I don't think we can create stability in Iraq by asking other regional partners to change their approach. Those regional partners are themselves competitors with each other.

I think we should exploit the relationships Canadian, U.S. and European governments have with Baghdad and the Kurdistan region to promote our own policy; the policy being saving these minorities.

I'm not talking about a major geopolitical strategy that has to do with interests for our countries that would look like neo-imperialism or colonialism. I'm talking about the need to help this tapestry of diversity survive in Iraq, so when it comes to making sure Yazidis can stay in their homeland instead of continuing to migrate to Germany and Canada and elsewhere, we can work directly with those partners and push that agenda, which is our agenda.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you.

Thank you very much, everyone, for your comments. This is a really intriguing discussion, and I'm still trying to get my head around this idea that we need to be supporting local governments and not using the international community. I'm not fleshing it out, just because of time.

I think we need to be using more of our international structures, especially to bring people to criminal court, because what I see as the biggest problem that isn't talked about enough in all of this, in the power struggle and in the geopolitical relationships, is this horrendous and brute concept of power.

It is not community-based, and there is the huge gender equality issue. Why are we, or should we be, supporting a process that more clearly and decisively brings people to criminal court for sexual violence and the rape of women, or is it too premature? Should that be happening in tandem with all this? That's the only way I can see these other things working.

Maybe you've been thinking about it a lot longer so you can give me some of your insights.

Abid, please join in with your comments too.

You may use the rest of my time, so the chair will cut you off.

● (1350)

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: Thank you so much.

These are important issues, and if I had more than eight minutes I would have loved to include them in the things I talk about.

These are the things on the mind of the Yazidi community; they're talked about a lot. Amal Clooney is working on the issue of justice. Iraq is summarily executing a lot of people they accuse of being with ISIS with these fast trials that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been criticizing. When they execute them they never mention the crimes against Yazidis. I think that might have happened once. This is very frustrating to the community.

Suddenly they have the terrorists; they're killing them, and yet there's no justice for us because they're not being tried for the genocide or for the sexual enslavement; however, all of this has nothing to do with the survival of Yazidis in the country in the future.

It's a very important moral issue. It will help the spirit of the community. But to me it is secondary in importance to the political problems and administrative vacuum that I talked about, because those issues are inhibiting reconstruction and the return of families to their homes.

For me, that's pre-eminent; the other is secondary.

I also think about the international community. We are the international community.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes.

Mr. Matthew Travis Barber: I don't think there's any problem with involving the UN in the kind of commission I mentioned. The problem is that the UN on its own just will not pursue a project to create this kind of political change. We as financial supporters of Iraq and the Kurds, we who provide the weapons that they depend on for their armies, have influence to effect this kind of change that the UN does not have.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

Abid.

Mr. Abid Shamdeen: Yes, of course, we want to involve the international community, and this is part of our work, Nadia Murad's work with Amal Clooney for the past almost three years to get the UN Security Council to pass the resolution to investigate ISIS crimes. The problem is that the process is super slow; it does not move.

As I mentioned, in September of last year, the resolution was passed and since then we have tried to push the team to go and collect the evidence from these mass graves. But the team is not ready. It's not deployed. It's not on the ground to do the work. Iraq decided to open the mass graves themselves without any international oversight, and so we contacted the Iraqi government through the U.S. government and we made sure they stopped the process for now until further notice. Hopefully the UN team can join them to at least observe the process.

This is part of what we do, but with regard to what we were mentioning in terms of local government and reconstruction, we just want to make sure that the community is part of the solution and is involved so they can rebuild their own areas by themselves, or be part of the process. For example, instead of taking those local officials who were controlling Sinjar prior to 2014 and during 2014 to court, or basically asking them questions about why they left and why they did not warn the Yazidi community that ISIS would attack it, they are now getting the same officials to go back and run Sinjar again without any accountability.

This is the problem. We Yazidis want to see ISIS criminals in court and in an international court, of course. This is what we would have preferred this whole time. In fact, I wish and we want to see something like the Nuremberg trials or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa or something similar, at which ISIS members can confess to, especially, the sexual violence they committed against Yazidi women and children. We want to see that.

As Matthew mentioned, ISIS members who have been taken to court in Iraq are being charged with terrorism charges only. They have not mentioned—not in any case that I've seen—any of their involvement in the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women, and that is what we want to see. That's why we want the international community to be involved in this process.

● (1355)

The Chair: I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here and for their very knowledgeable testimony.

We are going to suspend now for just one minute and clear the room so that we can go in camera for some committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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