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Mr. Michael Levitt

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for our second meeting on Iran accountability week.

Today we have two witnesses as part of our continuing Iran Accountability Week sessions. On today's panel we have, from Carleton University, Hossein Raeesi, a scholar at risk and an Iranian lawyer who has defended the civil, political, and human rights of Iranians. As well, we're very honoured to be joined from Washington by a political cartoonist, Nikahang Kowsar, board member of Cartoonists Rights Network International.

Mr. Kowsar, would you like to begin with your opening remarks, and then we can move to Mr. Raeesi? Thank you very much.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar (Cartoonists Rights Network International, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, honourable members, I would like to thank you for this invitation.

As an Iranian Canadian I have the obligation to pass the peaceful values of Canada to the great people of Iran, who clearly consider Canadians their very good friends. I hope my contribution will have an impact on human rights in Iran through the respected members of this subcommittee and the Canadian government.

As an Iranian Canadian journalist, cartoonist, geologist, and human rights activist, I would like to testify on the situation of human rights in Iran by focusing on three different points: freedom of speech, environmental accountability, and holding authorities accountable for human rights violations.

First, concerning freedom of speech, in Iran there is a saying: "We have freedom of speech, but we do not have freedom after speech." In January 2000 I drew a cartoon, and days later thousands of radical Islamists were demanding my death. I was arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated by the individual responsible for the death of Iranian Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi.

In 2003, after receiving death threats on the very day of Ms. Kazemi's incarceration, I had to leave my family, home, and everything else behind. Canada became my safe haven, and I am grateful for the support and love of my fellow Canadian friends,

giving me shelter and opportunity to start a new life and reunite with my wife and daughter four years after leaving Iran.

Many Iranian journalists, writers, and cartoonists have not been as lucky as I am. Bloggers have been harassed, tortured, and killed. Writers have been banned from working and forced to live in exile. Cartoonists have been jailed and sentenced to prison and flogging.

Today many cartoonists are concerned for their fate after boycotting the Holocaust cartoon contest. They have chosen not to be part of the Islamist flock.

Foreign Minister Zarif claimed the contest had nothing to do with the government, but later everyone understood that it was not only supported but also funded and organized by different branches of the government.

Many journalists who should be independent monitors of power are monitored on a daily basis by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and the security branch of the Revolutionary Guards.

One year ago Mr. Zarif appeared on *Charlie Rose*, claiming they did not jail people for their opinions. The truth is that the Islamic regime has not only jailed but tortured and executed thousands of Iranians for their opinions and beliefs. One may assume that based on what many in the western media have claimed, there is a good and democratic side championed by President Rouhani and Mr. Zarif, in contrast to the evil empire of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and his band of Revolutionary Guards, judiciary, and institutions only accountable to the Supreme Leader.

I have never read or heard the good side punishing the evil side by cutting its budget. The good side is always feeding the evil. All sides of the regime are riding the same boat. They all claim to be believers in free speech—meaning, of course, freedom to flatter.

I will address environmental accountability, meaning holding authorities accountable for destruction of natural resources, water crises, and violating people's rights to sufficient, safe, accessible, and affordable water.

Based on the international covenant of economic, social, and cultural rights, governments are responsible to ensure that their people enjoy sufficient, safe, accessible, and affordable water without discrimination. Due to mismanagement, corruption, lack of accountability, and climate change, different regions of Iran are experiencing devastating droughts and water shortages. Today many lakes and wetlands have dried up, and more than 80% of Iran's groundwater has been drained from its aquifers in the last 37 years under the Islamic regime's watch.

The government and the construction arm of the Revolutionary Guards have had a negative impact on water resources in the country. An example is the dam built on the Karun River, where a saline formation with millions of tonnes of salt is now covered by a lake. It became one of the biggest man-made, salt-concentrated reservoirs in the world after the salt dissolved in the water.

Nowadays thousands of Iranians have had to leave their farms and homes in the countryside due to lack of water. Now they are becoming inland climate refugees. Based on the latest studies, the number of climate refugees could increase dramatically in the future, and understanding that a great number of Iranians will be victims of climate change and drought, we should not underestimate the number of possible Iranian climate refugees in the next decade who will have no choice but to leave everything behind. This means instability in the country and the region, and lack of resources to manage and feed these victims of mismanagement.

When water scarcity hits communities, human rights are among the very first victims. Many lives will be lost not only to drought but to violence.

We have witnessed what many Syrians went through after a drought and water shortage struck northeastern Syria in 2006. More than a million Syrian farmers, herders, and peasants moved to the suburbs of bigger cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus in the hope of employment, resources, and a better solution from the Assad government. In 2011, many of those farmers held guns instead of harvesting tools. Many have died in the conflict. A great number of those climate refugees are now in camps all around Europe.

Today Iran is experiencing a similar path: less rain, a warmer climate, over-exploited aquifers, and, worse, a rising population.

Last year, a former minister of agriculture said that tens of millions of citizens will have to leave Iran in the next decade due to lack of water resources. High-ranking members of the government, special interests, and the construction branch of the Revolutionary Guards and its consultants have exploited the natural resources of the country, building hundreds of dams with no accountability, transferring water from the western parts of the country to the provinces of former presidents.

My third point is about holding authorities accountable for human rights violations. In 2014, Iranian artist-activist Atena Farghadani was arrested for drawing Iranian parliamentarians with animal heads and posting the cartoon on her Facebook page. She was freed on bail but published a video about wrongdoing by the prison officials. Later, she was handed a prison sentence of 12 years and 9 months by Tehran's Revolutionary Court for that cartoon, which was a protest

against legislation to restrict birth control and make divorce more difficult in Iran, based on the will of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Atena was harassed, beaten, and had to go through a demeaning virginity test after shaking hands with her male lawyer; they were both charged with indecent conduct. Atena's name came up in Dr. Ahmed Shaheed's annual report. Cartoonists Rights Network International, with the assistance of other defenders of free speech and human rights, ran a non-stop campaign to free Atena. With open letters sent to Iranian leaders and the help of friends in the media and the cartooning community, we kept her story alive. Nobody forgot Atena. After a legal battle led by her attorney in Iran and an international campaign led by CRNI, the sentence was reduced, and she is now a free woman.

There are many Atenas in Iranian prisons whose names are rarely mentioned. Atena was lucky to be a cartoonist and artist with many friends around the world supporting her cause. There are, however, hundreds of activists, writers, and journalists jailed for their opinions, and very few have been supported. A former political prisoner once told me, "All political prisoners are equal, but some are more equal than others." It's a very depressing comment, but it has some truth to it.

It has been proven to many that the Islamic Republic of Iran only bows to pressure on matters related to human rights. Iran is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its officials should be held accountable for that statement. I sincerely believe that human rights is the major bargaining chip that the Islamic regime does not like to hear mentioned in re-engagement dialogue, and its charm offensive will possibly fade away after being asked hard and credible questions.

Thank you very much.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to ask Mr. Raeesi to please give us his 10-minute statement.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi (Human Rights Lawyer, As an Individual): First of all, thank you for your invitation. Thank you as well for your attention to the Iranian human rights situation.

As an Iranian-Canadian human rights lawyer, I will draw your attention to the fact that Iranians, the Iranian people, are interested in human rights and seek a democratic structure. The public culture is not unfamiliar with the principles of human rights. During the past 110 years that Iranians have tried to realize democracy, the rule of law, and recently human rights, they have never experienced such concepts well. Therefore, these people need more support and education.

Education can help Iranian people to master their disunity and enjoy a democratic government. A democratic government can help Iranians have the rule of law and practise human rights. They should have the best-functioning laws. As a human rights lawyer, I have defended numerous clients under very difficult circumstances over 20 years. I'm still in contact with the legal structure in Iran, and well oriented toward the details of the structure of the government.

Before I answer questions on the areas in which there are violations of human rights, it is worth mentioning that the violation of human rights is the product of the government. The violation of human rights is government-produced.

In Iran, human rights are violated in all areas of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights. I'll focus on five main areas of the violation of human rights in Iran. These are human rights situations based on Iranian constitutional law, based on the Iranian penal code, based on Iranian criminal procedure law, based on Iranian family and marriage law, and based on other areas.

First, human rights are violated in both the substantive structure and the administrative structure of the constitution. There are discriminatory clauses in the constitution that are serious barriers to the realization of a democratic structure. However, there are principles in this constitution by which some rights of the people are satisfied if the principles are put into practice. Examples of such rights include a recognition of minorities, the ban on torture, and the right to have a lawyer when referred to the judiciary system.

Another important point on the constitution is the centralization of the power base under constitutional law. The most power, I believe, based on the constitution, is in the not-chosen leadership in Iran. Therefore, in parts of the constitution where people are allowed to choose their president and members of Parliament, they try to follow reformative and peaceful methods for the realization of change in the makeup of the structure. However, such attempts have caused suppression and strict control in numerous cases.

● (1315)

We should focus on the case of Minoos Khaleghi. She was vetted and elected by the people of Isfahan, and after she was elected, they disqualified her from being a member of Parliament from Isfahan.

The second point is that the most important place in the legal system of Iran in which human rights are violated is in the penal code. It has been amended several times during the past 37 years since the Islamic Revolution. I think the Iranian penal code has been changed four or five times. Now we have the new Iranian penal code. If we focus on the new Iranian penal code, we'll find many areas of human rights violations, because the Iranian penal code is absolutely translated from the sharia system.

Based on this, we have denied the rights of minorities. We have inequality between men and women. We have exactly those points in articles 301, 302, and 303 with murder cases between men and women, and between Muslim and non-Muslim. We have inequality and discrimination, and we have a part of the Iranian penal code that allows a husband to kill his wife when he sees she is sleeping with someone in the same bed. We have many areas of human rights violation based on the Iranian penal code, and the Iranian government never tried to change the Iranian penal code to include

some of the Iranian government's obligations under the human rights treaty.

The third point is about the standard of a fair trial. I'm going to focus on criminal procedure law. The standard of a fair trial has not been well predicated in the criminal procedure law, and even in the cases in which these standards have been prescribed, they are not administered well, such as the right of access to a lawyer after being arrested.

Article 48 and article 190 are new Iranian criminal procedure laws focused on the right to have access to a lawyer immediately after arrest. In the nine months they've been in the act, they have never been used and never practised. Right now we have some Iranians in prison who have never had access to a lawyer. I know an Iranian Canadian who was arrested recently in Iran. She was released on bail, but she had no access to a lawyer after she was arrested. I was in touch with her last month.

In all important cases—for example, crimes against the state or crimes against Islam—people are not allowed to access their lawyer immediately after they have been arrested.

● (1320)

Another important part of the regulation of Iranians in which human rights are violated and there is discrimination against women is family law. The issue of marriage is based on the Iranian civil court and based on the new Iranian family protection law.

In some parts of even this new law passed two or three years ago, we have discrimination: discrimination between father and mother for custody and the right to divorce. Unfortunately, in the main area of discrimination in this law that I focus on—article 1041 of the Iranian Civil Code and article 50 of the Iranian Family Protection Act—we have inequality between girls and boys in the right to marry. They can marry under the age of 18, but it's unequal for girls and boys, being 13 years for girls and 15 for boys. Based on this, we have many areas of discrimination, because somehow the father has the right to sell his daughter based on this law. This law never banned this kind of terrible marriage, and this is the new law.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Raeesi. I think we're going to have to stop you there just so we can start questioning. I'm sure people will bring this point up with you in their questioning.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: Okay. Great. I was almost done.

The Chair: With that, we'll have the first round of questioning. We'll begin with MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much to the witnesses.

You said something very poignant, Mr. Kowsar, so I decided to just go back in some of my records here and make sure. Just as you ensured that your colleague's name wasn't forgotten, I wanted to make sure that the seven Baha'i leaders who have spent eight years in prison for their conscience aren't forgotten.

I apologize if I don't get the pronunciation perfect. They are Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm.

These people have been incarcerated for conscience's sake and have not been released. My understanding is that there are even restrictions with regard to family and friends seeing them. From what I've witnessed in the testimony that I've heard over the years, this Iranian regime is pretty indiscriminate in terms of who they will jail, who they'll torture, who they'll kill, but they have a particular hatred toward Baha'is. Where does that stem from?

• (1325)

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: It's an old story, actually. It goes back to when during the Qajar dynasty, before the Baha'i movement started. We had the Bábí movement, and the higher minister at that time, Amir Kabir, ordered that the people who were following Báb be killed. Báb was from Shiraz. I'm originally from Shiraz, so I know a lot about what happened after the revolution to many Baha'is.

Before the Islamic revolution, there were different groups, anti-Baha'i groups, in Iran. Now many of the members of those anti-Baha'i groups are members of the regime. One of the groups is called Hojjatieh, and Mr. Zarif, the foreign minister, was a member of Hojjatieh in high school. We have many members of Hojjatieh who officially are not part of Hojjatieh any more, but still follow those values. There's this hatred in that they believe that Baha'ism is rooted in the British colonial system and it's against Islam and is corrupting Islam.

I have witnessed many negative responses to Baha'is at junior high when I was in Iran in Shiraz. Sometimes they believe that the Baha'is are even haram and they don't even touch them, or they wash the tap they have touched. There has been a discrimination against Baha'is. It's not just related to the government; it has been a tradition in many Islamic Shiite sects against Baha'is.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

Mr. Raeesi, I understand that you're speaking as a lawyer and as—

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: —a professor as well, but really you were talking about legal structures in Iran. I just wanted to make sure that anybody who is listening to this testimony is clear about that.

What is not covered in regard to discrimination against human rights in their constitution is often implemented by their mullahs, who run Iran anyway. They will basically overstep any written law if they have a desire to incarcerate or torture or kill someone.

Am I overstating the fact?

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: Absolutely.

If we mention the Baha'i, for example, the Baha'i rise in Iran as a minority religion, I think it's based on.... Mr. Kowsar mentioned the

Iranian history and Iranian elected politics, but I do agree with him. However, I'm also going to speak against the structure of power. The structure of power in Iran is based on the Iranian constitution, and the Iranian constitution very much belongs to the sharia system. Article 4 of the Iranian constitution talks about all the laws and how everything must be based on the sharia system. The Iranian regime tries to focus on Shiite culture, practise sharia law, and the output of this practice is discrimination about everything.

Even when we have some kind of new law—for example, banning torture, or giving access to justice based on the Iranian constitution, the base of the power hierarchy in Iran is never allowed to practice human rights.

For example, I was a lawyer representing many Baha'i. After each session in the courtroom, I had to go to the office to answer many questions about why I was defending this group of people.

Most of the time I told them, "I am a lawyer, I am a defence lawyer, I am a criminal lawyer, and I defend them. Why are you asking me?" Even the Iranian constitution allows people to access a lawyer. They have the power in Iran, based on the constitution, to ask me, even though they have some points that coincide with human rights.

• (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: I think they would ask you either way, from what I've seen from that regime.

I'll pose this question to both, and then I'm done.

The Chair: A very short answer, please.

Mr. David Sweet: Many countries, and Canada is one of them, are reducing their sanctions against Iran. Is that helping people on the ground? Are individual Iranians feeling some benefit from that?

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: No, totally no.

If you look at North Korea, it has nuclear weapons, and our highest sanctions are against this regime, but people are only going to die in that country.

In Iran, no. I believe if the sanction is against the economy, against the people.... The Iranian middle class needs to have support. It needs education. It needs to have some voice against the regime. People are against this regime. An Iranian movement began many years ago to fight against this regime, because of human rights principles.

We should support this, not base sanctions against the people. Sanctions that target specific areas of violation by the regime would be helpful.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Raeesi.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: May I add my comments?

The Chair: Sure. If you can take 30 seconds, that would be great.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: I just want to say that the Iranian government is an excellent example of taking everything hostage. It can take sanctions hostage against its own people. When the sanctions are removed, it can take the goods hostage to control its people.

I think targeted sanctions against human rights violators would be a very good thing to continue.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we have MP Miller.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.): Thank you to both, and I'll follow up along those lines of thought.

It's always shocking to me how much play a cartoon can be given. It's there to amuse, incite, or whatnot. I think it underscores the value of freedom of expression and the careful approach we need to take when limiting freedom of expression.

Just to be clear, your cartoons were political commentary, not inflammatory depictions of religious figures. Showing an Iranian leader as a crocodile shouldn't be a reason for having your life and family threatened. It's abhorrent.

It is a reminder about how important freedom of expression is and the impact these things can have on change and transformation.

As you know, this current government is taking a cautious approach to re-engagement with Iran, and I'd like to get your thoughts on what you said earlier, which was using the human rights angle as a chip. I hesitate to use that term, because it implies bargaining, whereas the human rights agenda should be a principled approach, as you both mentioned.

Given this government, where do you think the human rights agenda can be best played? You may not be familiar with their undertaking to re-engage with Iran in a cautious manner.

• (1335)

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: One thing I'm mostly concerned about is the fate of a lot of journalists, bloggers, and human rights activists who are in prison, and nobody is supporting them. I believe we should be pushing the Iranian regime to free these individuals. A human rights activist was sentenced to 16 years, as we read today: Ms. Narges Mohammadi, who used to work with Ms. Shirin Ebadi years ago. Mr. Raeesi would know about it very well, much better than I do.

In pushing the Iranian regime, which needs the west—the west doesn't need Iran as much as Iran needs Canada or the United States or other countries—I believe we should understand, as Canadians, that the Iranian regime is desperate to get a lot of goods out of improved relations, and it's using its charm offensive to gain more through these negotiations.

I have no problems with re-engaging, but, as you said, it should be on principle, pushing the Iranian regime, first of all, to free all political prisoners and journalists, and to also recognize the dual citizenship matter. Iran has arrested many dual citizens, and it is taking them as its hostages. It has done so and it will do so in the future.

I believe Iran has to be stopped, and it should be stopped by force.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: The international community should focus on pushing Iran to have the best rule in the international community.

The most important point is the Iranian obligation. The Iranian regime played a role in the international community and involved a human rights UN mechanism. For example, a few months ago, they answered many questions about children's rights, but they never practised that law they were talking about, the UN human rights mechanism.

I believe the structure of Iran's constitutional law, penal code, criminal law, and judicial system must be reformed, and the reforms must be based on Iran's international treaty obligations. For example, on voting and elections, women's rights, minorities, access to be a member of Parliament or president, we clearly have discrimination within Iranian constitutional law. This constitution is contrary to Iran's international human rights obligation.

Based on this, I believe all international communities, specifically Canada as a remarkable country in the human rights field, must push the Iranian regime to change their laws. Based on this, Iranian civil society has the right to speak out about their rights. When the Iranian constitutional system and Iranian criminal law denied their right, they did not have access to speak out about their rights.

The Chair: Mr. Kowsar, at the beginning of your remarks, you talked a little about the Holocaust denial cartoon contest. I'm not sure if you are aware.... I know that contest was launched again in the last number of weeks, on Monday, before Minister Dion said the following: "I am appalled by the annual #Holocaust Cartoon Contest in Iran. This is anti-Semitism, not humour. The murder of over 6 million Jewish people is a historical fact. #Holocaust denial is #Antisemitism".

I wasn't sure if you had seen those remarks.

In the case of Atena Farghadani, you also talked about a posting on her Facebook page that had come into play in the instigation of some of the repression against her. What has been the impact of social media on cartoonists, and in general against people in the media profession?

• (1340)

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: I salute Minister Dion for those remarks.

On the matter of social media, Facebook, and later Instagram, and right now Telegram, have had a great impact on Iranian society. Because of press censorship, many post their artwork, pictures, cartoons, and illustrations on social media. The negative side is that when individuals do it using their real names, they become targets of the judiciary, intelligence forces, and even goons. That's the sad side of it.

We always advise individuals to use pseudonyms if they want to stay safe from the Ministry of Intelligence, though we have had stories that many people are working for the Iranian cyberarmy and for the Ministry of Intelligence to detect those fake names and fake accounts, and some people have been arrested.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Hardcastle, it's your turn.

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

I'd like to maximize my time with our guests.

Mr. Raeesi, could you continue, please, with your explanation about some of the problems with family law with regard to human rights, before we start the questioning?

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: I will give a little bit, not much.

I believe women's rights are the main area in Iran we should focus on, because half of the population of Iran is women. Many, I believe, suffer hugely from the government, and from society sometimes, because the government banned everything: all social media, all books—there is censorship of books—as well as the support of women's rights and the support of a culture to educate women in the right way. Based on this, we should focus on women's rights.

In the new Iranian Family Protection Act, we have many areas of denial of women's rights and mothers' rights. We should point out some articles that have put all rights of custody in the hands of the man. That applies also to divorce rights.

Unfortunately, fathers are allowed to sell their daughters, even under the age of 13. It is a terrible law.

We have some more terrible articles in this new law, such as article 51. If an Iranian woman marries a non-Iranian man, their children are not allowed to be Iranian. Nowadays we have more than one million children in Iran without any identification. They are all living around Zahedan and Mashhad, near the border between Afghanistan and Iran, because most of them were from marriages between Afghan guys and Iranian ladies. Their children are not allowed to access the education system or the health care system. They are living with huge suffering.

I was involved in many of their cases. I even applied for some of them to have identification, and my motion was denied. When I was a lawyer in Iran, I applied for this for some of my clients, but no.

Twice the Iranian Parliament tried to change this law. Finally, the Supreme Leader of Iran and the Guardian Council of Iran, based on sharia law, denied this right. It is a violation of women's rights.

We have many other areas of violation in the Iranian civil code and the Iranian Family Protection Act.

• (1345)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

Mr. Kowsar and Mr. Raeesi, both of you addressed us at the very beginning with your opening comments, establishing that you thought the Canadian-Iranian relationship is important somehow to the advancement of human rights and the civil movement. I am paraphrasing to save time.

Then we heard later, when you had some specific questions posed to you, that targeted sanctions might be best. We heard, especially from Mr. Kowsar, that in certain instances the government may need to be stopped by force.

I am not going to ask you to go into that, because of the time, but maybe you could just clarify what Canada's role is. When our government is assertive by force, do you meant taking a stand diplomatically? What is this informal friendship really going to achieve? How can we do this?

We are trying to look at moving forward. I could have broken this down into a hundred questions for you, but I want to get the essence of that from you both, if you could each take a minute. I don't know who wants to go first.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Sure, I will respond first.

The fact of the matter is that if Canada is willing to do business with Iran without putting in any preconditions, that would justify what the Iranian regime has done in the past and will do in the future.

I'm not a politician, but I believe that Canada should say that if Iran stops this wrongdoing and shows some improvement in other areas, we would be happy to build a bridge between businesses in Iran and Canada. However, if we were to sell wheat, goods, biochemicals, scientific tools, or anything without preconditions and not demand any changes in attitude and behaviour from the Iranian regime, I think it's just supporting the Iranian regime's charm offensive.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: I will add a little bit to Mr. Kowsar's response.

I believe Iranian civil society has its own voice, and the Iranian movement has never stopped. For example, the Iranian women's movement has never stopped. Iranian students at the university have never stopped, and the young generation in Iran is really important. Based on this, I believe the Iranian government has tried to play a false role as a member of the UN. The Canadian government can continue to oppose these wrong decisions of the Iranian government.

The Iranian government has announced that we have our own law. No, you have law, but sometimes you never practise it, and sometimes your law is against women, against minorities, against children. You have executions under the age of 18. You have many executions for non-serious crimes. It's your law, yes. It's your law, but your law is wrong. You have to follow the standard of the UN and your obligation based on the treaties.

I strongly believe we should support Iranian civil society to never stop because Iran can change only through Iranian civil society. Education is the best, and continuing to oppose the wrong role of the Iranian government is maybe the second point.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, Professor Raeesi.

Next we have MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentations today. They were very informative.

As we know, human rights violations never occur in a vacuum. We're here sitting in Canada talking about human rights violations that have occurred halfway across the world in Iran. My question to both of you is this: to what extent do the human rights violations in Iran and the discrimination against religious minorities and ethnic minorities by the Iranian regime have an impact on people of Canada and across the world?

I'm speaking specifically in terms of exporting things like Islamophobia, contributing to the growing impacts of Islamophobia in the western world—and not just Islamophobia, but also anti-Semitism, as the chair pointed out as well. I would really like you to comment on that.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: Go ahead, Mr. Kowsar.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Thank you very much.

First of all, I would like to say that after what happened in late 2015, with millions of refugees moving from Turkey and Syria to Europe, we saw a wave of Islamophobia over there. What I want to point out is that in a few years, due to drought, especially in the marginal provinces of Iran, such as Sistan and Baluchestan, with a high rate of Sunni Muslims and a Sunni majority, or in Kurdistan or other parts such as Khuzestan, we will see that thousands and thousands will have to leave the country because it's not supporting them under the hard circumstances of the drought. Based on scientific studies, this will worsen in the next few years.

What I'm scared of is that many of the people will have to leave the country without even understanding the sensitivities of international security, and this will possibly give a platform to some anti-immigration groups that have used Islamophobia in the past.

On the other hand, because so many Iranians have been so unfortunate as to not be aware of international human rights conventions, they will have problems adapting themselves to their new environments. In regard to what we saw in some parts of Europe after the mass immigration of many Syrians in other places, I'm sorry to say that some negative things happen, unfortunately, and will possibly happen in the future. This is one of my main concerns: that the drought will cause a negative human rights situation in the future.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: I would like add something. I believe that Islamophobia itself is important, but we should be aware of Islamic rule inside the Muslim countries.

For example, in Canada we are talking about the scarves and the niqab. In Iran, in Saudi Arabia, and in many other Muslim countries, women are under huge pressure to have the mandatory hijab. As long as Islamic law is going to be the law practised in Iran, in Saudi Arabia, and in many other countries, we have a huge human rights violation.

When we are talking about Islamophobia here in the west, I think we still have a misconception about what exactly happens inside the Muslim countries. The power is under the control of the regimes in the Muslim countries, and they use Islam and sharia law in the

wrong way, to push people into jail, to cut off a hand, for lashings, for executions, and for many other human rights violations.

Here we are talking about the sharia system, sharia culture, and the hijab. Yes, we should talk about that, but we should be careful inside the Muslim countries to focus only on the women, because they are under huge pressure from Islam, from the hijab, only from the hijab, because the hijab is not just a sign or a symbol of Islam. No: the hijab is also the weapon of Islam against women inside the Muslim countries.

• (1355)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I want to quickly clarify.

You initially said that these regimes in these Muslim countries are using Islam as a weapon against people, against women. I just want to clarify that it's not the religion itself that you're referring to in terms of discriminating against women, but only the regime.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: I believe a regime uses the traditional Islamic law to have this weapon. It is not itself a regime based on Muslim scholars, based on the traditional Islamic law.

For example, we have execution for blasphemy and apostasy. I was a lawyer for many people on apostasy in Iran only because they are banned from talking about Islam inside a Muslim country. Now we have people in Saudi Arabia and Iran—Persians, Iranians, even Iranian clergy—in prison because they spoke out about the new or modern Islamic law. The Iranian regime and the Saudi regime and many other countries use the sharia system, but sharia never can be practised these days. They use it. It's not exactly in the wrong way as a regime, but it is a Muslim regime country and some clergy support this.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Raeesi.

MP Anderson, it's 1:58. We have time for a short question. I want to give you that opportunity.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I have a couple of questions. I wish we had a little more time.

I'll just focus on one thing. Amnesty International and others have noticed that certain ethnic groups in the country face discrimination in employment, housing, access to political office, and the exercise of their rights. I am just wondering if there is a difference between discrimination against ethnic minorities as opposed to religious minorities, and if so, has that discrimination evolved separately?

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: I would say we have had very few ministers from Kurdistan, for instance. Kurdistan is a very well-established part of the country. We have millions of Kurds in the country, but we have had very few people working in the administration from Kurdistan or from Sistan and Baluchestan. On the other hand, we have had very few Sunni officials as well, so it's a matter of ethnic and also religious discrimination. I don't remember having heard or read about a high-ranking Christian or Jewish official in the country.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: I believe all of the minorities, ethnic minorities and religious minorities, suffer hugely under the regime, and if you look around Iran, near the border of Iran, most are Sunni Muslims. The population is between 15 million and 20 million Iranian Sunni Muslims. They don't have any newspaper, never. They have nothing—no newspaper, no magazine, no media, and even in Teheran they are not allowed to have their own mosque.

Also, imagine a woman from Kurdistan who is LGBT, a Sunni lesbian who converts to Baha'i in Iran, and who has a Ph.D. in medicine, for example. She is not allowed to have a job, absolutely. There is great pressure; if you're a non-Muslim, a non-Shia, and you are from an ethnic group, you have no access to equal rights as others do. I'm Shia Muslim. Mr. Kowsar and I are both from the same city. Our city is Farsi and is non-ethnic, but we are under pressure. Many Iranian people, and the Iranian regime, consider Farsis as a minority.

• (1400)

The Chair: I want to thank both our guests, Professor Raeesi and Mr. Kowsar, for joining us today. This was the second of two days of

testimony on the fourth or fifth annual Iran Accountability Week of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. We also heard from Professor Akhavan and Dr. Shaheed, and I have to tell you that it was enlightening.

I thank both of you for taking the time to join us here today, and I thank the members of the subcommittee for engaging and asking such insightful questions of our guests.

The subcommittee will be preparing a joint statement, and, again, I very much look forward to being able to continue this work on Iran throughout the course of the subcommittee's work.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Hossein Raeesi: Thank you.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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