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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues, to meeting number 24 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

For the members, we'll go through three to four rounds of questioning of the witnesses, and then we will break to go in camera and come back for some committee business and talk about our next meetings, etc.

Today we are meeting for a briefing on the situation in Iran.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking and address all comments through the chair. When you have about 30 seconds left in your questioning time, I'll signal you with this paper so that witnesses and members are aware of that.

We have interpretation. You'll see a globe icon at the bottom of your screen. You are able to pick English or French, or if you're bilingual, you could leave it the way it is. Please do not take screenshots or photographs while we're going through our meeting.

Our witnesses for the two hours are the following. Kamran Saghah—and I apologize if I've mispronounced a name—is representing the Association of Iranian Ex Political Prisoners in Canada. We have, representing the Iran Democratic Association, President Shahram Golestaneh accompanied by Simin Boorchi, an ex-political prisoner.

Witnesses, you're going to have up to six minutes to make your opening remarks.

We'll begin with Kamran. I'll be timing you for about six minutes, so if you can start now, Kamran, then the other witnesses can go after.

Mr. Kamran Saghah (Electrical Contractor, Association of Iranian Ex Political Prisoners in Canada): Good evening, everyone. It is my pleasure to be in this meeting today. My name is Kamran Saghah, and I am a resident of Vancouver, B.C., and a proud citizen of Canada.

The violation of human rights in Iran is a book of untold stories that pain the hearts of every human being. Iran's shameful record of human rights has ordered the Iranian regime as the number one executor of the world capital. The merciless judiciary system of the mullahs is responsible for the execution of more than 120,000, including juveniles, the elderly, dual citizens and pregnant women.

I myself have spent part of my youth in Iran prisons and have first-hand witnessed unimaginable brutalities. I was charged for reading the newspaper of the MEK, the group that was opposing the regime. We were a group of five people doing mandatory two-year military service in the summer of 1981. My so-called trial lasted about three minutes, with no lawyer and no chance to defend myself. The face of the so-called “Judge” Fallahi and his sentence have become part of my permanent memory.

Detainment, torture and execution are in fact a way of survival of this regime. Allow me to refer to a few.

There was the massacre of more than 30,000 political prisoners in the summer of 1988. In fact, Ebrahim Raisi, the leading presidential candidate in Iran, was part of the death committee responsible for the massacre, which took my best friend, Amir Anjadani, and some of my relatives, like Ahmad and Agha Mohammad Tasharrofi.

Ali Younesi and Amirhosein Moradi, two international award-winning students, were arrested in April 2020 and charged with a series of accusations of violent acts. Amnesty International said that while detained in separate rooms, Ali Younesi and Amirhosein Moradi had been sleeping on the floor, and were also at times detained alongside individuals accused of violent offences. Amnesty believed that they remained held in section 209 to pressure them to make forced confessions.

More than 150 innocent protesters were killed in daylight by the regime guards in November 2019. More than 4,500 arrested, and many of them are still in prison. The protesters were protesting a sharp spike in fuel prices.

Navid Afkari, 27 years old, a gold-medallist champion wrestler, was executed in September 2020, accused of taking part in anti-government protests. The case set off a campaign by international sports groups to demand clemency for the athletes. His brothers were also arrested, and are still in prison.

Then there was the shooting down of the Ukrainian passenger plane with IRGC missiles, killing 176 people, including many Canadian citizens. It's worth noting that the Ontario Superior Court has ruled it an act of terrorism.

More than 4,300 people have been executed in Iran during Rouhani's tenure. As of now, they include 118 women. The actual number of executions, and particularly executions of women, is much higher. The clerical regime carries out most executions in secret and out of the public eye.

● (1840)

I wish I had more time to draw a more detailed picture of the pain and misery that the people of Iran have endured in the last 42 years.

I want to plead with you not to forget political prisoners in Iran.

Mr. Arzhang Davoodi, a mechanical engineer from Texas, has been languishing for 18 years in various Iranian jails without a single day of furlough. There is Dr. Saeed Masoori, Mr. Saeed Sangar, and the list goes on.

Despite all these painful years, the future of Iran is as bright as a shining star. The dismay, discontent and dissatisfaction of the people of Iran have reached an explosive level. The quests for freedom, peace, a nuclear-free Iran, free elections, gender equality, etc. are all embedded in the 10-point plan of Mrs. Rajavi, the president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran for a prosperous Iran.

On behalf of many thousands of Iranian Canadians, I urge the Canadian government and every single one of you to support us for a free Iran, in as many ways as you are able to.

I thank you for the opportunity and look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Saghah.

Now we'll hear from Mr. Golestaneh and Ms. Boorchi.

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh (President, Iran Democratic Association): Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, honourable members of Parliament and honourable Chair.

I want to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to discuss such an important issue that has affected and will affect many people around the globe and in Canada.

I want to thank the subcommittee and its former and current members for having a unified voice in promoting and defending human rights globally, most notably in Iran.

Mr. Saghah talked about some of the issues. My colleague, Ms. Boorchi, will talk about some of the issues involved in the heart-breaking situation of political prisoners and Iranian prisons.

I want to concentrate my remarks on two major issues. I cannot say how timely this session is to address these issues. First is the shooting down of the Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 by two IRGC missiles, when 176 passengers, including 58 Canadians, lost their lives and were killed. The second is Iran's so-called presidential election.

The events involved in the shooting down of the Ukrainian flight have been elaborated on in various meetings, and I'm sure you may have heard the testimony by the families in front of the transport committee and many other forums, so I will not repeat those. The

families of the victims are devastated. All they want is justice—justice before compensation—and to hold the Iranian leaders accountable for what the Ontario Superior Court of Justice called a deliberate act of terrorism. I guess that's not too much to ask.

Foreign Affairs Minister Marc Garneau called Iran's behaviour regarding flight PS752 unconscionable. We believe there is enough evidence to take Iran to the international courts. This is what we demand that Canada do, in addition to designating the IRGC a terrorist entity.

The next topic—and I will go very quickly to leave time for questions and answers—is Iran's sham presidential election on June 18, just three days away. The overwhelming call to boycott the election has reached an unprecedented level in recent years. Large segments of society from all walks of life are increasingly calling the election in this regime a sham and illegitimate. Mothers of martyrs of the November 2019 uprising and families of executed and imprisoned political prisoners—including the family of Iranian wrestling champion Navid Afkari, who was executed in 2020—not only all called for boycotting the election but also publicly stated that their vote was to overthrow this regime.

Chanting slogans such as, “We won't vote anymore for we have heard so many lies,” “The people have not forgotten that Raisi is the mass murderer of 1988,” and “Hardliner, reformer, the game is now over,” have become so widespread that social media is full of messages of this kind.

In a posting yesterday, a young man went public and said to Raisi, the so-called front-runner in Iran's presidential election, hand-picked by Khamenei, that Iranians know he is the mass murderer of 1988, and that he knew he was endangering his own life by saying this. He said he was ready for it and that his only request was that when they wanted to hang him, they use a silk rope. Another man tore down posters of Khamenei and pleaded for people to take care of his two kids if he was arrested and executed.

The election in this regime is a farce, not only by our account but now even by those who have fallen out of favour with the regime, including former presidents or leaders of the very same regime who were involved in the mass atrocities.

Raisi, as well as many other officials of this regime, is a top pick for our Magnitsky sanctions. Professor Cotler's Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights published a report with the names of gross human rights abusers, including Raisi, and recommended their inclusion on our sanctions list.

Unfortunately, so far Canada has not added a single individual on that list to its sanctions list, and this is not what a responsible policy is. The minimum Canada can do is to do that and to designate the IRGC a terrorist entity.

• (1845)

The Iranian people will soon decide their own fate, but Canada can and must play a role, such as the one we played in the apartheid regime in South Africa, standing with the Iranian people in their quest for a democratic republic based on the separation of religion and state, gender equality, the abolition of the death penalty and a modern judiciary system that abides by international law.

This is what the people want. They are the very same principles that are enshrined in NCRI president-elect Mrs. Rajavi's 10-point plan and platform for the future Iran.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going to move to the members for questions. In our first round, we will start with MP Sidhu from the Liberals, for seven minutes.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being with us this evening.

The Iranian presidential election is set to take place later this week—more precisely, on June 18—and since the last election in 2017, many things have changed in the Iranian political landscape.

Mr. Golestaneh mentioned this in his opening remarks, but I'm hoping to hear a little more from Mr. Saghah and Ms. Boorchi in terms of telling this committee more about their perspectives on the presidential election and its various implications.

• (1850)

Mr. Kamran Saghah: Thank you for your question, Mr. Sidhu.

In fact, what has happened is that the Iranian dictator regime is not like a classic dictator regime. It is a religious fascist government. They use every single way, every tactic, in order to stay in power. I believe they play all the cards they have.

Now, people realize that there is nothing between these regimes that's going to be solved. People realize that more and more now. I can say that for more than 98% of people, when elections are called, they hate them, but unfortunately, they've been controlled by different kinds of secret service—about 53 different organizations to oppress and control people.

It was just this morning that my mom called. She's very old, about 80-something, and she noticed something, because our house is very close to an airport that is hardly used now because they made another big airport in South Tehran. She said, "You don't know how many passenger airlines are coming in." So many people boycott the regime election that they had to bring them from other countries, like from Iraq or from Hezbollah, or their proxies from all around the region. They stand there on the line and say, "Yes, we have some people to vote for us." That's all I can say for now.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

Ms. Boorchi, do you have anything to add in terms of the perspective?

Ms. Simin Boorchi (Ex-Political Prisoner, Iran Democratic Association): I didn't hear the question because I was disconnected. Can you please repeat it?

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Yes. No problem.

As the Iranian presidential election is fast approaching on June 18, I just wanted to hear your perspective on the election. A follow-up to that would be the implication for Iran as an important regional actor. I know that Mr. Saghah mentioned the region quite briefly as well.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: First of all, the Iranian people do not believe that this is an election. This is a selection.

In any election, you should have a few different parties. The people come out and they talk, and there are new faces, but in Iran it is not like that. It's the supreme leader. Some people come and register. Most of the people they choose have to be 100% devoted to the supreme leader. The supreme leader chooses four, five or six among the candidates, and then tells the people to choose from them.

All of these people who are candidates right now were in the government, and everybody knows about their corruption and their association with the oppression of the people, so to me and to millions of Iranians this is not an election. This is a selection and everybody is boycotting it. People, ordinary people, actually make video messages and put them on the Internet, asking people not to participate.

We all have to put our heads together and put our hands together and overthrow this government, because we have seen so much corruption, for at least 40 years. Enough is enough.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Over the past few years, we have seen many occasions where peaceful protestors have taken to the streets to express their opposition to the regime. The regime responded forcefully. What are the chances that such a nationwide protest would happen again in the near future, and did these protests have an impact on the regime itself?

Mr. Saghah or Mr. Golestaneh or Ms. Boorchi, the floor is open to whoever wants to comment.

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: You talked about the prospect. Actually, it is very much what is at play. Basically, even in the past, since 2018, major protests, as you just alluded to, have been held in Iran. The most violent one, from the government perspective, which killed 1,500 people, was in November 2019. Even since then, many protests, like right in the aftermath of the downing of the Ukrainian flight, and on every occasion, every day in Iran, about 200 to 300 protest rallies are taking place, on economic issues, social issues, freedom of expression issues—on every aspect of life. The prospect of change and nationwide uprising is very much on the horizon.

Of course, the oppression of this regime, as Mr. Saghah alluded to, is not a traditional dictatorial regime; it's a religious fascism, I call it, that uses all kinds of methods and tactics to oppress the people. I would not personally expect millions of people to come out, because it's impossible, but I would say organized resistance by the resistance units will bring the regime to its knees very soon.

When people have openly challenged—they are doing it every day—and I mentioned a couple of them in my opening remarks.... I wish we had the opportunity; I believe the members should have the opportunity.... I was not sure whether video clips are accepted as evidence or not, but I believe that even if they are not, then a collection of them could be given to the members so that they know what's happening on the streets in Iran.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going to move to MP Chiu for seven minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To the witnesses attending today, I salute you. Thank you for coming. Your courage and persistence, hopefully, will one day pay off to see a freer, fairer country in Iran that respects justice and human rights.

From another witness who couldn't make it today, we have his written testimony. In it, he mentioned that one of the recommendations is to make sure we focus in Canada on the intimidation of Canadians of Iranian descent and also the interference of these Iranian dissidents in Canada.

Can all three of you speak briefly to what your experience has been? Are these overdramatized descriptions, or is it in fact true that foreign countries like Iran have been intimidating Iranian dissidents?

Let's start with Mr. Saghah.

Mr. Kamran Saghah: I can give you one example. When they shot down the Ukrainian passenger airline, I went and attended a ceremony, because one of the Iranians on the north shore has a bakery, and his wife and daughter were killed in this shooting.

Believe me, I said, you can do a lot. You can go after and complain and apply for court. He was hesitating. He said he was scared, because he was going back and forth to see his parents or relatives. Even though they are here, they are still scared of the Iranian regime. That's why many family members didn't take action, because of the fear of this regime. Regarding—

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you. Because of the time constraints, I would like to ask the same question of Ms. Boorchi.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Yes. I can say that Iranians who live here, when we see some people who are related to the regime or who are supportive of the regime here..... I remember not too long ago, they had a religious ceremony in downtown Richmond Hill. People were chanting and telling them they should not be having this ceremony here. One person was saying, "Allah means 'harmony'; we'll know what to do with you, and the IRGC knows where you are and we will take care of you."

At one time I was a political prisoner, and now I'm running from Iran. I came all the way from the other side of the world and I see them right under my nose. They are threatening us. This is really scary.

• (1900)

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

Mr. Golestaneh, is there anything substantial...? Have you heard about cases being reported to Canadian authorities that have borne some fruit, that have been protective of Canadian dissidents?

Have you any advice for the subcommittee?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Absolutely. There have been many cases.

What Mr. Saghah said, and I will reiterate, is that the victims are victimized twice, and I'm talking about the victims of the shooting down of flight PS752. Many of them have actually complained to the police and security services. Some of them also publicized and published the threatening phone calls, some from Iran and some from within Canada, asking them not to take any legal action. When a victim like that, who has lost his wife, his daughter or a young child, is threatened in such a manner.... You can imagine how widespread these threats are.

Of course, over the years, I have seen many cases of people who have reported to the authorities. Some of those have originated from within Canada. Others, and I would say the majority, have originated from outside Canada but targeted individuals from within Canada. That includes people who have bought their citizenship on bogus claims and are related to the Iranian regime going to other countries and threatening people in various ways.

As Ms. Boorchi said, they say, "We know where you are. We have your credentials. We know how to deal with you." This is very serious.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

Mr. Saghah, to be effective, a fear has to be substantiated. We have a written statement from the other witness who couldn't be here with us today that there have been kidnapping situations.

The regime has to have something to back up the fear. Do you recall any such incidents?

Mr. Kamran Saghah: Yes, I do.

For example, I've been here for almost 32 years. Can you imagine? They called my sister, who is in another city, and took her in for interrogation by the secret service. They asked for my information, like my phone number, address and everything.

The last time, she gave a different last number of my phone number. They said, no, this is his number. I mean, see how they try to keep this fear of Iran, even abroad?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu.

We'll now move to the Bloc, with MP Brunelle-Duceppe, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us this evening.

I want to acknowledge your courage, resilience and strength you've shown by being with us today. The study we're doing is extremely important.

My first question is for Mr. Golestaneh.

You're aware of what's happening in Iran right now. What is the situation of ethnic and religious minorities? Specifically, why are Kurds and Balochis suffering more? What is the situation of Baha'is and other religious minorities?

Could you please provide an overview of this?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Of course. I'm sorry, but I will answer in English, if I may.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's not a problem at all.

[*English*]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Actually the ethnic minorities in Iran, especially in the border provinces, like the Kurds, the Baluchis and the Arabs, I would say, in Khuzestan province all suffer double discrimination, and that's why these provinces are among the poorest provinces in the country and have not seen any improvement in the past 42 years.

Some of these people, just to make ends meet, basically have to do extremely difficult jobs of portering fuel across the border just to get their basic necessities covered. They are called kolbars or soukhtbars, which means they are the porters of goods or fuel, like the Baluchis and the Kurds. Most often they are targeted. They are killed by the IRGC and the border guards, knowing that they are the poor people and have no other means to defend themselves. That's why we have major uprisings in Baluchistan and in Kurdish cities against the whole situation, and that's why the regime is so afraid.

You referred to the Baha'is' case. As we speak.... Yesterday, I read another news article that another Baha'i motorcycle champion was sentenced to eight years in prison. This is typical. They don't have any rights to higher education, and their plight has been heard many times in this subcommittee and many other forums. All the religious minorities and all the ethnic minorities, unfortunately, suffer twice, once because they live in Iran—because every Iranian citizen suffers—and second because they are in a minority group.

• (1905)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Iran claims that women have equal rights, and it was elected to the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

I'd like to hear what Ms. Boorchi has to say about this, please.

[*English*]

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Can you please say it in English one more time?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is Ms. Boorchi getting interpretation, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

The Chair: Is the interpretation not coming through?

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Yes, I just put it on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'll repeat my question, and you'll give me my time back, obviously, thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Thank you. I'm sorry about that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, it's no trouble; it's normal. I'm very bad when it comes to technology.

What I was saying is that Iran claims that women have the same rights as men. Now, Iran was elected to the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

I'd like to know what you think about this situation.

[*English*]

Ms. Simin Boorchi: I am so saddened to hear that Iran has been elected to a chair on the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women. Let me tell you about women's rights in Iran. First of all, we are second-class citizens in Iran. We don't allow a woman to go out of the home or out of the country without her husband's approval. As a woman, if you are an adulterer, you are stoned to death, while men are exempt because they can have multiple wives. You cannot divorce, even if your husband is beating you up and you have a miserable life. The children you give birth to go to your husband, and if your husband passes away, you, as the mother, cannot have your kids, but your husband's family can take care of your kids.

You are asking me how the situation is in Iran. I am so sad.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Ms. Boorchi.

Mr. Golestaneh, in your testimony, you spoke about the Iranian wrestling champion who was sentenced to death and executed.

I'd like to know what the situation of political prisoners is right now, considering what was done to the Iranian wrestling champion. Everyone looked at this with disbelief.

Do you know the status of his family? What are people saying there, in Iran, and what is the situation of political prisoners right now?

[*English*]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Thank you.

About Mr. Navid Afkari, who was a wrestling champion, the whole world rallied to save him, actually, including Canada and many other places, and unfortunately it fell on deaf ears in the Iranian regime, because he had become a symbol of resistance and also was participating in the uprising in 2018. Unfortunately, his two brothers were also arrested and, as said earlier, they are still in jail.

Now, the rest of his family, including his very brave sister, Mrs. Elham Afkari, goes public. Despite being intimidated, arrested, harassed and all the types of physical and emotional trouble that she has to go through, she has gone public. One of the slogans that she made just a couple of days ago was, "My vote is to overthrow this regime, for they have killed my brother and my two other brothers are suffering."

Indeed, in a response that I received personally from the foreign affairs minister a while ago, after the execution of Mr. Afkari, he said that Canada is pursuing the case of the two imprisoned brothers.

• (1910)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll move to Ms. McPherson for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all our witnesses for joining us today. I'm horrified by some of the testimony you're sharing with us, and very saddened that you had to come and share it with us.

I'd like to start with the downing of flight 752. Of course, I've spoken to some of you already about this, but many of you will know that Edmonton Strathcona and Edmonton as a community was disproportionately impacted by that terrible tragedy. We've seen the Government of Canada have a response and we've seen what the Iranian government has failed to do.

One of the questions I have is about supporting the families. What are the asks that the families have? What can we do right now to support families? In particular, I think of families I have spoken to who have deep worries about the safety and health of their family members who may still remain in Iran.

Could you comment on that, perhaps?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: I believe that what we need to do is basically to listen to the voices of the families. The Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims has had many meetings and sent many requests to the Canadian government and elsewhere.

Indeed, I would also stress on this one that many of the family members of the victims staged rallies in Iran when the Ukrainians and, at the time, people from Canada, from the Transportation Safety Board, went to Iran to investigate. They rallied in front of their delegation residence, saying, "We don't have any hope from the Iranian government, but we ask Ukraine and Canada to follow up our loved ones' case in the international courts." I guess we have to hear that.

On your specific question of what Canada can do—and of course there are many things Canada cannot do—we have offered, I believe in a symbolic way at least, to some of the families to come

and take up residency in Canada. I believe that's a good gesture. It would not resolve all of the problems for all of the families, unfortunately.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Of course.

Mr. Golestaneh, I know that you know, but I brought forward a unanimous consent motion into the House of Commons, asking the Government of Canada to condemn any threats that were being made to people in Canada. You spoke about that a bit. Would you like to provide an update or any additional information about that?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Yes. Many of those audiotapes were actually made public. CBC published one. I believe that was an exclusive use, so I cannot use it, but it is on the CBC's website: One of the family members was phoned from Iran and basically threatened not to take any action.

On another occasion, it was Iran's foreign minister's audiotape that was revealed: Mr. Zarif, who many people in the west think is a reformer. He said this case will not go anywhere because they knew it; they knew what they wanted to do, and I'm afraid that this will not go anywhere. He tried to whitewash the whole regime

Unfortunately, this is not the only case. His department was also implicated in terrorist acts in other countries, including in Belgium. An Iranian diplomat, for the first time ever after World War II, was condemned and convicted on terrorism charges. He was convicted of having placed a bomb at a gathering of hundreds of thousands of Iranians in Paris. He was given the maximum sentence of 20 years, with no chance of parole or appeal.

I know from my own city, Ottawa, a radio host who has done this. She was threatened, actually by a gun to the head of her brother from Iran, calling on her to stop her work or to return back to Iran, otherwise her brother would be in danger.

These are the types of things we see quite often.

• (1915)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Ms. Boorchi or Mr. Saghah, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Ms. Simin Boorchi: I would like to bring to your attention that we, as Iranians, want the world listening to the people. We don't want to postpone by having an appeasement policy, saying, "Let's talk now. Let's see how it goes." For years, all the countries have talked to these people, and it gets worse and worse. It's only firm and decisive action that can stop this. Condemning is good, but because they are very shameless people, they do not listen. We have to take action.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

A stronger response, I think, is what you're requesting from us.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Yes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Saghah.

Mr. Kamran Saghah: I just want to add that the only policy that works is taking a firm policy, because up to now we have been using other policies, and they have been expanding their power in the region—not only within Iran, but also in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen; all people around and near Iran are suffering the brutality of this regime.

I believe there is a solution; there is a way. I believe the Canadian government can do a lot by taking it—

The Chair: Thank you.

We're moving into our second round of questions, and we're going to begin with the Liberals.

MP John McKay will be up next, for five minutes.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): I'm not quite sure who I should direct this question to, but it's long puzzled me as to what benefit the Iranian government gets from shooting down a passenger jet.

Can you take me through the thinking of this regime and what possible benefit they could have obtained by virtue of this immense tragedy?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: I believe that's for me, so I'll take it quickly.

I'm not too sure, John, whether you have seen the investigative report by a Canadian investigator, Andre Milne, regarding this tragedy, and the technical issues that led him to believe.... He investigated this tragedy from day one.

With regard to your specific question, he actually argued.... This is not concrete, I would say, evidence. This is analysis, per se. They tried to use a human shield in order to avoid further intensification of the conflict with the U.S. In the aftermath of the U.S. drone killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, instead of closing down the Iranian air space and declaring it dangerous for passenger flights, they allowed this to happen.

It's a public report published in Vancouver, in a weekly. I can send the report to the subcommittee for distribution. Mr. Milne has also given it to Ukrainian and Canadian authorities. He felt it was a deliberate Iranian action. That's why the Iranians asked every single passenger whether they had U.S. citizenship. There were a couple of passengers who had U.S. citizenship, but they were not on board. They were denied. The Iranians wanted to use this passenger airline as a human shield in order to prove.... In the beginning, they did not

admit they did it. They said it was an accident, and it was due to U.S. hostilities, so they wanted to use it as a shield to protect themselves.

• (1920)

Hon. John McKay: I must admit I find that logic bizarre, and almost incomprehensible: to yank U.S. passengers off a flight in order to shoot down non-U.S. passengers and create a human shield. I don't quite get the thinking there, but since I have only a couple of minutes, I thought I'd mention that, because it has puzzled me for quite a while.

Go ahead, Mr. Golestaneh.

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: I'll elaborate on that. Let me provide you a couple of other examples, because this is not the only one. It's unfortunate, and I'm not talking about general terrorism. I'm talking about specific action, like when Iran bombed the Iraqi Shia Imam tombs. They were doing things that a normal person would hesitate to even contemplate. How could they do this?

They placed a bomb in Mashhad. This was revealed afterwards, that it was not by any opposition group or anything like that. Within their internal in-fighting, it became clear that this was done by elements of the government in order to take advantage of others. This was not the first time. They killed Christian priests, and they blamed it on the opposition. There are many things that cannot be easily explained to a non-suspecting witness from outside Iran's walls. I totally agree with you.

Hon. John McKay: I thank you for that.

Let me ask one last question. The diaspora community here seems to be not only very fractured; elements of it are quite deviant, and contrary to Canadian interests. In the pathetic little amount of time that the chair has allocated to me, could you give me, in 30 seconds, who and how the diaspora community is threatening the security of Canada?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: That's almost impossible to do in 30 seconds, as you said.

It's not only the Iranian diaspora that is fractured, as you say. As Ms. Boorchi said, we have to listen to the Iranian people inside the country. I guess the Iranian diaspora is just a cut of the society in Iran. Of course, that's what democracy is about. That's why we have to listen to various voices. The threat the Iranian diaspora is facing from the Iranian regime is more than a physical threat, I would say. It's influential.

The Chair: Thank you.

My clock rolled over by about a minute there, John, but it's done that for all the members. They can be well assured that they've also had a slow-running clock.

Next up is MP Scott Reid for five minutes...or so.

Mr. Scott Reid: Or so. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I personally think you're very fair to all of us, based on our experience.

I want to ask a question about the issue raised with regard to the expatriate community being fragmented. Iran itself is a remarkably diverse, heterogeneous country. There are multiple languages. There are some very large linguistic minorities—the Azeris and the Baluchis—and there are some other distinctions.

To what degree is the Canadian diaspora community a reflection of that? Or is it primarily just one group from within that mixture?

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Yes, there are different fractures, different ethnicities, in Iran, but they all call themselves Iranian. If it's something for Iran, everybody says they will give their life for Iran. The Baluchis say it. The Christians say it. The Muslims say it. The Kurds say it. The Turks say it. Yes, we have different languages and different religions, but we all gather around one pole, which is Iran.

Yes, in opposition there are different fractures too. I may be from the north; Mr. Golestaneh may be from the west, and there are other people, but we all consider ourselves Iranian. We know that our motherland needs help. We want to be the voice of our motherland. They destroyed our country. It was a fertile land. It is now deserted. People are living in destitution and being put away. There are tens of thousands of people just sitting in jail for questioning their government. This is not acceptable.

Living in Canada, I can talk to you so freely and express myself. Why in my country can I not do that? We have 3,000 years of history. There are some religious people who are not religious. They are fascists. They don't have any education. When I go and talk to priests here, they say they are studying law, philosophy, and this and that, but these people are not doing that. That's why we want a change and people like that don't want a change.

• (1925)

Mr. Scott Reid: Ms. Boorchi, since you have the floor right now, maybe I can ask you my next question.

You and one of the other witnesses made reference, right in your first presentation, to the term “religious fascist” regime. You're free to fill in what your meaning is there, but I want to ask this question: To what degree is the religious element used as window dressing or as a way of legitimizing what the regime does? To what degree are they sincere about their religious fervour?

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Yes. Whatever they interpret about Islam, it's not that.

Do you see this picture? I hope everyone sees it. This girl, 13 years old, was arrested. They said—they made this up—that if the girl was a virgin when they executed her, she would go to heaven. They don't want these people to go to heaven, because they stand up in front of them and are against them, so they raped this girl in order for her not to go to heaven. They want to play God. For me as a Muslim, it's not people who judge me. It's God who judges my actions. For them, because they want to teach other people who is the boss, they are even doing this—being judges who execute their own kids.

Take everything they say about the hijab, for example. The hijab is mandatory. Everybody has to have one. If you're Christian, you're Muslim, you're Jewish or whatever, if you come out of the house, you have to have it. At the beginning, they were throwing acid in the faces of people. It happened in Isfahan. If you look on the Inter-

net, you can see that there have been seven or eight cases. Today the imam says it at Friday prayers, and the next day seven people have acid thrown in their face.

That's why I'm saying it's religious fascism. They are not religious people.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Mr. Kamran Saghah: Can I add something?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, please do.

Mr. Kamran Saghah: In fact, it's very hard for western people to understand what kind of government it is when we say “religious fascist government”. In fact, there is something in their brains and they interpret this as Islam, but if you study Islam, it's not really Islam. It's against Islam or against Christianity or against Jews. Whatever is in their brain, they interpret accordingly. What they do is unbelievable. You have to study a lot, and then you notice what kind of government you're dealing with. Then you know what to do with these people.

Our resistance has studied a lot, and they know them. That's why they made a 10-point plan, which is the best solution for the future of Iran. For sure, we're going to face something big happening in Iran very soon.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Reid, for another longish five minutes that we had.

I will move to MP Brunelle-Duceppe, for five minutes...ish.

• (1930)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Golestaneh, you talked about Iran's influence, but I would like to know about Iran's influence in Canada. Are there any views from the Iranian community? Are there any Iranian operations in Canada, and if there are, what forms do they take and how are they conducted? Can you shed some light on this?

[*English*]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Of course.

There are actually a lot of influencing operations by the Iranian regime in Canada. Fortunately, there is so much evidence of it. Indeed, we produced an interview of when the Iranian embassy was here. The third counsellor, or the cultural counsellor, of the embassy gave an interview in Iran and said that they have to infiltrate Canadian institutions and political institutions via the next generations of Iranians in Canada. That was part of the reason for the closure of the embassy, among other things. All I am saying is that this was published and well publicized.

Besides that, there was an article in the Toronto Sun a few years ago. The head of a Canadian think tank was offered \$80,000 to produce a report against the Iranian main opposition, calling them cults or terrorists and things like that. He refused. We don't know how many people did not refuse.

Coming to the present day again, a few weeks ago I read articles on the Global News website and in the National Post about the Iranian and Hezbollah influence operations using Vancouver casinos to do money laundering. A couple of years ago, there was another operation by the Ontario Provincial Police, who actually captured five Iranians involved in money laundering for political purposes.

There are many cases like that. We wish.... That's another reason that I believe this committee has to reconvene—hopefully, in the fall—to do a more detailed analysis of many aspects of the Iranian regime's operations in Canada. We would be more than happy to provide all of this evidence, most of it by Canadian researchers or law enforcement authorities, actually, including the RCMP, the OPP, the Vancouver police and things like that, on some of the Chinese gangs, based on the latest reports of money laundering and influencing Canadian universities and political institutions. That can also be easily followed up on.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You tell us that here, on Canadian territory, the Iranian government is currently engaged in large-scale money laundering. Did I understand you correctly?

[English]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Absolutely.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

So, what has the West missed in relation to Iran? Why hasn't it been possible to make a significant change in Iran?

[English]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: That was a big miss.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

[English]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Okay, I believe the big miss was the whole notion that, unfortunately, has taken over our political system, generally speaking. I think, within the Iranian regime, we can count on some so-called moderate elements. That, unfortunately, has proven to be counterproductive and futile.

It goes back to many examples. However, again, to give it a Canadian context, it goes back to the case of Zahra Kazemi, the Montreal photojournalist who was arrested, raped, tortured and killed in Iran just for taking pictures in front of Evin prison of the families of political prisoners. Now, in the aftermath of that, unfortunately what happened was that the Canadian government's response was very weak, and we did not follow through on our own promises.

I remember having a conversation with one of the released political prisoners at the time, who said that, right after the ordeal, the prison officials basically gathered all the political prisoners and said, "Look, we killed a Canadian citizen. Now Canada is apologizing. Who do you think you are? We can kill you all and no one would care."

This is not the message that we should send to the Iranian people. We should send a message to the Iranian people that we support their legitimate right to self-determination and to choose their own future, and we support their resistance.

• (1935)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Can you give us your recommendations quickly? What should the Canadian government do in the short term?

[English]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: In the short term and to be very practical, I believe that the House of Commons should pass the resolution. The families of the Ukrainian flight want it. The Iranian community wants it, and the Iranian people from within Iran call for it: the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist entity that has its hands bloodied all over the world: in Canada with this flight, and in many other places. That's one thing we can do, and then we can follow up on that promise.

There are many other policy options for being firm and supporting the Iranian opposition. This is not feasible, I would say, by any sitting government—to support one group versus another. I'm not talking about groups. I'm talking about ideas that support democracy, the way that we dealt with apartheid in South Africa. This is not far-fetched. Iran, today, is way worse than apartheid in South Africa.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Mr. Golestaneh.

[English]

The Chair: Now we'll move to MP McPherson for five minutes-ish.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, again, to our witnesses.

I'm very interested.... I have the role in this committee of asking the last questions, and I'm very interested in that line of questioning that we were just exploring: the idea of what Canada can do. What are the practical things, in both the short and the long term, that you would like to see Canada do to help the people of Iran and to support a free Iranian people?

Maybe what I would do is perhaps start with Mr. Saghah, and then we'll just pass it through each of you for your final words on those things, those concrete steps, that you would like Canada to take in the short and long term, please.

Mr. Kamran Saghah: I believe that, like the congressmen and congresswomen in the U.S.A., we can support the 10-point plan. This is a very big step towards freedom and democracy. Support the Iranian people by recognizing them, or at least support the 10-point plan, which is really the most advanced idea. It covers everything for the future Iran.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Ms. Boorchi.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Designating.... We all—all Iranians and even the countries around us that hurt from the IRGC.... The biggest and most important thing is to put the IRGC on the terrorist list, because when they are on that, their activity can be shortened. The money laundering that they do, they cannot do. The pressure they can put on people is going to be less. The rest of the people of Iran know what to do.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Before I go to Mr. Golestaneh, Ms. Boorchi, could you tell me...? We talked earlier today about Iran's having a seat on the UN status of women commission. We talked about the needs for women. I'm wondering if you could also just touch upon how Canada can support Iranian women.

The reason I ask that is that we have a feminist international assistance policy. We are developing a feminist foreign policy. I think it's very important that this perspective becomes part of our study.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: As an Iranian woman, I always look up to Mrs. Rajavi. For almost 40 years, she has been the front-runner of freedom for women and has been speaking for women's rights in Iran. You can study their policies, talk to her. You can talk to the other Iranian groups that may be active.

We don't want anything out of the ordinary. Anything Canadians accept for themselves should be acceptable for us too, as Iranian women. When they are going to do communications and going for economic consultations, they should remember to always, always put human rights first.

Human rights abuses in Iran are enormous, in every walk of life. It doesn't matter whether they are educated, not educated, women, men, old or young; they all suffer from it. We want this to be....

● (1940)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Acknowledged.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Yes, acknowledged.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much.

I have just a few more seconds, but I would give the final word, if I could, to Mr. Golestaneh, to finish off the meeting.

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Sure. Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

On the policy recommendation of what Canada can do, or basically even what MPs—or every individual or every one of you—can do, it's taking a firm stance on Iran. Designating the IRGC is one.

Second, we have a tool here in Canada called the Magnitsky sanctions. There are many human rights organizations. I only quoted one, from Mr. Cotler, but there are many.

Even the European Union, which has so many relations with Iran, has 89 individuals on its list of human rights sanctions. In Canada, we still don't have a single individual Iranian official on the Magnitsky sanctions, and I am wondering why. We have people from Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and many other countries, but not from Iran. This is troubling to the people of Iran. They say that this is complicity.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP McPherson.

We actually are going into a third round. We have just about eight minutes—a maximum of 10 minutes.

I'm asking members to keep everything down to about one and a half minutes to two minutes, to allow our witnesses to maybe conclude or make some closing remarks through their answers to your questions.

We will start with MP Zuberi.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I'd like to thank everybody for being here and their courage in speaking to us.

We all fully appreciate how challenging this is for you and your families. We support and respect what you're doing, fully. Thank you.

We were on the topic of sanctions. For the record, to my understanding, Canada currently sanctions 41 Iranian individuals and 161 entities under the Special Economic Measures Act. That sanctions 12 individuals and 10 entities. I'm not saying that this is sufficient in terms of curtailing human rights abuses from Iran.

I'd like to give a moment to Ms. Boorchi, please.

Your introduction says that you were a political prisoner. If you're comfortable sharing with us, I'd like to give you the floor.

Ms. Simin Boorchi: Sure. My name is Simin, as you know. I am a former political prisoner. I live in Brantford, Ontario. I am a nurse. I want to share my ordeal in the hands of the Iranian regime and the IRGC.

I was just 19. In the middle of the night, eight men climbed the wall of my house, found their way to my bedroom, put a gun to my head and told me, "Don't move." One of them told me to get dressed and go with him. My brother was one year younger than me. He said, "Where are you taking my sister?" They said, "Oh, do you want to come?" He said yes. Then they blindfolded both of us, threw us in the back of a car and drove us away in front of my parents.

On that night, I stepped into an unknown world, a world that I could not believe existed. For a year and a half, I was witnessing the agony and the torture that the prison authority inflicted on the people under their care. It was unimaginable and horrific: physical, emotional, psychological torture 24-7, such as lashing to the point that you'd lose the soles of your feet or sometimes a finger; hanging you from the ceiling; electric shock; being deprived of sleep, food and washrooms; and humiliation.

Then there's one that is special for us as women—as a young girl who was not married—torture before execution. Nasrin Shojae was one of them.

The Chair: Thank you for your courage.

Thank you, MP Zuberi.

Now we will move to MP Chiu, for about two and a half minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Chair, I have discussed this with MP Scott Reid. I will be using his time as well, so for the next five minutes I would like the witnesses to comment on—

The Chair: No, it's two and a half minutes in total for your party. Then we'll go to the Bloc, and then to MP McPherson.

• (1945)

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Fair enough.

By the way, thank you for doing a great job.

I would like Mr. Golestaneh, perhaps, to comment on a news report of several months ago that China has signed a \$400-billion U.S., multiple-decade deal with Iran for oil, gas, tech and weapons. What kinds of implications does this have? We know that sanctions may work, but it seems to us Canadians that it's a way out of the sanctions. Can you comment on that, please?

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Yes, absolutely. This was devastating, but not unusual. I guess good people find good people and bad people find bad people. I guess that's a common theme, and this is happening, of course, with Iran hanging out with China, and previously even on an arms deal with North Korea. Many of the Iranian IRGC missiles are built upon North Korean No Dong 2 missiles, with lots of expertise [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

On China, this is a 25-year deal, as you mentioned, worth a lot of money, but more than anything else—to me; this is my analysis, although of course the news reports are accurate—the analysis perspective is that Iran wanted to use that as leverage in its talks with the west and the U.S., to say, “If you don't relieve the sanctions, we have other backers: We can rely on China and we can rely on other countries.” That's why we have to convince even those countries that they are dictatorial.... As I said—if I can have 30 seconds—even within Canada, based on the report of our RCMP officer charged with this task, there were money-laundering operations that were done with Chinese help.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

With the remaining 10 seconds, I want to thank all of you again for your courage and for being here and telling us your stories. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Chiu.

Now we'll go to MP Brunelle-Duceppe for about two and a half minutes—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Will you excuse me for just one moment, Mr. Chair?

I think the time of two and a half minutes is very short. I know that this is Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's study, so I'll pass my time to him, if that's all right.

The Chair: Thank you, MP McPherson.

That is five minutes or so for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I accept with pleasure, and I thank my dear NDP colleague.

Mr. Golestaneh, you have to look at the current Iranian propaganda, which is very well put together. I think it's quite obvious. The government of Iran claims that the removal of sanctions will help the economy, which would relieve people of some of the difficulties.

How should we approach this logic and propaganda of the Iranian government?

[*English*]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: To this portion, of course, Iran is claiming that the sanctions are hurting people. They use this alibi to put pressure on western countries to remove the sanctions.

First of all, even the sanctions are not blanket sanctions. They are targeted sanctions. Even in the worst-case scenarios, they are still targeted sanctions. Nevertheless, I will give you a very practical example.

After the JCPOA—the nuclear deal—was signed between Iran and the western countries, \$150 billion was given to the Iranian regime. Did the Iranian currency change in value even an iota? No. All that money was spent on improving the arsenal of Hezbollah or other terrorist entities in the region, as well as the wars in Yemen and Iraq and so forth. Unfortunately, not a single penny.... I'm not exaggerating that.

During these years after the JCPOA was signed, we had an earthquake in western Iran, in Kermanshah. People are still living in shacks in temporary shelters while beside them, convoys of arms are going to Iraqi militias. The people say they are still living in these shambles and ask why the government is not supporting them.

The solution for Iran is not economy. The solution is a political solution. Indeed, don't even quote to me the current presidential candidates in their debate—the so-called debate. Every one of them has accused another one of embezzling billions of dollars. Again, this is very much in the public eye.

The solution to Iran is not relieving sanctions, because sanction relief goes into the pockets of the leaders, not to the poorest people in Iran. That's why we see the Baluchis and the Kurds doing the most difficult jobs on earth just to pay for their basic necessities.

• (1950)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Some people around the world say that Iran is being accused of geopolitical terrorism outside its borders because it opposes U.S. imperialism. We hear this argument often.

What do you say to these people, who say that Iran doesn't have a bad regime and that it's only opposing American imperialism?

[*English*]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: Definitely that has been the case since the inception of the current regime in Iran. Indeed, when they executed many of the political activists in Iran in the 1980s, they buried them in American flags, basically portraying them as agents of U.S. imperialism and things like that.

Meanwhile, everyone inside the country knew well that this had nothing to do with foreign interference. I guess this session does not allow me, and we don't have much time to go into the general politics of this, but purely from an Iranian internal perspective, this is only an alibi that Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, used to basically rally people in the region behind him. We are anti-American, so you have to support us in our fight against imperialism.

It has nothing to do, in reality, with the pluralistic views of the Iranian people.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign

Affairs and International Development. What do you see as the most pressing human rights concerns in Iran today?

[*English*]

Mr. Shahram Golestaneh: The most important issues are the issues of political prisoners in Iran. Mr. Arzhang Davoodi, who is in his 70s, has not seen a single day of furlough in the past 18 years, as Mr. Saghah said. He is a graduate from Texas. There are so many others like him.

Atena Daemi, whom Ms. Boorchi probably referred to, is in jail. The Iranian authorities told her to just ask for a pardon and she would be released. She said no. She said that if anyone has to apologize, it's them, not her.

This is the bravery of the Iranian people that we have to support, especially women. We have to recognize that women are at the forefront of the fight against fundamentalism and against this regime. That's why all of my colleagues referred to Mrs. Rajavi or other women activists.

This is why it's so important to recognize that in Iran, trying to be—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Golestaneh.

Thank you, MP Brunelle-Duceppe.

On behalf of the committee members, I wish to thank the staff, the clerk, the analysts, the interpreters and everybody.

Thank you to our witnesses for your testimony, your courage and your bravery in sharing your stories with us, as well as many of your recommendations.

We thank you very much for being before us here today.

At this time, members, we are going to conclude this session, and we are going to move in camera to deal with some committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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