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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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

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•(1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon everybody, and welcome to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. As you know, we are continuing our study on the human rights situation of the Yazidis, Christians, and other religious and ethnic minorities in Syria and Iraq.

I'm very pleased to welcome before the committee today Mirza Ismail. He is the chairman of the Yezidi Human Rights Organization-International, a Canadian-based non-profit advocacy organization founded in 2009. Its mandate is to advocate for the protection of human rights, to maintain international awareness of the plight of the Yazidi people, and to draw awareness to human rights violations against Yazidis and other groups. The organization has pressed the governments of Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom to take an active role in protecting Yazidis who are trapped or enslaved in Syria and Iraq; and the organization has been instrumental in bringing international awareness to the plight of the Yazidi people.

Mr. Ismail, we're honoured to have you join us today. I'm going to ask you to give us 10 minutes' worth of remarks, at which time we're going to open up the floor to questions from the committee members. Please proceed with your remarks at this time.

Mr. Mirza Ismail (Chairman, Yezidi Human Rights Organization-International): First of all, I would like to thank you so much for inviting me to this presentation. I also would like to thank all of the committee members for attending to hear what's going on against the Yazidi people.

My presentation is going to include some picture displays, so you can have a better idea of what the Yazidis are going through. Also, my information is all from our people working on the ground in northern Iraq.

Mr. Chair, thank you so much, and committee members. I'm honoured to be here today to make a presentation about the Yazidi people, who have suffered enough under the control of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria since August 3, 2014. I'm going to tell you a little about who and what the Yazidis are.

The Yazidis are an ancient and proud people from the heart of Mesopotamia, the birthplace of civilization and the birthplace of many of the world's religions. The Yazidi religion is monotheistic

and very peaceful. Yazidism is not a missionary religion. Therefore, the religion and the ethnicity are both combined into one that is called Yazidi. We believe in one God without companions, God's seven archangels, and the four main natural elements: the sun, the earth, the wind, and water.

We respect all religions and faiths, and when we help others, it is without regard to faith or nationality. We pray to God and ask him each morning for an end to war and peace for the whole world. We say our name, Yazidi, at the very last. Unfortunately, radical Muslims have been trying to wipe us off the face of the earth. For the last 1,400 years, the Yazidis have faced 74 genocides in the Middle East, including the ongoing genocide by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which began on August 3, 2014, just because we have a different culture, religion, and way of life.

Most of you are aware of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Islamic State that have been committed against the Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians in northern Iraq and Syria. The Yazidis in Sinjar have suffered especially, and the Yazidis of Kocho village in particular.

More than 5,000 Yazidis were killed, including the beheading of hundreds. There are presently about 430,000 Yazidis displaced in northern Iraq, including 3,953 Yazidi orphans in IDP camps. According to the escaped Yazidi girls I met in northern Iraq, the ISIS militia abducted 7,450 Yazidis, mostly young women and children. Since then, more than half of those abducted Yazidis have managed to escape, and with the help of some of the outsiders, about 200 elders were also released in 2015. However, more than 3,200 Yazidis are still held in ISIS captivity in Iraq and Syria.

The young girls and women have been subjected to sexual slavery from the first day of the attack until now. They are being sold and bought by different militia, by different Muslims in the Middle East region. The young Yazidi boys are being trained to be jihadists and suicide bombers.

In all respects, it is a genocidal campaign against the Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians that began on August 3, 2014. We are very grateful that Canada, the EU, the U.S., and UN have recognized that what ISIS has done against the Yazidis is genocide. Now we believe the international community has legal obligations to make sure that genocide against the Yazidis never happens again, as this is the 74th genocide we are facing, and it is still going on as I speak.

•(1310)

Some of you may ask how other groups in the Nineveh have coped with the Islamic State invasion. Sadly, the majority have joined ISIS. The local Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen quickly joined up with ISIS at the time of the attack. They killed, abducted, raped, and tortured the Yazidis, and they looted the Yazidi properties, from jewellery and household items to farm equipment and automobiles.

Humanitarian aid, while necessary, is not sufficient. Much humanitarian aid distributed by the Kurdish regional authorities never gets into the hands of those who need it, due to skimming, corruption, and politics. Recently, Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, and Khairi Bozani have opposed the Canadian plan to bring Yazidis to Canada, saying that they don't want the Yazidis to leave Kurdistan. Well, Mr. Bozani is director of Yazidi affairs in the KRG. He is a member of the PDK, the political party, and has been given that position by Barzani. He says only what he is told to say. He doesn't represent the Yazidis.

Since then, I have received hundreds of phone calls from displaced Yazidis asking and urging Canada not to listen to someone who has been bought by a political party and works only for its interest. The displaced Yazidis do not belong to Kurdistan. The displaced Yazidis belong to their ancient homeland: Sinjar, Shekhan, and the Nineveh plain.

Why did Barzani and his cohorts collect Yazidis' and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians' weapons 50 to 60 days prior to the ISIS attack? The KRG had more than 11,000 of armed militia in the Sinjar region on the eve of the ISIS attack against the Yazidis. Desperate, the Yazidis tried to flee to the mountains for safety, but the KRG militia prevented them. What was Barzani's reason for not allowing the Yazidis to flee to the mountains for safety, other than collaborating with ISIS?

When the KRG militia began withdrawing to the Kurdish region, the Yazidi men followed and begged them for weapons, but the KRG refused to give any weapons to the Yazidi men, who were ready to fight against ISIS. Why did Barzani refuse to give weapons to the Yazidis to fight ISIS? In fact, the KRG militia killed many of those Yazidi men, in different areas in the Sinjar region, who asked for weapons.

We, the Canadian Yazidis and the human rights organization, raise our voices on behalf of our silenced Yazidi people in the Middle East, whose cries you cannot hear, whose tears you cannot see, and whose unbearable suffering you cannot imagine here in the west. Our voice has been pierced by a bullet. The Yazidi women, men, and children have been forced into conversion, tortured, beaten, raped, and sold into sexual slavery. While our government has a foot on the ground in Iraq to destroy ISIS, I am urgently asking each and all of you to ask our Canadian government to intervene in rescuing women, girls, and children, who have suffered more than enough under the ISIS sharia law presently in Iraq and Syria. We, the Canadian Yazidis, are asking for equality and equal rights for the displaced Yazidis in northern Iraq, especially the orphans and the Yazidi girls who have escaped from ISIS, and the Yazidi refugees in Turkey, Syria, Greece, and Jordan.

Our demands are that the Canadian government work with other allies, such as the U.S., the U.K., and the EU, to create an autonomous region for the Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians in Sinjar, the Nineveh plain region, and Hassakeh under international protection. As of two years ago, the KRG has not been able to protect us in many ways, and what evidence and video I have, I am willing to share with whoever wants to see it. They didn't protect us; in fact, they collaborated with ISIS, killed Yazidis, and handed them over to ISIS.

•(1315)

Bring in 7,000 to 10,000 Yazidis from IDP camps in northern Iraq, with priority to be given first to escaped Yazidi girls from ISIS with their remaining family members. The second priority should be orphans of both or either parents; third, families whose family members were killed by ISIS; and fourth, displaced Yazidis who have relatives in Canada.

Bring in 23,000 to 25,000 Yazidi refugees from Turkey, Syria, Greece, and Jordan as quickly as possible.

Germany took in more than 1,000 escaped Yazidi girls, and this is greatly appreciated, but in some cases the KRG and some affiliated Yazidis were involved. For example, Khairi Bozani, Mahama Khalil, and Sheikh Shamo have been bought by the KRG, and tell the world whatever the KRG tells them to say. As a result, 241 got into Germany. According to the displaced people we talked to, they were never abducted by ISIS, and many of them were not even from the areas that were attacked by ISIS. We hope our Canadian government does not make the same mistake of ignoring the real victims, while others benefit instead due to political interests.

To this end, we must insist that the following Canadian organizations be a part of the processing in this project of bringing Yazidis to Canada, to make sure similar mistakes don't happen: Yezidi Human Rights Organization-International, Project Abraham through the Mozuud Freedom Foundation, One Free World International, Canadian Jews and Friends of Yezidis, Samaritan's Purse Canada, and the Liberation of Christian and Yazidi Children of Iraq, CYCI.

We beseech our government to take immediate action to rescue more than 3,200 abducted Yazidi who are still in ISIS captivity in ISIS-controlled areas, and to bring them here so that they can live as human beings with dignity while ISIS is in the process of being defeated. We cannot lose our abducted Yazidis who have been in captivity for more than two years. From our side, we are ready to help in every way possible upon our government's request.

I received several phone calls recently. About a month ago, ISIS members in the city of Mosul chose 150 Yazidi girls—those who are beautiful and blonde—and transferred them to Qatar and Saudi Arabia for the king and prince's family via Jordan.

Recently, about 100 to 125 from Tal Afar have been transferred to Baaj, which is 34 kilometres out of Sinjar. About 200 have been transferred from Mosul to Syria. The Iraqi government and the KRG are in control of the Iraqi border, so how are these people able to transfer those escaped Yazidi girls outside of Iraq? We hope that Canada can monitor and be a leading force there, so as not to let that happen and to save the Yazidi people.

In the name of humanity, we are asking each and every one of you to do whatever you can to save these innocent souls. I am here and ready for any questions you may have. Thank you so much.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ismail, for your very sobering presentation. I know that every one of the members of this committee has been impacted by your words and also the pictures that you brought before our committee today.

With that, I would like to call on MP Sweet to lead off the questioning.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Ismail, thank you for your testimony. We notice in many of the pictures that you are there, so you've risked your life to go back there and bring accurate testimony to us. We greatly appreciate that.

You have made some extraordinary claims, and those claims are of very serious things that we haven't heard before. Up until this point, we've heard that the Kurdish militia have been the allies of Yazidis, but you have given us an entirely different perspective. I want to ask you to ensure that after your verbal testimony, you table the evidence that you have—you mentioned video and so on—with our chair, so that we have it.

You mentioned that 3,953 orphans are in IDP camps. Do you know exactly where they are, how many camps they're located in? Can they be located by UNHCR officials?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes, they can be located by officials. Most of the displaced Yazidis are in the governorate of Dohuk, which is close to the Yazidi region. Southern Dohuk is a part of the Yazidi homeland, which includes Sharya and Khanik. As for the rest, it's the Yazidi IDP camp in Sulaymaniyah.

Regarding the information received from the ground, in each camp we have some colleagues from our organization. They provide us with information about orphans, and also they provide us many names of those who are suffering from illnesses. They cannot obtain any support for medical care. I think many of you saw those pictures of the sick Yazidis. Also, the Yazidis in Greece are not safe. They were attacked by Islamic State supporters. There were Arabs, Kurds, Afghans, and Chechens.

About the video, yes I do have a video of eye witnesses—actually their brother was killed by peshmerga—and I'm willing to share. Whoever wants to see it, I am willing to share it. We have some eye witnesses, and I can provide you with their names and phone numbers, if you want to contact them. They were eye witnesses when they ran. Also, I have a video of that escaping Yazidi girl. She tried three times, until 10 p.m., to flee with her family to Mount Sinjar for safety, but the KRG militia did not allow her. She said that

in front of her eyes, they killed her husband, father-in-law, and brothers-in-law, and they took the women and children into captivity.

Thank you.

• (1325)

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Ismail, you mentioned—and I tried to capture all the numbers—that there are over 100...to three different locations, who you said were transferred out of the country. You mentioned that this was with the knowledge of officials.

Did I get that correct?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: In the last 10 months or so, most of the Iraqi borders are being controlled by the Iraqi government and the KRG, so how were these people able to be transferred? We know Mosul has been taken with the support of air strikes, like the border, like the Sinjar region, which has been taken for more than a year now. For the Iraqi government, from the other side, it has been more than two months since they took the Anbar province, which borders Syria. I think we are all assured that the Islamic State would not be able to transfer the Yazidi girls via Iran, so whether it's via Turkey.... They took them via Jordan, according to the information we received from one of those escaped Yazidi girls.

As well, I talked to one of the uncles of a Yazidi girl, who was only about 14 years old, and she's still in Mosul. She told her uncle that ISIS came, and they chose 150 young beautiful women, and they said they were going to transfer them. They took them from that area, and they said they were going to Saudi Arabia and Qatar for the king's and princes' families.

I received this information from the people on the ground, and actually the people who are in captivity.

Mr. David Sweet: With the 3,200 women who are still left captive, of those 7,000, I believe, who were originally abducted, do you have sources on the ground to have an idea about where they're being held?

You mentioned about being able to rescue them. Do we have any idea of where they are?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Now the majority is in Iraq, but just recently, they are trying to transfer them to Syria, where ISIS is still much in control. They know they are getting defeated in Iraq, so they're trying to.... Before Iraq is under full control, they are trying to send them to friendly Islamic countries....

This has been coming around for a long time. Even during the Ottoman Empire, they did this with the Yazidis, they did this with the Assyrians, they did this with the Armenians, they did this with the Greeks. During the Kurdish genocide against the Yazidi in 1833-35, by Kurdish "Blind Prince" Mohammed of Rawanduz, they killed more than half a million, and they did the same thing.

Abducting and enslaving the non-Islamists is not something new that we face. Every time we have been facing this. But in past times, we didn't have the technology that we have today. ISIS has never done anything in hiding. Whatever they do, they post their video on social media and articles on their website.

Mr. David Sweet: You've said that this is the 74th—

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet:—genocide that the Yazidi people have faced.

In the western world, we have not experienced the generational hatred that your community has faced. Maybe with my last amount of time, you could give us an idea of how that suffering has affected your people and how this has broken down again now as you're facing yet another genocide.

•(1330)

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Seven hundred and fifty years ago, the Yazidi were estimated at 23 million. From Mesopotamia to Sumeria to Babylon to Assyria, that land has been given different names. In the past 100 years, it has been called Iraq.

Because the Yazidi are not Muslim and because our faith is based on nature, according to Islamic sharia, we're what they call "the people without book". We are among "the people without book". The sharia encourages them to kill, rape, and torture us until they finish us. ISIS declared on social media that they were going to kill the Yazidis to the very last one.

In the west, Canada is one of those countries that claim responsibility for world affairs. We are bringing our voices and urging you to help support us so that we can survive. There is a lack of freedom, human freedom, so we need your support.

In Islamic sharia, we are considered infidels. They are encouraged to do whatever they do, and they're going to go to heaven if they do it. So, they're going to do it.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, I'd just ask that the recorded interviews that he has, whether they're video or eyewitness reports, be aggregated into the witness testimony.

The Chair: Yes, they're going to be sent to the clerk.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Ismail.

The Chair: We're going to move along to MP Khalid, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Ismail, for your very compelling testimony today. I know that we are all moved, and have been, the more we learn about the Yazidis, your situation, and what you're faced with.

Can I please ask you, as kind of a backgrounder, to describe what Yazidi life was like for the community within that region prior to Daesh taking over?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The Yazidis' life was very peaceful. The Yazidis and the Chaldo-Assyrians have lived together with the Armenians, with the Jewish community, with Zoroastrians, and with Sabians for thousands of years.

Now, in our calendar, we are celebrating the 6,766th year. We are from an ancient time, from Sumeria, to Babylon, to Assyria, to Mesopotamia, and into Iraq today. Only about 1,300 years ago, the Arabs conquered Iraq and the rest of the Middle East. Then the Turks came from Mongolia, and during the Islamic expansion, they tried to destroy all non-Muslims.

By sharia law, if you are "a people of a book", they give you some choices. For example, Christians and Jews can pay taxes without being converted or killed. "The people without book", like Yazidis, Hindus, or Buddhists, are given only two choices: convert or die.

I think most of you have heard what happened in 1971 to Hindu people.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Sorry, I think you misunderstood my question. My question is, at the grassroots level, what was life like? Was there an economy? Was there business? Were you living with the other minorities that are in Iraq?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The economy was based mostly on agriculture as soon as Iraq became a country. Before that, the Yazidis were living a peaceful life with the Assyrians, with the Armenians. It was the same thing; life was based mostly on agriculture.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: They grew vegetables, wheat, and livestock. Nobody went against one another. Unfortunately, as I said, after the Muslims conquered the Middle East, we were being attacked.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

We have been studying this very difficult issue for the past of couple of weeks, and we have heard testimony that as the Yazidi women who have been kidnapped and enslaved escape and return back to the community, they are also facing discrimination from within. Can you please comment on that?

•(1335)

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Whoever you heard that from, it's not true. I think you saw many pictures where I am with an abducted Yazidi girl who I met in northern Iraq. Some of the Yazidi girls were as young as 12 years old. They were forced to marry 80-year-old men in Mosul and Syria, and the rest of Iraq and Syria. This has been mostly propaganda by the Muslim world, which is saying that, but that's not true at all.

In Germany, I think you have seen it, or I can give you the pictures and the video. Many of them have been married to young Yazidi men after they escaped. We are the one organization, with CYCI, that was in northern Iraq. Working together, we saved almost 141 individual Yazidi girls. Now many of them are in Germany and they are married.

This is not right. We paid some of them more than \$7,000 just to get our women back. It was the same thing. Now we have some escaped Yazidi girls imprisoned by KRG. The KRG tried to brainwash them. They said, if you go to your community they're going to kill you, so stay and convert to Islam. It's better for you.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What kinds of initiatives are you as an organization, as a community also, doing at the grassroots level to make sure that the women who have suffered so much atrocity are integrated when they come back into the community? What kinds of initiatives have been taken?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: We are trying our best to help them with psychosocial help, as well as medications. I gave a list to you. We have been helping them with other organizations, financially and with psychosocial help.

If the Yazidis don't like these women in their community, why am I here today to plead and to urge you to bring those Yazidi girls to Canada, to live as humans with dignity? I know the KRG has been against Yazidis for a long time and are trying to wipe us out, because the KRG's plan failed to destroy Yazidis with ISIS. That is why the KRG is trying to tell you this.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you. My last question for you is, what is a long-term solution to this problem? The Yazidis have suffered, as you said, for a very long time. What can be done to really save the culture and the community? What is a long-term solution?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: A long-term solution.... Lalish is the only Yazidi holy place in the world, and our history goes back for more than 6,000 years. We are the people from that land since the birth of humanity.

The long-term solution would be to find ways to work together. Now we work with some U.S. congressmen and women. For example, Jeff Fortenberry, Anna Eshoo, and some senators. They are working to establish an autonomous region for the Yazidis and Christians and to provide military training so that they can protect their people, their history, and their land. We have been urging Canada to join up with the U.S. to do that. Canada is one of the best countries in the world, which respects human rights, and Canada and the rest of the western world know that the Yazidis and Christians will not be able to survive under sharia law.

For example, the KRG says Islam is the state of the region. In southern Iraq the government, or the central Iraqi government, they say Islam is the head of the state. If Islam is the head of the state, you have to follow sharia law, and if you follow sharia law you have to kill Yazidis. The world should know that.

The long-term solution, as I said, is to create a safe zone for Yazidis and Christians in Sinjar and the Nineveh plains and provide them with military training so they can protect their ancient homeland and their people.

On August 3, if it wasn't the KRG's plan, the KRG would not have collected the Yazidis' and Christians' weapons. If the Yazidis and Christians had weapons they would fight ISIS. ISIS themselves declared that their greatest losses in Iraq and Syria were in the Sinjar region, where the Yazidis live with only very basic weapons, such as AK-47s, and limited ammunition.

If they had resources to defend themselves, they would do that. We wouldn't then come to this situation, and we hope that Canada could join with the U.S., U.K., and EU to create a safe zone for the Yazidi Christians in Iraq and Syria.

• (1340)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ismail.

We are now going to move to MP Hardcastle.

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

Mr. Ismail, thank you so much for your thought-provoking information.

I don't need to hear any more graphic detail to convince me. What I would like to hear from you is.... Because we're in shock, and we're

supposed to be decision-makers and policy developers, so what kinds of practical steps can you recommend to us? You told us earlier that with some of the support that goes to government, there is corruption and there is skimming off the top. You told us about government officials and government people that are working against the Yazidis.

Instead of talking about the long term like my colleague asked you about, in the short term, is there an organization right now or a group you trust that we could make some headway with over there? I don't mean here in Canada.

Who do you work with, and what do you see as a promising partnership for us to foster some kind of relationship, so there can be real action?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: I would recommend that you work closely with the Yazidi Human Rights Organization on the ground and the Assyrian Aid Society. The Assyrian Aid Society has been very helpful. They collect donations from around the world, from churches, and they provide equally to Yazidis and Christians.

From the government side, I was there in 2015, and I was there in 2014, at the time of the attack. One time, at the beginning of the winter in one of the IDP camps in Zakho, more than seven trailers came with winter clothing. The people who made donations were there, and they tried to distribute. They probably distributed to 50 or 100 people and then as the donors left, they closed the trailer doors and said, "That's enough for you. We gave you more than enough."

In late 2014 to 2015, I went to Iraq with the Hindu guru, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. He donated 110 tonnes of food and clothing. We were there to make sure that this donation reached the people who needed the donation and not the government.

I believe that if the international community worked together, they could work with the people directly because the people are suffering, and the government is taking advantage of it. We hope you could work with the people on the ground, with the Yazidis, the Christians, the Sabians, and all who are displaced in those camps to make sure that the aid reaches them.

I can show you hundreds of pictures of the sick people. They are screaming for money just to have an operation or they will face severe health problems.

We hope you can work with the people who have suffered instead of working with the government.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Chair, I will turn my time I have left over to one of my honourable colleagues because I have to exit the meeting at this time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hardcastle.

Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Ismail, for your testimony.

Our heart goes out to the Yazidi people, and the atrocities that have been faced by not only the Yazidis but other minorities and other individuals in Iraq and Syria.

My first question to you is continuing on what Ms. Khalid had said. For the future, how do you solve this issue? You have been mentioning a lot the grouping of individuals in certain religions, but do you feel that a separation of church and state in a future Iraq or Syria would be part of a solution?

• (1345)

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The Yazidis, Christians, and Sabians in Iraq have tried many times to survive together with the Muslims, but unfortunately, when there is an attack, they point their guns on their neighbours—

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: That's exactly my question. Here in western states we have a separation of church and state where individuals from all the different religions have freedom to practise their own religion. I understand that, for certain individuals who claim they may be Muslim or under Islamic rule and even prior maybe under the Ottoman Empire, there have been people who have seen a lot of atrocities.

Would you see a separation of church and state as being better to grow the region there and to have stability so we don't see human rights atrocities?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: It would be greatly appreciated if Islam could accept a separation from the state and from politics. That would be great, but unfortunately, you don't see that anywhere in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East.

I was in the city of Dohuk in December of 2014, and I heard a mullah on a loudspeaker saying that ISIS is doing the right thing in killing the infidels. I contacted one of the UN officials in Baghdad and said that this was what was happening. The Yazidis were sleeping in the streets in the middle of winter. I think you saw my picture under the bridges. If the mosque is telling this to its people, what are you going to do? They didn't do anything.

Of course, if they could separate the church from the state, that would be greatly appreciated. Probably we would be able to survive together.

Saddam was a dictator but under his regime the life of Yazidis, Assyrians, Christians, Sabians, and Baha'is was much better than today, which now they call a democratic Iraq. Under Saddam no religious people could give a fatwa or permission to kill Yazidis or Christians.

If the west thinks they are going to be able to do this in Iraq and Syria or in other places, like Egypt for example, where many different ethnic groups live, or in Iran with, for example, the Zoroastrians, Yazidis, and Assyrians, or in Turkey, that would be great, but I don't see that in the future because they have not been able to do that for the last 1,400 years. I don't think that's going to happen any time soon.

For a short-term solution, Canada could be the leading force to save the Yazidis and Christians and then also work for the long-term solution.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: We mentioned solutions. I want to ensure that with what we bring together here in our committee, we see human rights established and we don't see any atrocities happening in these regions.

If I can correlate that a little to the former Yugoslavia, there was a separation. You mentioned an autonomous state in your testimony. In the former Yugoslavia there were a lot of states that have separated: Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, etc. Do you see an autonomous state as a solution, because within that region there is still distrust. I understand from your testimony that there is still distrust of so many different factions, and that the Yazidis are facing distrust toward others.

I'm still relating it to my first question. Is the solution an autonomous state or the separation of church and state?

• (1350)

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The fairest solution and the only solution would be an autonomous region within federal Iraq for the Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrians.

Now it's called the disputed area. Both the central government and the KRG government are fighting for the indigenous land. Canada was one of the countries that held that the KRG had to be a safe autonomy in 1991, and the U.S. and Europe. This is the only solution. Canada could work with other allies like the U.S., the EU, the U.K., and the UN to establish an autonomous region within Iraq.

We are not asking for a separate state. Iraq has been a federal country since 2003, and it's in article 125 of the Iraqi constitution that if the majority in the region wants an autonomous region, they should be granted it. The Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians have been fighting for an autonomous region since 2008, with the U.S. government and the Institute for International Law and Human Rights that's based in D.C. and Brussels. We have been working closely with them, and we hope that Canada could join other allies to form this. Then, at the same time, there are many Muslims who live in the minorities' area too.

As you mentioned, to separate church from the state would be great. That can work long term, but short term, I don't think any of the Yazidis or Chaldo-Assyrian Christians would trust the Iraqi government or the KRG government, because they were not able to protect us. They didn't do it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ismail.

We're going to now move to MP Anderson.

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

I want to thank you for being with us today.

One of our witnesses the other day talked about the proliferation and potential proliferation and expansion of sect-specific militias in the area. Groups of people in villages or who have similar beliefs are getting together and forming their own militias.

Can you talk about that? Have the Yazidis done that, and how are they protecting themselves?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Both the Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, from the first day, they formed their armed...and whoever owned a gun. For example, on Sinjar mountain, no internationals went to support them or to save them. They were saved by the local Yazidis, with only very basic weapons, such as AK-47s, and for the Assyrians, it's the same thing.

So, yes, we have more than 5,000 armed Yazidis in Mount Sinjar, and Sheikhan, Bashiqa, and Barzan. They are the ones. Unfortunately, the KRG is against forming any forces. We are screaming for support from the west because we know the KRG is not going to protect us. In fact, they will always try to destroy us.

Mr. David Anderson: Can I ask whether the Christians find themselves in a similar situation? Do you see similar organization there as well?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes.

We work closely with the Assyrian Aid Society, so we have very good contact with the Assyrian democratic movement in northern Iraq. That has its own militia to protect the Christians in northern Iraq.

Mr. David Anderson: If this safe zone doesn't get set up in the near future or whatever, you said you're still at risk of continued discrimination. Where would that discrimination come from? Where should the international community be watching? Is the KRG that aggressive, or is it coming from some other places?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The discrimination is coming from the KRG.

Under the Saddam regime for 34 years, Saddam imposed Arabic ethnicity on Yazidis. Then, when Saddam was gone, the KRG took over Saddam's unfinished work and they imposed Kurdification on Yazidis. They already have bought many Yazidis with money, including the Yazidi prince and others, like Khairi Bozani, or Mahama Khalil. They buy them with money and then they send them to meet with officials in the west and say that the Yazidis are Kurds, which doesn't make any sense. When the Yazidi and Chaldo-Assyrians used to live together more than 6,000 years ago, there was no mention of Kurds in the world.

• (1355)

Mr. David Anderson: You talked about your safe zone, and one of my colleagues asked for a little bit more information on that. How would you see that as being set up? How would security be taken care of? How would you establish a justice system? What would be the legislative representation for people? Do you have an idea of what you're asking for?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: What is now called the disputed area is the Nineveh plain and the Sinjar region. In both areas, more than 85% to 90% of the population are Yazidis and Christians, and they have lived together like brothers and sisters for thousands of years. In fact, they have saved each other, to the extent that they could save one another. The Yazidis in the past, during the Ottoman Empire, they saved more than 20,000 Armenians. The Ottomans sent a letter to the

Yazidi leader, who at that time was Hamo Sharro. The Ottomans said if the Yazidis would hand over Armenian Christians, they would not be attacked but if they didn't hand them over, the Ottomans would commit an attack against the Yazidis. The Yazidis tore up the letter and said, "Commit whatever you want to commit. We are brothers and sisters and we are not going to hand them over to you." Then the Ottomans came from Istanbul and attacked the Sinjar region.

As for the autonomous region, according to the Iraqi constitution, Iraq is now a federal country. The Yazidis and Christians wish to get help and support from the west to create an autonomous zone, so that when they have their own separate administration, they will be able to defend themselves within Iraq.

Mr. David Anderson: These small communities have to resettle and they have to move back in with their neighbours. We've had other testimony talking about how difficult that's going to be. Do you think it is possible? Can these communities come back together and live in harmony?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: In the Yazidi region of Sinjar, the majority were Yazidis and the others were the minority, like the Turkmen, who were in Tal Afar, which is about 25 miles east of Sinjar. In the Nineveh plain, most of the area is Yazidis and Christians together. Either way, we are kind of grouped together in one region so I don't think we're going to have any problem.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, we're going to draw the testimony to a close.

Mr. Ismail, I want to thank you for being here and providing testimony. I know you're going to send some additional materials to the clerk, and we'll make sure you have that contact information.

I want to thank you and your colleagues for the work that your organization does and also for providing some difficult testimony, but important testimony, for us here today.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: On my behalf and on my colleagues' behalf, I would like to thank you so much for inviting us. I would like to thank all the committee members and all the people who attended here. Thank you so much for having us here and for listening to what we have been through. We are not only fighting for the Yazidis. We are fighting for all minorities that have been suffering under sharia law, whether Yazidis, Christians, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, or Sabians. We hope that Canada can be a leading force to help those people survive.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to suspend and go in camera for about three minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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