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Chair

Mr. Stephen Fuhr

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Fuhr (Kelowna—Lake Country, Lib.)): Good morning. Welcome, everyone, to defence committee this morning. I'd like to welcome the chief of the defence staff, General Vance, to the committee to talk to us about Operation Impact.

Sir, I know you're very familiar with the committee procedures, so I'll just turn the floor over to you for your opening remarks.

General Jonathan Vance (Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's great to be back.

To all members of the committee, thank you very much for inviting me to speak before you. At the outset, I want you to know that I truly anticipate and look forward to these sessions. In my role, I think it's important to be able to answer your questions and give you the information that you want, need and deserve.

Today, I will provide you with an update about Operation Impact. Our specific military activities for this operation have evolved over time, but I want you to know the aim of Operation Impact remains clear and unchanged. We are one of 79 coalition members committed to defeating Daesh and setting the conditions for security and stability in the region. As you know, Daesh has lost over 98% of the territory it once held. Almost eight million people have been liberated from their control and the coalition has trained and equipped more than 170,000 members of the Iraqi security forces.

[Translation]

All that to say that the coalition's efforts have been effective. Daesh's territorial control has been severely reduced. People are returning to their homes and rebuilding their lives.

The coalition is moving into a phase of stabilization. In other words, it is focusing on aiding the Government of Iraq in restoring, maintaining and establishing civil order and governance.

The fight is not over. There is more work to be done.

[English]

Daesh has moved underground. Although significantly weakened, it is likely that the group will continue to launch small-scale attacks and try to reorganize. The prevailing ideology and instability that enabled it to rise are not yet defeated. Therefore, this is not a risk-free environment, but I can assure you that the men and women on

the ground, your soldiers, are well trained and carefully selected for their expertise.

[Translation]

We conduct rigorous planning to make sure our people have the right equipment, the right support, and the right command and control structures. In short, we ensure that they have everything they need to accomplish their tasks.

We have been gradually shifting from achieving tactical effects to setting the conditions for regional stability and security.

[English]

As we move forward, we will remain flexible to meet the evolving demands of the campaign. In the air, our Polaris tanker has enabled coalition partners to fly longer and farther, which enhances their operational effectiveness. Our C-130 Hercules aircraft have transported more than eight million pounds of cargo.

In northern Iraq, three CH-146 Griffon helicopters provide our deployed personnel with tactical airlift, transporting Canadian troops, equipment and supplies, who are conducting the train, advise and assist mission to support the ISF. Also in northern Iraq, we have led our role 2 medical facilities since October 2016. We have provided medical and dental care to over 2,500 people.

On the intelligence front, we have a team that collects, synthesizes and analyzes intelligence to support the coalition. This is used to protect our partner forces and plan operations.

In moving to more of a regional outlook, we have multiple teams working to build resilience and enable long-term security and stability. Brigadier-General Rob Delaney leads the ministerial liaison team. We took on that leadership role in 2016 and have been working to build enduring relationships with the Iraqi government. In the past year and a half, we have also increased our focus on training. Our combat engineers are delivering counter-improvised explosive device training and route clearance training to Iraqi security forces. This September, we started a training facility, called Q-West, in the north. We've trained over 500 Iraqi security forces members thus far. In Jordan and Lebanon, our training and assistance teams are working to build our partners' military capacities.

Now, I would like to take a moment to clarify a few points about our special operations forces' train, advise and assist mission. Early on during Operation Impact, special operations forces' members partnered with the Kurdish peshmerga, who were facing an immediate threat as Daesh swept over northern Iraq. In coordination with our coalition partners, we determined that we could achieve the greatest effect by working with them. Our train, advise and assist efforts enabled the Kurdish security forces to refine their skills, bolster their defences and set the stage for their participation in the Mosul operation in October 2016.

• (1105)

As you know, the Iraqi security forces successfully took back Mosul last summer. Canada was a key contributor to this success, in an advisory capacity at the tactical level.

[Translation]

As the campaign evolved—from degrading Daesh, to counter-attack, to defeating their organized efforts—our partnerships have also evolved.

In order to support Iraqi-led efforts in Mosul, we partnered with select Iraqi security force units—all of which were carefully vetted.

These decisions were based on the coalition campaign requirements, and based on where our special operations forces members could provide the most effective contribution.

[English]

We continue to take that approach, working with specific Iraqi units to achieve the greatest effect in maintaining security.

Looking to the future, in addition to other activities under Operation Impact, a Canadian will lead the NATO training mission in Iraq. This mission is not a replacement of the coalition. It's complementary. Our contribution to the NATO mission includes up to 250 troops. A number of Canadians have already arrived and are setting up, and the mission is expected to start fully early in the new year. It's being led by Major-General Dany Fortin, late of commanding the 1st Canadian Division. I have great confidence in his leadership.

The NATO mission will provide training to Iraqi security forces and help Iraq build a more effective national defence and security structure. We are taking a train-the-trainer approach to create sustainable change, particularly in their educational and training institutions. Along with our allies, we'll help our Iraqi partners to develop skills in key areas like bomb disposal, combat medicine and logistics. Throughout all of it, we will place emphasis on the law of armed conflict.

To conclude, as we move forward, the Canadian Armed Forces will be contributing to both coalition and NATO efforts in the region during Operation Impact. These efforts are being well coordinated and are complementary to each other. This is a complex problem that cannot be solved by military might alone. Our efforts are part of a broader international and Government of Canada strategy, which includes humanitarian assistance, development aid and political and security sector reform.

As the conditions in Iraq and the region evolve, I will continue to work with the minister, the deputy minister, and our allies and partners to develop, execute and assess our plans. Through all of that, ladies and gentlemen, our deployed men and women are doing what they do best. They're professional, they lead and they demonstrate every day operational excellence in challenging areas of operations.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

I will be very happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, General.

I'll just remind everybody at the table. If you see me waving this paper, would you wind down your comments within 30 seconds to facilitate a graceful dismount and move to the next question.

I'll yield the floor for the first question to MP Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, General, for being here today to update us on Operation Impact.

I know you've already touched on, in your opening remarks, some of the areas in which we are participating. Can you discuss some of the specific strengths and areas where Canadian troops are leading the mission?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Certainly. I would start with the NATO mission. We put an experienced major-general, two star, in place to mount and do the first year of this mission. It's complex to be the first rotation that does this. He is showing great leadership, as are the Canadians who are involved in force protection, the aviation support to that mission, as well as those who will be doing the training.

I think we have particular strength through our special operations forces as they transition from the peshmerga to new partners in the Iraqi security forces, with a focus on training and advising them as they conduct operations to maintain security in the area and environment of Mosul.

• (1110)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Is Canada well regarded for its ability to train and advise?

Gen Jonathan Vance: We are.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

Gen Jonathan Vance: I can't forget the medical facility. We have fantastic doctors and technicians, and as you saw by the numbers, over 2,500 people were served for medical and dental problems. They've done a fantastic job.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: The coalition has committed to tackling Daesh's financing and economic infrastructure, preventing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters across borders, supporting stabilization, restoring central public services to areas liberated from Daesh, as well as countering propaganda. Can you specify in which of these roles Canadian Forces are contributing, and can you provide some examples as to the impact they're having?

Gen Jonathan Vance: We are predominantly involved in the tactical operations on the ground, largely focused on maintaining security and developing the capacity and capability of the Iraqi security forces.

Where it's appropriate, we are involved in intelligence sharing that may have an impact, with our Five Eyes partners and through the wider coalition effort to gather intelligence. Through that process, it is possible and it has occurred that foreign fighters and their movements have been identified.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

Switching gears a little bit, I come from a riding that has a military base in it, and there's a lot of stress that's put on not just those who are deployed but their families, and in particular while they're deployed. Some of the resources that work extremely well are the military resource centres. We have one of those at CFB Kingston.

Can you give us a bit of an update on the Seamless Canada initiative and how we're supporting our families while their loved ones are deployed through these various resources that we have?

Gen Jonathan Vance: It's a great question, sir.

I'll start off by saying that the longer I've been in the forces and in this job, the more I realize that not only are our families the strength behind the uniform, but they actually in many ways form an integral part of our operational capability. One cannot conduct operations or conceive of operations without being confident that the member is supported and stable and the family is able to continue to function.

The seamless Canada initiative is a function of a wider initiative that we've called "Canadian Forces Base Canada", where it is clear to me and clear to the senior leadership of the armed forces that we were once entirely designed as a military to be in single-income families that thrived, that lived on bases, that lived largely a subsidized life on bases where your police force, your school, your gas station and your shopping centre were all sort of inside the wire on your base. Decisions were made some time ago for a variety of very good reasons to isolate the forces less—because we were isolated from society at that time, I think—and to be more present in communities. We are and that's good. We benefit from all of what Canadian communities offer.

Nonetheless, the one thing that didn't change was the mobile lifestyle of the military, moving from base to base around the world or across Canada. Though it's delightful to live in communities around the country, it's a challenge to pick up and move, when now we largely live in an economy and lifestyle that takes two incomes to properly raise your family, when it's not as easy to assure yourself of access to a doctor or to the childhood education that your children particularly need, particularly as you transfer between different school systems. There's also the challenge of your paycheque. You

move between different tax brackets or different taxation regimes and so on.

It makes for an uneven existence for military families. It adds stress to things that even the best of MFRCs can't solve. We're investing in MFRCs and we desperately need them and we want to continue to improve and strengthen what the MFRCs do.

If I may, I'll just finish. The idea of Seamless Canada and the Canadian Forces Base Canada approach is to find ways to make that experience—where we must move—both the move itself and the experience of arriving somewhere, much less stressful.

• (1115)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I appreciate your saying that. It's something I've asked before of you and others who have come before the committee and something that I'll continue to ask. I know definitely in Kingston, if you look back 30 years, all of our military lived in one particular area of the city. Now they're totally embedded in the community. Military folks are coaches of children's athletic teams. They're really embedded right into the community, whereas they weren't before. I'm glad to see we're looking at that. I hope we can continue to make progress in making sure we can continue to work on some of the things you've identified as being challenges for our military families.

Gen Jonathan Vance: If the chair will allow me to say this, the idea of living among those communities and with our neighbours is wonderful—the kids are playing hockey and sports with other kids who aren't all necessarily military—but the mobile lifestyle and the exigencies of service haven't changed. We've changed the way we live, but we haven't really changed the stressors. What we have to do is to address those stressors. In my view, it's a clear and present danger to the morale of the armed forces if we don't address them.

The Chair: Thank you, General.

MP Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, General Vance, for joining us today and giving us a very timely briefing, given everything that's going on at Meech Lake with the coalition ministers of defence talking about the future of Operation Impact.

First and foremost, I want to thank you for your leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces. Please pass on our thanks and gratitude to every member of the Canadian Armed Forces, and not just those involved in Operation Impact, but those in missions around the world and in daily operations right here who are keeping us safe and secure. Please wish them our best for a safe and secure new year, and of course a very merry Christmas and happy Hanukkah.

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you, sir.

Mr. James Bezan: You are talking about 250 troops total for the NATO mission. Does that include every Canadian member of the armed forces who is involved in Operation Impact, including the air task force in Kuwait?

Gen Jonathan Vance: It does not, sir. The NATO mission—

Mr. James Bezan: What would be total number of Canadians involved in Operation Impact and in the NATO mission?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Sir, we have authorities up to 850 people.

Mr. James Bezan: That's what I thought.

You talked about the air task force in the context of the Herces, the Griffon helicopters, the refuelling capabilities, as well as the delivery of materiel to everybody on the ground.

Of course, in the first military action by the Liberal government when it came in, Justin Trudeau pulled all of our CF-18s out of the fight against ISIS. Then he reduced our number of surveillance aircraft by 50% by yanking one of the Aurora aircraft home.

You don't mention it here, but is the other Aurora still in theatre, or has it been brought home as well?

Gen Jonathan Vance: It has been returned home.

Mr. James Bezan: When did that happen?

Gen Jonathan Vance: That happened last year. We indicated that.

Mr. James Bezan: I wasn't aware of that. I thought we still had the one Aurora there.

Gen Jonathan Vance: We replaced those two aircrafts with the two CC-130J Hercules aircraft at the request of the coalition.

Mr. James Bezan: Was that accepted by the coalition itself? Did they have to replace that aerial surveillance capability with aircraft from other nations?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Indeed, the force generation for the coalition is a constant iterative effort that must evolve with the nature of the operations on the ground. When we withdrew those aircraft, the requirement for deliberate targeting had ceased to exist in terms of the need for those aircraft. Deliberate targeting demanding a long cycle of collection was less critical at that time. The ability to move troops, equipment and materiel around the theatre with our Hercules became more of a requirement, so we did it, in consultation with the coalition and in full agreement.

Mr. James Bezan: Other coalition partners still maintain fighter and bomber capabilities in the region. Are they still being deployed in Iraq in particular, or are they just used in the Syrian region now?

Gen Jonathan Vance: There are still assets available to coalition command to use in Iraq and Syria. I can't tell you today what their rate of usage is, but it has decreased considerably since the transition.

• (1120)

Mr. James Bezan: You mentioned that when we first went over we were working almost exclusively with the Kurdish peshmerga. The Kurdistan Regional Government said that our air assets, including our CF-18s, were saving lives, and they always appreciated the work we did in training up the peshmerga in their stand against ISIS. They were key in the liberation of Mosul.

Can you tell us what we're doing with the peshmerga today, if anything at all?

Gen Jonathan Vance: We are not doing the train, advise and assist mission with the peshmerga anymore. We are conducting security operations with Kurdish forces within the area defined as Kurdistan.

Mr. James Bezan: Are any of the coalition partners helping out the peshmerga, or are they being left on their own?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Yes, they are.

Mr. James Bezan: They are getting help?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Yes, sir.

Mr. James Bezan: We were going to supply a cache of lethal weapons to the peshmerga, which were supposed to be delivered just after the referendum on their own declaration of independence took place. As I understand according to a question we had on an Order Paper, those weapons are still sitting in storage in both Jordan and Montreal.

What plan do you have for that cache of weapons? Are they going to be gifted to somebody else—like Ukraine—or are they going to be used by the Canadian Armed Forces themselves?

Gen Jonathan Vance: They won't be used by the Canadian Armed Forces. There has been no decision or military advice provided on my part as to where those weapons should end up. I think we have the capability and the doctrine, I would say, that where we are involved in conflict and where it is appropriate to transfer lethal aid.... We don't really distinguish between lethal and non-lethal aid in Canada. It's a bit of an Americanism, to tell you the truth. However, that assistance to any partner force remains possible. We have no plans to do so with anybody at this juncture.

Mr. James Bezan: You mentioned briefly that we do have special operation forces on the ground. Can you go into more detail as to exactly what their role is on the ground? I know some of it is training, and advise, assist and accompany security forces. Are they also providing that close security capability for our other troops at the role 2 hospital, for example, or at NATO headquarters or the NATO mission in Baghdad?

Gen Jonathan Vance: No, they are not providing armed security, other than protecting themselves whenever they move around. There's no stand-alone force protection role other than what everybody does all the time to defend themselves.

I can't go into the specifics, sir, but they conduct operations to support and assist Iraqi security forces in ensuring that any pockets of ISIL or Daesh do not re-emerge. It's the connection of intelligence to activity. Then, where necessary, if the Iraqi security forces need to act, whether it's to conduct a detention operation, to seize or arrest someone, or to attack, they're supported in terms of their planning of those operations.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): First of all, thank you so much for being here with us today.

I would like to follow up on what my colleague said about wishing our members out there all the very best. I also would like to add that we're incredibly proud, and we appreciate not only them but their families and the sacrifice they make for their work.

I want to say that I also appreciate what you said in the last bit of your report, about our deployed men and women are doing what they do best: demonstrating their professionalism, leadership, and operational excellence in challenging areas of operations.

I know in the work that I do with the NATO Parliamentary Association, every country has nothing but praise for the men and women in uniform from Canada. I just think we should all be incredibly proud of that in this country.

As the person who has the honour of representing CFB Comox 19 Wing, I appreciate also that you talked in your report about the amazing work that the Canadian Air Force has been doing in Operation Impact. As a member who represents not only the base but the many veterans who retire in the Comox region, I certainly get a lot of calls and questions about the work that's being done, so I am grateful that you are here today.

In your report you mentioned that Daesh has lost over 98% of the territory it once held. I know that some Canadians feel very strongly that the reason the Canadian troops were there was to do that work. They're asking me questions about why we're still there. I think you did a little bit of that in the report, but could you expand on what has been going on more recently?

• (1125)

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you for the question.

It's important and I think many people would recognize the challenge from going from winning the battles and the kinetic war to securing the peace. I think the west has been somewhat criticized on different operations where we now find ourselves in that uncomfortable space between having won the clear military fight—or largely won. It's not completely won at this juncture. How do you best set conditions for peaceful resolution when the reasons underpinning the fighting in the first place had much to do with what was going on in society, in government and so on?

There is a role for the military to play in setting conditions so that effective and legitimate governance can re-emerge, and where the security sector can be reformed in such a way as to be credible to their people and serve as a useful instrument for their government in terms of the defence of their territory.

If the question is “Why are we still there?” or “What ought we be doing going forward?”, I would boil the answer down to this: We've learned lessons through a number of conflicts, including Iraq. Having won part of the challenge, one cannot easily walk away without having secured long-term peace and security, for which there is a military role but not an exclusive military role.

I suspect that many people may feel we are in this uncomfortable space between the two as we now work with the Iraqi government. They go through their elections. There are all sorts of social, political and economic things that must happen in that country to weave

together the fabric of their society. We remain there to support them as they try to rebuild their defence and security sector. We also provide a measure of security. That's really how this materializes.

If I may, we also have to be ready for reversals. The bad guys always get a vote, so there isn't an element here.... It's not done and over. I think many people are accustomed to the nature of war in the past. It was over, a truce was declared or someone surrendered. Then a political process took place, new governments emerged and everything was won and set.

We're not dealing with that kind of a conflict. Therefore, we must have different answers from perhaps what we're accustomed to in terms of how to secure the peace.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You said in your report that there were multiple teams working to build resilience and enable long-term security and stability, which is basically what you've just talked about.

Could you give us a bit of detail about how that's actually happening on the ground?

Gen Jonathan Vance: It's a whole-of-government effort. To do justice to this, I would simply say that other elements of Canadian and international power beyond the military are being employed, where we are financing activities that seek to re-establish neighbourhoods and care for the people who have been displaced.

We have police on the ground—RCMP and others—to try to help them re-establish an effective police force. Remember, this country has been ravaged.

We have a diplomatic mission there that continues to engage.

The military part gets quite practical, making certain that they have good skills in mine clearance and the removal of explosive devices and remnants of war, so that as families move back into neighbourhoods, they can call on their own security forces to help them re-establish some sort of safety.

This goes all the way through to providing the best support we can, in terms of re-establishing their professionalism. They have been dealing with an emergency, so they have recruited rapidly, trained rapidly and engaged as best they could against an enemy of their state. Now they have to rebuild their state, including the institutions that we take for granted. A professional, loyal and fully trained armed forces that is ready to do the bidding of their government is something they're working towards.

They've increased in professionalism, they've increased in capability and they've done a very good job dealing with the clear and present danger: the threat of Daesh. Now they want to professionalize and return to a state of peace, with credible armed forces.

I see the white flag.

•(1130)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's okay. Thank you so much.

The Chair: I'm not surrendering.

Thank you, General.

I'm going to give the floor to MP Robillard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank General Vance for his excellent testimony in both official languages.

I want to use this opportunity to wish all our armed forces members and their families a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

On October 3, the Iraqi president, who was elected earlier in the year appointed Adel Abdel-Mehdi to the position of prime minister. The latter is also the acting minister of defence and the interior.

Given that the Iraqi Parliament seems to be more divided than ever, can you paint us a picture of the relationship between Canada and the new Iraqi prime minister and tell us how that affects the relationship between our Canadian armed forces and the Iraqi forces?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you for your question, Mr. Robillard.

I will answer in English so I can be completely comfortable.

[*English*]

I think the relationship is emerging. This is a brand new government. They are still working to put in place their plans as to how they will move forward.

The Iraqi Parliament has changed its face somewhat, in terms of its representation and political representation.

All I can tell you is that the Iraqi government has made it clear that they welcome and acknowledge the need for continued coalition support. They've been particularly.... They've said specifically that they welcome the NATO mission, and indeed enjoy the fact that a Canadian is leading it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

As you are here to talk about operations, we saw last weekend that the Canadian armed forces were always ready to help civilian authorities as needed through Operation Lentus. We know that this has been very important for the people of the Magdalen Islands. Can you tell us more about the state of preparedness and the capacity of our forces to respond to those kinds of emergencies? How are you adapting to the changes in circumstances, from floods to forest fires to snowstorms?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you once again for your question.

[*English*]

I have to tell you, sir, I'm very proud of our response to that, as I am every time we respond to support Canadians. I've said it before

and I'll say it again: All members of the armed forces love to support Canadians first. It's a real point of pride, when Canadians are in trouble and we are asked to support, that we can be there.

We've learned a lot over the years about how to make that faster, so we have good liaison—in this case with the Government of Quebec—and excellent work through the government operations centre, where, from the provincial level down through the ministerial level and to orders to me to act—because I cannot act in Canada without a request—and in support of other government departments, we responded.

In this case, it was with Hercules and troops to support not only the movement of Hydro-Québec and other workers onto the island, but also, which was important, to do a welfare check of individuals to support the police, not in a law enforcement role but just to make sure that everybody was okay. The time from when we were requested to think about this until we left and started doing the job was, I think, 24 hours or less.

I would say that the impact of such things as climate change or the advent of natural disasters has certainly made it clear to me.... You asked me about how we are prepared to respond. We maintain force structure. We maintain a part of the armed forces at readiness, and in some cases quite high readiness, to be able to respond to Canadians in need. We have now a process whereby we anticipate fire season, flood season and increases in the requirement for search and rescue response, depending on when people will be out on the water and land. We are then poised to respond more quickly.

It has, though, become not a case of the odd occurrence. It's now almost routine. We have, I think, for the last three years, deployed to support provinces in firefighting and managing floods. It's now becoming a routine occurrence, which it had not been in the past. We take that into consideration in terms of the force structure and employment of the reserves. I've given direction to look at developing ways to make the reserves far more capable and ready, in terms of initial response, because they are present there.

•(1135)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

As members of Parliament, we often hear about the difficulties of living in a military family. We hear and know that deployment and all the travelling across the country are a challenge. We have put this question to the deputy minister, but we should also hear your point of view.

Can you update us on the seamless Canada initiative? What has been done concerning military family resource centres and the relocation policy?

[*English*]

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you for the question, sir. I think I answered this question once, but I'm happy to do it again. Perhaps I can just abbreviate.

I would stress that living in a military family is also wonderful. I grew up in a military family.

Where it is clear to me that the nature of life today in Canada for a highly mobile armed forces has challenges is in things like the wild variations in housing prices, differences in the tax rates, differences in operational tempo and differences in the school systems.

I would suggest that what we are trying to do is to make that situation better.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go to five-minute questions, now.

The first five-minute question will go to MP Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

General, it's great to see you again after seeing you at the security forum a couple of weeks ago in Halifax.

When the deputy minister was last before us at committee for the supplementary estimates, there was a lot of talk about the Team Canada flight and the Department of National Defence's public affairs team. At that meeting the deputy minister was given the opportunity to address comments that were made on the matter here at committee.

I wonder, since we have you here today, if you would consider commenting on transparency and Team Canada.

Gen Jonathan Vance: I'd be delighted. Thank you for the question.

I have given direction in writing and verbal guidance to my commanders—and that has cascaded down to the forces—to seek to be transparent and to lean into that transparency, that where there's a doubt, be transparent and communicate. I've encouraged my senior commanders—and I lead by example in this regard—to try to ensure that we answer questions and that we do that with integrity and credibility.

As it relates to Team Canada, the first job of the chain of command was to attend to the needs and care of the affected person. In consultation with that affected person, a course of action was selected. In hindsight, there was another course of action, but nonetheless a course of action was selected that ensured that our drill as it related to Operation Honour was to take care of the victim first. That was done in consultation with the victim. Decisions were made, and I was briefed on those decisions.

Thereafter, an investigation was commenced. That investigation was interrupted when the police, the NIS, commenced an investigation. That investigation, once completed, with charges laid, allowed us to recommence the administrative investigation by the RCAF. That investigation was completed. I read it. It didn't answer all my questions. I launched a more formal, detailed summary investigation led by a two-star rear-admiral not inside the air force.

That investigation, which is called a summary investigation, was completed. I read it. I still had more questions. I sent it back for more questions to be answered. It was answered. When I finished that, I made all of those reports, including my final letter, available to the

media as quickly as I could, proactively, so that those who were interested and who were covering this could see what our objective was: job one, take care of the victim; job two, find out what happened; job three, ensure it never happens again. It's my responsibility. I have to make certain that it never happens again.

In the course of answering questions throughout the investigation, we answer the questions that we know to be true, but until the investigation is complete I don't know all of it. We are slower than the media because I cannot deal in maybes. I have to deal in facts. Once the investigations were complete and once the summary was complete, I proactively made them available. More importantly, I've given direction to the armed forces so that this never happens again. I am accountable for that and I take full responsibility for it. My job going forward is to ensure it doesn't happen again.

Meanwhile, there is another process, a legal process, under way with the alleged victim and assailant that will be taken care of and that I have absolutely no part in.

I believe I have been as transparent... I believe in the transparency of this. I want people to understand what happened, and I have offered all the available information that I possibly can.

As it relates to costs, costs were offered as we went, as we knew. I think we've learned lessons in this process about how to do better. Again, it goes to I think even our procedures and that which we include in costs, including full exposure of costs. We must be prepared to do that more quickly and more readily.

At no time was there ever a decision made or advice given to deliberately mislead anybody. We gave what we had, and if it wasn't good enough and we found out more later, we gave that too. There was no effort to deliberately mislead the media—ever.

● (1140)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, General.

I think I have one minute left.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds for a question and a response.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I will not be able to accomplish that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. We might have some time at the end.

I'm going to give the floor to MP Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Through you, I thank the general for coming.

General, I guess it's an early Christmas present, because we haven't seen you in three years—

Gen Jonathan Vance: Last year...

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: —for Operation Impact. That's how long we've been asking for a technical briefing, so thank you.

Our troops are currently on the ground in Iraq as part of the NATO training mission for Iraqi forces. This is not the first time that Iraqi forces have been trained by western powers to maintain peace and security in their country, yet despite all the training they received from the Americans and the British forces they were unable to stop ISIS from taking over large parts of their nation.

How can we be certain that our training efforts will result in success this time around?

Gen Jonathan Vance: That's a great question.

I think that the issue of certainty is one that eludes us, when we are not dealing, really, with the aspect of training. I can be very certain about training an individual to be a good soldier and putting them in platoons, companies, squadrons and regiments and having them acquit themselves well.

If you are an armed forces that has been well trained yet you are still under government control or in a country that hasn't yet solved the societal schisms or the challenges within their country as it relates to how they are managing the country, then even the best military can't withstand that. To put it bluntly, there's really no point in having a great military inside a country that is not equally great.

The Iraqi military was overtaken by a number a things, not the least of which was that their country was failing.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: ISIS is diminishing, but the ideologies that have led to the creation of that vile group have not disappeared. Instead, many of the group's cells and leaders have gone underground or blended into civil society, as you mentioned. How is Canada preparing the Iraqi military for the counterterrorism and counter-insurgency tactics that will be required to permanently destroy ISIS?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Once again, it's a great question.

The permanent destruction of ISIS in its military form and complete eradication is unlikely to ever happen. I think there will be disaffected persons who may or may not wish to conduct crimes against their state. However, as an organized credible force that could unseat government, or indeed bring harm to the state...I think they are well on their way to achieving that.

It's more serious than just Iraq. It's Iraq and Syria. The phenomenon of ISIS has spread and is spreading, and they have franchises, if you will, spreading globally.

Attacking and dealing with the ideology is not a question of the use of military force. Military forces can help set conditions. We can collect intelligence. Where necessary, we can use force to stop activities and actions by another armed group. This is really about establishing the legal and political frameworks and about supporting countries that may fail or are failing as it relates to the protection of their borders, which creates that ungoverned space that allows for organizations like ISIL to thrive.

We are involved in that actively around the world, and not just in Iraq. We are doing capacity building around the world. We are involved in intelligence gathering. We are involved across government departments in supporting and trying to prevent governments from failing in the face of these kinds of pressures.

• (1145)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Is there any chance our troops will be forced into an active combat role in Iraq through the NATO mission?

Gen Jonathan Vance: I don't really know what you mean by "forced".

Let me take it two ways. One, our troops are never forced to do anything. They're given orders and they follow those orders.

Might they be in a situation where they must defend themselves? Yes. Will they use combat actions to do so? Yes, they will. Will the NATO mission morph or change into a mission where we are conducting offensive operations against Daesh? No. That is not the mandate of the mission.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: We're seeing the new NATO mission is focused on Iraq, but ISIS has gone into both Syria and Iraq. Is there any chance the mission will extend into Syria? Also, if Canadian Armed Forces trainers are accompanying the forces that enter Syria, would we follow them over the border?

Gen Jonathan Vance: There's no chance.

The Chair: I'm going to have to hold it there, General. There might be some time to answer that after the fact, but I now yield the floor to MP Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, General Vance, for being here. It's a pleasure to meet you for the first time. I'm a fairly new committee member.

My first question I think might be slightly odd, but it's a curiosity for me.

How has Operation Impact affected our relationship with Turkey, if it has in any way? I know we have been involved with the Kurds, and I think they see them as a bit of a problem, so I just wanted to see if there have been any implications for us on that side.

Gen Jonathan Vance: It's interesting. I've been asked that question very rarely but it's a good one.

Turkey is an important ally of Canada. It's a NATO ally, and they have a unique and important perspective on that part of the world. They live in a tough neighbourhood and they're dealing with difficult challenges inside their own country, so it's a good question and I'm glad you asked it.

I think our relationship with Turkey has grown stronger as a result of what we've done. The Kurds we trained who work with the peshmerga are not associated with those Kurds who the Turks are arrayed against in terms of the terrorist acts against their country. I did go through a consultation with the Turkish chief of defence as we laid out the scope of our mission, and he's quite comfortable.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That's great. Thank you.

Very recently this committee travelled to the UN. The message we heard from them was that they were overwhelmingly very positive that Canada's back supporting peace operations and that our contributions matter.

Can you give us an update on what we have achieved so far and what we are working on when it comes to the Canadian Armed Forces re-engaging with the United Nations?

Gen Jonathan Vance: I'm ill-equipped to give you the full range because Global Affairs Canada and our United Nations mission are doing an awful lot of work and supporting the UN as an institution. The armed forces continue to provide highly trained troops to a number of UN missions, principally in Africa but also in the Middle East. I think we are doing a great job in Mali, providing an essential asset with great Canadians providing medical evacuation and tactical aviation logistics support to a mission that needed it. That was very much welcomed, not only by the UN but by those nations who've been bearing that burden by themselves for a while, as was the process of conceiving the smart pledge concept that would provide some support to the UN as they sought to ensure a continuation of that capability. So far it has worked.

We've asked a number of allies but we certainly asked Romania if they would be interested. They've indicated they are. We can see into the future where that mission will benefit from continued highly technical and capable forces to support that really key enabler to that mission. Otherwise, you've heard the government pledge other capabilities from a quick reaction force, to training, to the Elsie initiative.

I'd like to highlight that. It is important for the United Nations contingents that go on operations to be highly capable so we will be in a training mode. We're still working through the process to determine who and where they will go. We will need to develop our expertise to help them, particularly as it relates to where they're going to conduct their operations. Nonetheless, to train them in good military skills and support them as they try to achieve a more positive gender balance within our forces, which has been proven an advantage on UN operations, is an ambition for Canada, the Canadian Armed Forces, the Elsie initiative and Global Affairs.

I think all of that together is why the UN would be quite pleased with where we're at.

• (1150)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

The Chair: You have about 45 seconds.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: It's okay.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll move on MP Martel, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): Good morning. I am happy to have you with us.

Iraq has been embroiled in a conflict for nearly two decades. I would like to know what barometer you are using to determine when you should pull Canadian forces from Iraq.

Gen Jonathan Vance: It is difficult to answer that question.

[English]

If the conditions are such that the Canadian Forces are no longer of value, I think it would be indicated by a number of things: the Iraqi government itself, our allies and coalition partners, and most importantly to me, the wishes of the Government of Canada. I continue to monitor the operation, the region and the reasons we're there.

At some point in the future I would look forward to being able to provide the advice that Iraq has come far enough and Daesh has gone backwards enough that we don't need the military forces there anymore. We're not at that point right now. In an environment and in a region that's affected by so many variables, I couldn't possibly point to where military forces are not required internationally or where, as a subset of that, the Canadian Armed Forces would not be required. It would be pure speculation.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: Do you think the climate in Iraq has improved a lot? We know there is still a great deal of pressure for them to take back control of the country.

Of course, we are trying to maintain a certain stability by providing assistance, but we know that, internally, the adversary always tries to take back control of the country.

How are our troops managing that situation? Is the tension in terms of regaining control of the country palpable or is the climate rather steady?

[English]

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you, sir.

Given where we are in the conflict right now, I think the tension and potential around the resurgence of Daesh is a real thing. That is to say, we cannot assume away anything about Daesh. They will try and are trying to recover. They could re-emerge. It's unlikely at this juncture, but they could. Even if they didn't, in the process of trying, they would cause damage, harm and fear to the population.

When you speak of climate, what I am seeing is a government seized of trying to be as inclusive as possible, including in how they appoint their ministers. The secret will be—and I'm no expert on the governance of any nation, let alone Iraq—to ensure that those grievances by any segment of the population are addressed and that what we would call “good order and government” spreads across the country, including in all manner of ethnic divisions. They also need to ensure those things that we assume to be part of good order and government: a police force that conducts itself correctly, a military that conducts itself correctly and is professionalized, a judiciary, and indeed, right up through the ministers of government. I think that is the ambition of the Government of Iraq. That's what I'm seeing.

I think we're at the stage where that ambition needs to be supported. That is what they are asking for, the support to do that. It remains to be seen how smoothly that will be implemented, how successfully it will be implemented, but I believe that there is great reason for assessing the climate to be positive in that regard.

• (1155)

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: MP Wrzesnewskij.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

General Vance, it's always good to see you. It's always very informative. Also, thank you for all of your service.

General, in your opening statement, you referenced the 98% of territory that has now been taken from the control of Daesh. I'm curious about the other 2%. Could we perhaps get a little clarity? When we reference the 2%, is that to embrace the sort of pockets that re-emerge, such as a village getting taken over once again here or there, as opposed to an actual zone that is controlled by Daesh?

Gen Jonathan Vance: I acknowledge that it is a slightly inexact way of describing what has gone on. ISIL exists, Daesh exists with some coherence, at a very small size, controlling small amounts of territory in the Euphrates River valley, and it's mostly in Syria. As a phenomena, they've lost mostly everything, and there are some cleanup operations going on, largely outside of Iraq.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij: Thank you.

Daesh had a long list of crimes against humanity, but perhaps the most horrific was the genocide against the Yazidis. In your opening remarks, you talked about people returning to their homes.

What is the security situation in the Yazidi traditional homelands? Are there any special security measures in that area, considering what Daesh had done throughout that region?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Much of that occurred in the border area between Iraq and Syria. I know and understand the conflict in Iraq, I understand the conflict in Syria as well, but as it relates to our operations in Iraq we are taking no specific measures. We are taking all of the measures necessary in the region where we are operating to support Iraqi security forces in maintaining security. That is being done by other people including those other allies, including those in Yazidi territory.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij: General, a number of committee members, and I included, have had the opportunity to visit our troops in Ukraine. We're taking part in Operation Unifier. We're very proud of the work they are doing there. Ukraine is a NATO ally in many ways. They are a NATO shield today against Russian aggression against the liberal democratic west.

Interestingly, when we met with Canadian officers—and we're proud of the training they're providing to the Ukrainian military—over and over we would hear how they were actually learning as well. Because it's a very different form of warfare that's taking place in Ukraine's east, in the Donbas region, my understanding is that many of those lessons learned are being applied to our leadership in

the multinational battle group in Latvia. I was wondering if perhaps you'd like to make some comments on what we are learning and how we are applying those lessons in Latvia.

• (1200)

Gen Jonathan Vance: We're proud of the mission, too. I think we responded very quickly and we put the right troops on the ground to do the right thing at the right time. I think we continue to evolve that mission, ensuring that we, as best as we can, meet the training needs of the Ukrainian forces. I'm proud of them too, sir, and thank you for mentioning that.

I don't think it's a premise, but one thing you said I just can't let stand because it's of material importance. They are a NATO partner and not a NATO ally. It might not mean a lot to some people, but I have to tell you it means a great deal when you're dealing with the specifics of the use of military force.

That said, they have acquitted themselves very well and they are geographically positioned in such a way that I understand completely what you mean by that, that they are indeed on the eastern flank of the alliance, and that's, I think, one of the reasons Canada is so supportive of them.

Ukraine and their forces need to continue to evolve, and I think we have learned from them. One of the great things that happens when you have the privilege of working with other forces in a train, advise and assist role is that it's not all one way. You learn about their culture, about what worries them, and you learn a bit about what they are dealing with. We have indeed learned lots from them.

Thank you.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij: Thank you.

The Chair: The last formal question in round two goes to MP Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I was listening in on all of these comments. One thing I know in the work that I've done in the NATO PA is that there are a lot of discussions around extremists, ideologies, the challenges that they are bringing to the different countries, and how we're working collaboratively to address those issues. I think that's definitely one direction all militaries are having to look at.

I also look at the changing climate and the impact that's having on our forces here at home as well. I know that recruitment and drawing people into the Canadian Armed Forces continues to be something that we're working on. We want to see diversity expanding. In this environment of the international impacts, but also the local community and country impacts, I'm just curious if you could talk a bit about recruitment, looking at diversity, and how we, as the Canadian Armed Forces, are able to draw people in. What do we need to change within the systems we have in place that will allow us to be more inclusive and more attractive?

Gen Jonathan Vance: I thought this was a five-minute round and not a 45-minute round.

The Chair: It's a three-minute round.

Gen Jonathan Vance: I'm going to go quickly. You've asked a lot there, and all of what you just asked are things I am deeply engaged in. I would love to give you a more fulsome answer, and perhaps we can do it another time.

What I will say is, number one, our recruitment is going well. We have experienced net growth in the armed forces since 2015, and we are now just shy of 600 short of our pay ceiling. Before, we've been some thousands short. Recruiting is going well and retention is going better, but we're not where we want to be, because we have to grow. We have a mandate to grow the armed forces, and there is a cadence of growth that we must achieve.

My job is to ensure, on a strategic horizon, that the armed forces is fit and that it's the correct instrument for the Government of Canada for the conflicts that will come in the future. The armed forces is as it is today. My team and I manage as best we can dealing with the problems of today as they relate to the changes we must undertake.

We must attract and recruit from a broader segment of Canadian society. We want diversity not simply for the sake of diversity. We want to be able to take full advantage in a competitive world where we want the best, whether it's physical, mental or any other skill sets that you possess. We want to select from the best that Canadians have to offer to be able to field that in the conflicts of the future. I spend an awful lot of my time working on building the conditions, setting the conditions for an armed forces that will acquit itself well in the future, in the 20- to 50-year horizon. To attract and appeal to a wider segment of the Canadian population—the entire Canadian population—is very much what this is about.

We must be able to fight the fights that will come in the future. That means a changing skill set. I've said this before. It's not simply going to be the old style of military on military. We must be competent in cyberspace. We must be competent in the information space. We must be competent in all manner of technical capacity to prevail in the future. It's about being credible as a combat force in the future.

• (1205)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, General. I believe we have you until the bottom of the hour, and I have four MPs: Spengemann, Bezan, Fisher and Gallant. We're able to give each of you five minutes.

I'll start off with MP Spengemann for five minutes, please.

Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

General Vance, it's great to be with you. Thank you for your service and, through you, I'd like to thank all members of the Canadian Forces for their tremendous work and service.

Operation Impact is a mission with which this committee has been seized from the outset of this parliamentary mandate. Iraq is a case that's near and dear to my heart, having had the chance to serve for just under seven years with the political wing of the U.N. mission there. One of the issues that we were seized with at the time was the question of the status of Kirkuk in northern Iraq. As we all know, we

have very strong relationships to Iraq's north, commercial, cultural and otherwise.

I'm wondering if you can give us your sense of how the relationship between the federal government of Iraq and the Kurdistan region is currently evolving. Do you see any risk points? At one point, there was heightened risk of military tensions between the federal centre and the Kurdistan region. I think that's substantially diminished, but I'd like to hear your views on that.

Then, if you could cast a regional lens on that from a military security perspective, where do you see the Kurdish nation and its aspirations and plans in 2018?

Gen Jonathan Vance: I think I'd just start by saying that it would be highly inappropriate for me to comment on the details of what I think the Iraqi government should do or what postures they should take with any of their ethnic minorities in their country.

I can say, though, that I think the secret to success that we've seen elsewhere in the world is to be inclusive and respectful of ethnic minorities. I'm a simple infantry soldier. "Run a good country" is easy to say but difficult to do, and I understand that. I am in no way qualified to offer you the ins and outs. I am heartened by the fact that the military confrontation that seemed to many was going to materialize around Kirkuk did not happen, because there was an internal de-escalation function that occurred inside Iraq, in Kurdistan. That's a very good sign.

I think now it's the detail of how you manage this federation, this confederation, this collection of peoples and have appropriate access to oil or the riches of their country. How is that managed? It's not for me to say and not for me to provide guidance on, but what we are committed to is ensuring that it's done in as peaceful and secure an environment as possible, free from the threat of a resurgent or uncontrollable ISIL element.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: I'd like to thank you for expressing those sentiments and putting them on the record. I think they're echoed widely by allied forces and the international community.

My second question relates to counterterrorism operations in Iraq, as we've been engaged in a train and assist role. It's a question of regional dimensions of terrorist entities, like ISIS. In other words, if one conducts operations in country X, there's a high risk of terrorist elements being displaced into other regions. We've heard it with respect to Libya and then the G5 Sahel.

From a Canadian military perspective, can you give us your views on what that implies, in terms of strategic planning for operations in the Middle East?

Gen Jonathan Vance: If I may say, it's a great question. In fact, it's not just the Middle East. It's a global phenomenon, so we are militarily and certainly at the political level—Mr. Bezan mentioned the discussions going on today at Meech Lake—increasingly concerned about the spread of the phenomenon and being able to put in place and militarily appropriately support, because it's not a military lead, those agencies and governments seized with countering the violent extremist threat that's emerging around the world.

Whether it's in Malaysia, the Philippines, the Sinai, Iraq and Syria, the Caucasus, the Balkans or wherever these violent extremists may wish to migrate to, we need to account for the phenomenon because it can move more. We are not immune, so it is of concern to me as it relates to the protection of Canadians and it's a concern to me as it relates to the protection of our missions that we're on.

• (1210)

Mr. Sven Spengemann: I have very little time left, so maybe I'll end this on a yes or no question.

From a Canadian military planning perspective, are the root causes of terrorism relevant in any way?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Yes.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: That's helpful.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's perfect timing.

MP Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Chair, just to follow up, we're talking about ISIS, war crimes and crimes against humanity like the Yazidi genocide.

Are there any efforts by the military to actually capture some of those leaders so that they can stand trial for the crimes they've committed?

Gen Jonathan Vance: There are efforts on the part of some militaries, not ours. We do share intelligence as it would relate to actors in the battle space, but we are not doing any direct action against anybody like that.

Mr. James Bezan: I know, General, you don't like getting into political discussions, but I think the one issue that a lot of us are concerned about when it comes to Iraq is the Iranian influence. Tehran, of course, is heavily involved in the Government of Iraq. We know that the Quds force and leaders from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are embedded in Iraqi security forces. They're providing weapons and materiel and command and control to Shia militia in the area.

How do you balance that off from an armed forces standpoint, knowing about the insidious nature and the terrorist threat that Iran, itself, possesses and then trying to work alongside them in getting rid of ISIS?

Gen Jonathan Vance: It's a great question. None of these places where we work are easy to understand, let alone easy to fix, and that's probably why they had the problem in the first place. In this case, it's very clear that Iran is an actor. It's an interested party and, in some cases, a malign agent in Iraq.

That said, the PMF and Shia militia forces did help with the destruction of Daesh. We never worked with them, and I gave orders that we would be entirely deconflicted with anything that they were involved with. We don't do any train, advise and assist. We did no fire support. We did nothing with those forces. That said, it is up to the Government of Iraq, sir, to decide on its go-ahead relationship. It's not up to us.

We train, advise and assist in the NATO mission, and in the current mission we're in, in Erbil, we are dealing with vetted, approved Iraqi security forces. I want to assure you of that. These are not PMF forces. They are not Shia militia. They are bona fide, enrolled, recruited Iraqi security forces.

I think it is really a question for you, or an issue for you and other political leaders and foreign affairs departments to determine what posture we take as we go forward in supporting Iraq to become the Iraq that it wants to be.

Mr. James Bezan: I appreciate that and understand the fine line you have to walk as a commander diving into those political discussions.

We talked about the meeting that's happening up at Meech Lake right now. What's the hard stop right now in the current Operation Impact? When does it come to an end if it's not renewed?

Gen Jonathan Vance: It's March 31, sir.

Mr. James Bezan: Will the discussion today be about an exit strategy or a drawdown of forces in Iraq?

Gen Jonathan Vance: The discussions today are privileged, sir. They are getting an update on the issue and they are developing consensus and views at the Minister of Defence level on what needs to be done and what, perhaps, might be done in the future.

Mr. James Bezan: From the perspective of what's happening on the ground today, how much fighting are we seeing on a daily basis? We're not hearing a whole lot of news coming out of Iraq these days.

You said 98% of the country is under control of the Government of Iraq now. Is there a major push to free the last 2% of the country, and then put it into just a hold basis to secure the borders to make sure that the insurgency stays out of the country?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Yes, sir.

I would say on a daily basis there is very little fighting at all—mostly none. That 2% figure—I think, as I said earlier I confess—is perhaps somewhat indicative of some small pockets that are in the Euphrates River valley, the northern river valley, and largely not in Iraq.

Iraq is not free from the occasional flare-up that you and I would probably consider in the realm of criminality, or as Ms. Gallant mentioned, insurgent-type activity, but it's not organized open conflict.

• (1215)

Mr. James Bezan: My final question is on the air task force. How many troops would be involved there? Is it still situated in Kuwait, or is it now supporting the Griffons, predominantly, in Iraq itself?

Gen Jonathan Vance: There are three parts to all things that fly in Iraq. There is Erbil. There will be Baghdad, itself, where we have the NATO training mission, and then we are flying out of Kuwait with the larger fixed-wing aircraft. All of those troops fall within that 850 person total.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

General, a number of initiatives in “Strong, Secure, Engaged” have already been implemented by the Canadian Armed Forces. We’ve enhanced tax relief for members on deployed international operations.

How do these measures help put our women and men in uniform first when it comes to supporting our military?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Again, it’s a big area. The defence policy as it relates to our people is big. The first chapter is all about it, as you know.

I think the best way to answer this.... I’m very happy about the tax relief. It eliminated the need to try to distinguish between missions. It was to compensate people for being away from home with an added risk factored in.

I’m delighted about where we got to. You’re deployed, you’re on a named operation that we designed, and you are relieved of paying tax. I think it’s a great thing, and it’s a good thing for the troops. Everything that’s a good thing for the troops is something that I like.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Are there other initiatives that you want to...?

Gen Jonathan Vance: There are. I think, broadly speaking, we need to be very conscious as we make decisions, whether it’s going through lean years where budgets are reduced, or rich years where budgets are going up, to pay down the people part first. We haven’t always done that.

We’ve tried to maintain a balance to ensure we have operational output, which is good. Nobody has ever made a bad decision, but as we make those decisions over time there is a gradual erosion of support to people. The medical system—you cut a few here. The personnel management system—you cut a few here.

Over time, as we arrived at the work we did to put advice before the minister on the defence policy, I arrived very firmly at the conclusion that we’ve eroded too far. We had processes in place that were largely designed to be so balanced as to sometimes be unfair to the people. Actions that were designed to find efficiencies and all of that bureaucratic language ended up meaning you’re going to do it to the troops. It was never intended, nobody ever does that on purpose, and no individual act did it. I’m not blaming anybody.

However, I think it’s fair to say that as we look back there has been an erosion of the power and support that we have to support our people and their families. I believe that we need to pay that down first—the minister certainly does—and that’s where the policy is. From a compensation and benefits review, to how your career is managed, to what type of a career path you can have, all of that, I think we have to ensure that our human capital is in great shape first,

before we start using it. As the military does, you employ people to get things done. Let’s make certain they’re good before we do that.

I think what I’ve done as a result of that policy is to be able to sponsor a bit more of an emphasis on the people and their families, at least in what I would consider to be a less pejorative balance as it relates to other things that we might do in terms of their operations and procurement and all the rest of it.

Mr. Darren Fisher: That’s great news.

We just touched on relationships—with Turkey and things like that. What is the CAF’s relationship with the Kurds right now?

• (1220)

Gen Jonathan Vance: It is very good. We’re living in Erbil.

Mr. Darren Fisher: That’s very good.

I’m good. Thank you.

The Chair: Madam Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

For nearly two decades, Iraq’s been mired in conflict. What barometers are the Canadian Armed Forces using to determine when to withdraw Canadian forces from Iraq? Would it be when peace is restored?

Gen Jonathan Vance: There are a variety of performance metrics that are being used by the coalition, and will be used by the NATO mission, to determine the voracity and the capability of the Iraqi armed forces. That will be taken into account. There’s also decision-making by the Iraqi government. I think the Iraqi government will have the ultimate say as to when it thinks Iraq is far enough along and no longer in need of international support. I don’t know what barometers it will use, but one of them will certainly be whether there is an immediate threat from Daesh. If there’s no immediate threat from Daesh, what’s the residual threat, and does Iraq have the capacity to deal with that residual threat?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Of the 2,500 people who were treated by the medical and dental teams, what’s the breakdown between the domestic population and the troops—our troops and other troops—who may have been treated there?

Gen Jonathan Vance: A very small number of that 2,500 would have been our troops, but anybody who goes through, even for a minor sickness that one recovers quickly from and just needs some medicine for, would be counted in that. Our troops were part of that. However, we don’t treat the civil population, as a rule. We treat military people.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: When our troops are getting ready to exit the theatre, do they go to that decompression spot that we provided for troops exiting Afghanistan?

Gen Jonathan Vance: No, they do not, not for this mission.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: General, you stated how proud the troops in the Canadian Armed Forces are to participate in domestic operations. A number of troops were tasked with setting up tents at illegal spots of crossing from the United States to Canada. I looked through the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report, but I couldn't find a line item for what the cost to the military was. Do you have an idea of what that is? If not, would you provide it to the committee at a further point in time before the end of the year?

Gen Jonathan Vance: Yes, Madam, I'll take that on notice.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

The Chair: General Vance, thank you very much for coming today.

In this 42nd Parliament, this committee has been to the Pentagon in D.C., to NORAD HQ in Colorado Springs, to NATO HQ in

Brussels, to eFP in Latvia, to Ukraine. You probably know that we're going to be going to Mali in February. Without question, everywhere this committee has gone we've heard nothing but positivity and accolades for the Canadian Armed Forces. I want to pass that on to you.

Thank you for coming today. Thank you for your leadership, and thank you for your service to Canada.

Gen Jonathan Vance: Thank you, sir.

I thank all of you for what you do.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll suspend.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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