



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 012

Tuesday, June 21, 2022



Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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• (1625)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

It's great to see everybody.

We're in meeting number 12 of the subcommittee on international human rights. Today we'll be looking at the human rights situation in Iran.

I just want to remind all those present in the room to follow the recommendations from public health authorities as well as the directives of the Board of Internal Economy to remain healthy and safe.

We're going to start off with our first round of panellists today.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here and for taking your time and preparing your testimony. This is just a small reminder to all witnesses that you have five minutes. I will give you a hand signal when there is one minute left. When we have 30 seconds, I'll just raise my hand. I'll have to ask you to conclude at the five-minute mark.

With us today we have Maral Karimi, a doctoral candidate here as an individual. From the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, we have Kasra Aarabi, a senior analyst on Iran and Shia Islamist extremism. As an individual, we have Nikahang Kowsar, an environmental journalist and water issues analyst.

Without further ado, we're going to start off with Kasra Aarabi.

Please, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Kasra Aarabi (Senior Analyst, Iran and Shia Islamist Extremism, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change): Thank you.

Members, Iran is at an inflection point. There are two contrasting realities, and I want to use this opportunity to shed light on both and on how the international community, not least leading democracies like Canada, can help shape the right outcome.

The victory of hardline Islamist cleric Ebrahim Raisi marks a key turning point for the clerical regime, something that's been overlooked by the west. For the ayatollah, Raisi's presidency is about advancing Iran to what he regards as the next stages of the Islamic revolution. The next stages of the Islamic revolution are about forcefully achieving Ayatollah Khamenei's Islamic society and consolidating his grip over the Middle East. To advance these stages, Raisi has been mandated to "purify" the regime. This means em-

powering the most radical and ideologically committed forces to Khamenei.

The danger that accompanies the new regime in Tehran lies not only in Raisi as an individual but also in the driving force behind him—namely, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC. Against this backdrop, the IRGC has formed the foundation of the Raisi administration, with IRGC affiliates occupying key ministerial roles and many of the 874 government appointee positions. This includes both the interior and foreign ministers. The former, Ahmad Vahidi, is on an Interpol most wanted list for his direct role in the bombing of a Jewish cultural centre in Argentina in 1994. The latter, Hossein Amirabdollahian, is an IRGC Quds Force affiliate who had previously earned the title of Qassem Soleimani's representative.

Domestically, the IRGC is preparing to unleash a new wave of Islamization on the Iranian people to eradicate non-Islamic influences, including western and Persian aspects of Iranian society. Women and youth are primary targets.

As part of the plan to consolidate Khamenei's grip over the Middle East, the IRGC is working towards two major objectives—one, the forceful departure of the U.S. to isolate Israel, and two, targeting the Abraham Accords. Under this agenda, all Arab states that have ties, or are thinking about normalizing ties, with Israel are targets.

Let's turn to the other side of the story, the other reality. While Khamenei is laying the foundation to forcefully achieve his ideal Islamic society, the gap between the regime and the people could not be further. Since the early 1990s, Iranian society has witnessed a gradual process of secularization and liberalization. Today this has reached unprecedented levels, with polling revealing that as many as 68% of Iranians want a secular state and only 32% identify as Shia Muslim, a clear rejection of the Shia Islamist regime.

Dissent has manifested itself on the streets. Tracking the trend of unrest in Iran, we can see that protests are growing in size and scale and are becoming more violent in nature. The 1999 unrest took place in three cities and left seven people killed. Ten years on, the 2009 protests were in 10 cities, and around 100 people were killed. Iran's latest protests in November 2019, however, saw protests in over 100 towns and cities. As many as 1,500 civilians were killed in just a few days. All the signs indicate that this protest trend in Iran will continue on an upward trajectory.

This new wave of unrest can be traced back to the winter of 2017, and is explicitly about outright changing the system. Crucially, this trend began when the U.S. was part of the JCPOA and 11 months before sanctions were reimposed. This itself shows that the protests are not just about Iran's economic situation. They're about the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. The slogans are the biggest indicator of this. Right now on the streets, unlike 2009 where calls for reform were still popular, today the Iranian people are chanting, "Mullahs must get lost", "Down with the Islamic Republic", and "Khamenei is a murderer, his regime is illegitimate".

How can Canada help curb the IRGC's plan and advance the Iranian people's aspirations? The first key thing in terms of policy is that the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization is critical. The guard is not a conventional armed force. It started off as an Islamist militia, and has maintained that militia identity. Through the way it behaves, it is no different from other Islamist groups.

First, indoctrination is key in the IRGC. Just as groups like ISIS and al Qaeda spend resources radicalizing their fighters, the IRGC does the same. In fact, the same Quranic verses that ISIS and al Qaeda use to give religious legitimacy to wage jihad against Jews, Christians and Muslims who reject their ideology are the exact same Quranic verses the IRGC uses in its indoctrination material.

Today more than 50% of IRGC training is indoctrination. Just look at the modus operandi of the IRGC—terrorism, hostage-taking, hijackings and insurgency. Of course, the world cannot forget when the IRGC deliberately fired two rockets at a civilian passenger plane, flight PS752, killing all those on board, the majority of them Canadian citizens.

There is added urgency to designating the IRGC. Why? Because it's becoming more extreme and radical. There is a militaristic and apocalyptic cult of Mahdism that is on the rise in the guards. They regard Israel's existence as the biggest barrier to the return of the "hidden Imam", and this is the clearest and most direct threat to the existence of the State of Israel.

What policy steps, then, can Canada take to advance the aspirations of the Iranian people? Like Putin's regime, the Islamic Republic is corrupt to its core. While the regime enforces a hardline Islamist order on the Iranian people and their sons and their daughters, the noble-born or "aghazadehs", as we call them in Farsi, live lavish lifestyles in the west, including in Canada. These individuals must be targeted with sanctions.

Secondly, protests are already ongoing in Iran. For the past three weeks we have witnessed them. The next weeks and months will likely see a nationwide unrest on the scale of November 2019.

Agility will be key. Voicing support for the Iranian people, making sure Iranians have access to the Internet and targeting their oppressors through Magnitsky sanctions will be essential.

Finally, Canada can and should lead international efforts to target the IRGC and support the Iranian people.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aarabi, for your testimony. We'll continue to engage with you through questions and answers.

Now I'll go to our second panellist, Ms. Karimi, for five minutes, please. Thank you.

Ms. Maral Karimi (Doctoral Candidate, University of Toronto, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My aim today is to provide an overall view of the direction of social movements, as well as the state of human rights in Iran. I will begin by mapping the waves of unrest that have been shaping up in recent years, marking a significant shift in the direction and social base of protest movements in Iran.

Most major uprisings in modern Iran, including the more recent Green Movement of 2009 and the 1979 revolution, were rooted primarily in the political desires of the urban middle classes. Recent eruptions, however, are largely characterized by economic underpinnings in geographical regions far from urban centres.

Teachers' unions, the Tehran bus drivers' union and other trade unions of various stripes—oil labourers, students, pensioners and shopkeepers—are some of the groups that have displayed their collective dissatisfaction on the streets in recent years. Wages and safe working conditions are among key demands. The government's response is often intense crackdown, including detention, solitary confinement, forced confessions and torture.

During an intense period of unrest in November 2019, many Iranians protested a threefold rise in the cost of petroleum in well over 100 cities. Security forces shut down the Internet. Close to 1,500 protesters were killed, and many more were jailed.

In January 2020, the Iranian public, still mourning the November protests, was confronted with the aftermath of General Soleimani's assassination by the United States and the downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, killing all 176 on board. Many were Canadians. The Islamic Republic of Iran's utter disregard for human life and its propensity for violence have, tragically, had far-reaching implications here at home in Canada with the downing of flight PS752.

The new wave of opposition to the regime, however, is characteristically different from prior periods, for it is threatening the ideological base of an ideological system. This is a measure that can prove fatal for the regime.

Since the onset, the IRI has branded itself the “republic of the dispossessed”, and it has managed to legitimize its violent consolidation of power based on that narrative. Loss of legitimacy in the eyes of its base of support is, therefore, no small feat. Ideological regimes are deeply dependent on their base in justifying repression. The current economic crisis further exasperates that crisis of legitimacy. IRI's inability to deliver its promise to materially better their collective lot further disillusioned its political base.

In the last year alone, over 4,000 labour and trade protests have taken place. Last week, over 120 teachers were detained. Some have since been released, but as many as 36 remain in detention. At least 10 jailed teachers and countless other activists are on hunger strikes.

The teachers' union is of particular significance, since they have a national organizational and mobilization capacity. Furthermore, women, including the currently detained Reyhaneh Ansari, make up considerable numbers, both in leadership and membership of the union. Union spokesperson Mohammed Habibi, as well as Jafar Ebrahimi and Rasoul Bodaghi, are among the teachers in solitary confinement in the notorious Evin prison.

The list, as you can imagine, is long.

State repression, however, does not end there. The regime frequently resorts to hostage diplomacy by detaining dual and foreign nationals on fabricated charges to justify suppression domestically and to demand concessions in international negotiations. As a case in point, recently, two French teachers visiting their counterparts in Iran were arrested on allegations of espionage.

Dissent also continues to intensify among the regime's long-time opponents, including women, ethnic groups and intellectuals. Examples of such expressions of solidarity come from Narges Mohammadi and Nasrin Sotoudeh, both lawyers and human rights activists. They are among many other rights and civil society activists who have persistently stood by the protesters. Women, the first casualty of the regime's gender apartheid, have also expressed strong solidarity.

• (1635)

The situation in Iran is dire, and the evidence suggests that the systemic repression and state violence, as well as the country's political and economic stability, will only get worse in the foreseeable future. Canada's commitment to democracy within its borders and beyond makes it a moral and political imperative to support these organic, democratic movements from below.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Karimi. We have reached our time for you, but we'll be able to continue to engage with you in questions and answers. Thank you for that.

Now, we will go to our third and final witness. Mr. Kowsar, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Nikahang Kowsar (Environmental Journalist and Water Issues Analyst, As an Individual): Thank you, sir.

I will read part of my statement about the state of Iran's water, as well as environment, human rights and related issues.

In 2001, as a water conservationist and journalist, I warned former president Khatami in person about the effects of the flawed policies of his ministry of energy. I briefed him on the impact of his administration's plans to build more dams and transfer water from one basin to another to serve the special interests, while ignoring the importance of watershed management and maintaining aquifers.

Water scarcity in many rural areas has forced millions of farmers and peasants to leave their ancestral lands and homes for the margins of major cities. The lack of proper infrastructure has disappointed these migrants, and the government has no plans to assist the victims of its water and food policies. Based on Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's demands, the government is encouraging farmers to produce more grains in a time of an extreme water shortage that, in turn, has turned Iran into a water bankrupt nation.

Based on the result of the recent research, Iran lost twice the amount of its annual renewable water resources between 2003 and 2018. While the government is encouraging population growth, water resources are disappearing, aquifer by aquifer, lake by lake and river by river. This is resulting in a negative impact on Iran's wildlife as well.

As you all may know, Iranian-Canadian wildlife conservationist Dr. Kavous Seyed-Emami was a victim of the regime's brutality. Many in the Islamic Republic have no respect for wildlife and biodiversity, and they cannot tolerate activities led by the likes of Dr. Seyed-Emami.

In the last few years, Iran has witnessed unrest related to water scarcity, and lives have been lost. Major cities in Iran are literally sinking as a result of land subsidence caused by groundwater depletion. Iran's leaders have continuously demanded that farmers produce grain so that they could prove to the world that the regime is self-sufficient and does not need to obey international norms. Instead of importing products with high water consumption, Iran is using more than half of its groundwater resources to produce wheat and other grains.

While we understand that the continuation of a water shortage will eventually turn into unrest and revolt, I'm concerned about the unpreparedness of the opposition forces to manage the water and environmental resources after the fall of the Islamic regime. I believe that Canada can have a great role in assisting Iran in the future. There remain knowledgeable Iranian-Canadian water experts who can build a sustainable bridge between the two nations.

However, there are also a number of Iranian-Canadians who have assisted the regime in destroying the environment, and Canada should take a stand. Most of the projects that led to this disaster were constructed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Camp headquarters and the Mahab Ghodss consulting firm. Mahab Ghodss is currently on the United States sanctions list.

It should be noted that many employees of Mahab Ghodss are now citizens of Canada, and the head of Mahab Ghodss has travelled freely to Canada to visit his loved ones.

It has been stated that a number of people associated with the Revolutionary Guards have lived and invested in Canada. Per an Iranian regime news agency, Alireza Razm Hosseini, an associate of General Qasem Soleimani, has previously lived in Canada. Mr. Razm Hosseini, a former IRGC commander during the Iran-Iraq war and a former cabinet minister under Rouhani's administration, was once referred to by General Soleimani as "our man in Canada".

Interestingly, before entering Rouhani's administration, Mr. Razm Hosseini became the governor of two provinces. He had a very bad environmental record in Kerman and Khorasan Razavi provinces.

In short, I can say that, given the state of the environment and water resources, the Islamic regime cannot be sustainable. After 43 years of the rule of ayatollahs and 42 years of hostage taking, the rulers of civilized and democratic countries must be smart enough to know that not resisting the hostage takers and terrorists will result in nothing but defeat.

Ignoring the views of Iranian intellectuals who have not complied with the wishes of the Ayatollah cannot be in the interest of the democratic world, especially Canada. A regime that does not recognize women and that imprisons scientists and protectors of the environment does not deserve any sort of compromise.

We have a saying in our region: We will not give into force unless it is very forceful. Governments and representatives should also learn from strong individuals who did not give in to the very strong IRGC.

Today, at the next meeting, Hamed Esmailion is going to present his case. I strongly believe that Mr. Esmailion and other individuals who lost their loved ones have shown us how strength and perseverance against the powerful elements that shot down PS752 could break the camel's back that is the Islamic regime.

Thank you.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kowsar.

We'll now be going to questions and answers, starting with the Liberal Party.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you also to the three people who presented today. I'm very grateful for your insights.

What we have heard is very disturbing. All three of you have actually highlighted the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, the IRGC. We know that they're responsible for terrible things within the region, whether it be in Syria or Iraq. We know that they are the group that actually cracks down on civil society every time there are protests in Iran. We also know, thanks to our last speaker, that they are essentially looting the country by building dams and creating all sorts of different problems.

Allow me to start off with Mr. Aarabi. What are the lessons to be learned for Canada and indeed the international community as the IRGC consolidates its hold over Iran?

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: Thank you, Mr. Ehsassi.

In terms of lessons to be learned, the first key thing is that the Islamic Republic is becoming more ideological. There is no doubt that it's becoming more ideological. Khamenei is empowering the IRGC because he regards the IRGC as the *sotoon-e kheimeh-e enghlab*, which means the main pillar of the Islamic Revolution.

Contrary to some assessments, this is not going to lead to the Revolutionary Guard undertaking a military coup against the regime. The clergy itself, the hardline clergy, is empowering the IRGC, and what we see today is an IRGC government, an IRGC deep state, and really their DNA is tied to the hardline clergy.

Moving forwards, without taking action against the IRGC, so if we look at the way Ayatollah Khamenei pursues foreign policy, Khamenei pursues a dual foreign policy for diplomacy and militancy. Previously the diplomatic wing was controlled by the Iranian government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the technocrats, and the militancy aspect was controlled by the IRGC.

Today we see that the IRGC has occupied the diplomatic wing as well. So far the west has only really attempted to engage with that diplomatic arm, leaving the IRGC's actions unchecked. That's essentially why we saw during the 2015 nuclear agreement that the IRGC effectively used the 2015 nuclear agreement as a bargaining chip over the west. In doing so, it was able to conduct and escalate in the Middle East, so its footprint during the JCPOA years expanded across the Middle East. We saw that the number of IRGC-manufactured militias—these are militias created by the Revolutionary Guard—increased as sanctions were eased, and domestically we saw that the IRGC was able to enrich its pockets even more. Each time the Islamic Republic stepped out of line, including by the way, in terrorist operations on European soil, assassinations on European soil, the west would essentially bite its tongue for fear that the Islamic Republic would walk away from the nuclear deal.

Where we are today is that the IRGC de facto controls the Iranian government and has control of the deep state. Unless we take action and counter it, this problem is only going to escalate. If we look at sanctions relief today, there's no doubt that rather than seeking to alleviate the pressure on the Iranian people, Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC are digging in their heels and bolstering their security forces.

If sanctions are eased on the Islamic Republic, much as in Putin's regime, that money won't end up in the pockets of ordinary Iranians. Rather, it will serve to bolster the very forces that suppress the Iranian people on the streets.

• (1645)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you ever so much.

I will turn to Ms. Karimi.

Ms. Karimi, over the course of the past several years, we have watched as organic protests have occurred throughout Iran in numerous cities, I think more than 100 cities. At the forefront of these are teachers' unions, pensioners and workers from the transportation sector.

Given the terrible state of the Iranian economy, what are prospects as we move forward?

The Chair: Ms. Karimi, you have two minutes at most to answer.

Thank you.

Ms. Maral Karimi: Thank you.

As I tried to point out in my remarks, the regime is suffering from serious economic crises. Essentially, there is a lack of political will as well as economic will. The coffers of the regime are essentially empty, or at least they're empty when it comes to infrastructure and spending on the masses. In the absence of the regime being able to meet the economic demands of its people, these protests are going to continue to happen.

As we have seen since 2017 and early 2018, these waves of protests are continuing to occur. Most of them have economic underpinnings. I'm also trying to point out that these links of protest are becoming more and more connected. We see expressions of solidarity amongst various groups, not only the working class but also the middle class, women, ethnic groups and so on.

These protests are going to continue to happen. They're organic. They're organized nationwide, especially by the teachers union. We expect the democratic world, particularly Canada, to stand by those democratic movements.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Finally, you said that it behooves Canada to support civil society in Iran. How do you think we can do so?

Ms. Maral Karimi: Well, both Iran and Canada are signatories to multiple worker unions and syndicates across the world, including the ILO, the International Labour Organization, and Education International. Iran currently is not meeting its obligation to facilitate but is actually criminalizing the various activists from within the country to meet their counterparts outside in the international community.

As I mentioned, there are two French nationals, a husband and wife—

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Karimi. We've gone overtime. You'll potentially be able elaborate through other questions and answers.

We will now move to the Conservative Party.

Mr. Cooper, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony.

Mr. Aarabi, I concur with you fully in your recommendation that the Government of Canada list the IRGC as a terrorist entity. Four years ago, the House of Commons, including the Prime Minister, voted overwhelmingly to do so, and yet four years later no steps have been taken in that regard—not even after, as you note, the IRGC is responsible for the blood of 55 Canadians and 30 permanent residents in the takedown of PS752. Now, why the government hasn't acted, I don't know. Often the response from the government is to simply say, well, we designated the Quds Force of the IRGC as a terrorist organization.

Perhaps you could elaborate on why it is completely inadequate to simply say that the Quds Force is designated and therefore we're addressing this.

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: Thank you.

The Quds Force is a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Like other branches of the guards, it makes no sense to target just the Quds Force. If you look at the Revolutionary Guards' DNA, first of all, it started off as an Islamist militia, as I explained, and it's maintained that militia identity throughout in the way it behaves.

The IRGC as a whole uses terrorism, militancy, hostage taking and hijackings. It's not just the Quds Force. The entire Revolutionary Guards Corps undergoes ideological indoctrination. Radicalization accounts for more than 50% of the Revolutionary Guards' training, and that's for all Revolutionary Guard members. It's not just the Quds Force.

The content in that indoctrination material—I've assessed this and published a report on it—is explicitly clear that it is violent and extremist in nature, and no different to the content that prescribed groups, from the likes of ISIS and al Qaeda to Hezbollah, use to indoctrinate their fighters.

On Hezbollah, it is designated in Canada. The IRGC created Hezbollah. The IRGC wrote its charter. Hossein Dehghan, IRGC commander in the 1980s, wrote the Hezbollah charter. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp today is Hezbollah's biggest support financially and militarily, and in terms of training and logistics. If Hezbollah warrants being on the list, there is no reason why the IRGC, its main arm and founder, should not be on the list too.

You cannot draw a distinction between the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guards. The Quds Force is a mere branch of the Revolutionary Guards as an entity.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

In addition to listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization, the government has at its disposal Magnitsky sanctions. Two years ago, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights recommended that the list of those who should be targeted include President Raisi, as well as the head of the judiciary. President Raisi, of course, played an integral role in the 1988 massacre of more than 30,000 civilians.

What are your thoughts on that? What measures can the Government of Canada take to hold those who are responsible for gross human rights violations accountable?

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: The Magnitsky sanctions are a key lever for Canada, and all liberal democracies, to take against human rights violators in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It's really important because, as I mentioned, much like the former Soviet Union and Putin's regime, the Islamic Republic is a regime that is corrupt to its core.

Magnitsky sanctions can act as a deterrent for future human rights violators. Why? Because the sons, daughters and families of these same individuals—the same elites who enforce these hardline Islamist policies on the Iranian people and who commit human rights violations—travel to the west. They live abroad. They live lavish lifestyles across the west, including in Canada.

Using Magnitsky sanctions, which impose travel bans and freeze assets, can act as a deterrent. For future protests—and there will be future protests, by the way—using those sanctions could make that individual think twice before ordering a massacre on Iranian streets.

Magnitsky sanctions are an essential tool for Canada to use in targeting Islamic Republic officials.

• (1655)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you think President Raisi should be included on that list?

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: It is absolutely clear that President Raisi was involved. He says he's proud to have been involved in the *heyat-e marg*, the death committee, which was responsible for the deaths of as many as 30,000 Iranians.

He has been designated by the United States, and I think the other western nations should follow suit.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Very good.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Cooper.

Now we're going to continue on with our next questioner.

[*Translation*]

You have seven minutes, Mr. Trudel. Go ahead.

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today. Your presentations were very informative.

I'll start with you, Ms. Karimi. In previous studies, we've seen how dictatorial regimes leverage social media, particularly to spy on the enemies of their governments. I believe networks such as Facebook and Twitter are banned in Iran.

Could you tell us how the Iranian government or state uses social media to silence potential opponents of the regime?

[*English*]

Ms. Maral Karimi: I'm so sorry. I just learned how to turn on the translation. Could you quickly tell me again what the question was?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: All right.

I wanted to discuss social media. In other studies we've done, we saw how dictatorial regimes tend to use social media to spy on enemies of the government. I know that Facebook and Twitter are banned in Iran.

Can you tell us how the government uses social media to spy on people and muzzle any opponents who may emerge?

[*English*]

Ms. Maral Karimi: Definitely.

The Iranian regime is learning from the best and the brightest in the world of espionage and cyber-armies, AKA Russia. They have trained a large cyber-army that can pose as just about any kind of... They come across as being of different political stripes and they spy on people.

Also, more importantly, not only are users on social media responsible for their own tweets, the posts and the content they create on these platforms, but they're also oftentimes responsible for the comments or discussions that other users make about their comments. They often get prosecuted for it. Many bloggers and social media users are now in government jails. Also, the government forces activists and other people they arrest to hand over their social media accounts, and they take over those accounts and create misinformation and disinformation about those.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: In the news, we've seen how countries like Algeria spy on pro-democracy activists who aren't currently in Algeria but who are in various parts of the world. The country uses pressure tactics, as we saw with Canadian dual nationals who are here and who fight for democracy in Algeria. As soon as they set foot in Algeria again, they are thrown in jail and falsely accused of being terrorists. Then, all manner of administrative methods are used to prevent them from leaving the country.

Does Iran use similar tactics to deter the Iranian diaspora from portraying the Iranian state as an oppressive state? I would think it's done through use social media. Does the Iranian state use those kinds of tactics against enemies of the regime all over the world?

• (1700)

[English]

Ms. Maral Karimi: Definitely. For an Iranian, regardless of whether or not you live in the country or beyond, there is always censorship by the regime. Even Iranians with dual nationality often-times have to be careful. Those who live beyond the borders of the Islamic Republic always have to be vigilant of the regime censorship, because if it's not them being targeted, it could be their families.

There have been several instances in which workers and specialists of Facebook, Instagram, etc. have been pressured by the regime to co-operate against the democratic movement. Just recently a small cell was discovered in Germany, which was essentially moderating the content on Instagram during the recent protest that occurred in Iran, and it was kind of eliminating most content that included, for example, "Death to the Ayatollahs" and "Death to Khamenei" and also most content that was contrary to the regime lines, and these people are hired by Instagram.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Ms. Karimi.

My next question is for Mr. Arabi.

Can you talk about the relationship, if any, between the Iranian regime and the Lebanese Hezbollah, the military arm of Hezbollah?

[English]

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: There is a 100% link. Hezbollah was created by the Revolutionary Guards. As I said, Hossein Dehghan, who was the former defence minister of former so-called reformist president Hassan Rouhani in the late 1980s, wrote the Hezbollah charter. The Islamic Republic via the IRGC has been the biggest supporter for Hezbollah ideologically in terms of training, militarily in terms of the supply of arms, and in terms of logistics and coordination.

Hezbollah is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' proxy. It is Iran's proxy group. The group vows allegiance, complete and absolute, to Ayatollah Khamenei as their supreme leader as well as leader of the Islamic world.

The Chair: Please conclude your thoughts.

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: I want to end on this final point. The wages of all Hezbollah operatives are paid by the Islamic Republic. Sources in Lebanon tell me that for ordinary Hezbollah fighters, they are now being paid in local currency by Tehran, as Iran's regime no longer has the funds. From what I've heard from credible sources, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has told them to hold out and wait until sanctions are eased, when they will return to dollar payments. Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah chief, has said explicitly that everything they have comes from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

• (1705)

[English]

We will continue with NDP member Ms. McPherson for seven minutes.

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

I would like to echo my colleagues in thanking the witnesses for being here today. This is obviously very difficult testimony to hear. However, I don't think it's terribly surprising for many of us in this room. We have seen an Iranian regime that has time and time again put the lives of Iranians at risk, has murdered Iranian citizens, has tortured and has committed horrific crimes. As horrible as this testimony is to hear, I don't think many in this room are surprised.

What I think we need to get to the bottom of, as the human rights subcommittee, is the role that Canada can play, how Canada can alleviate what is happening in Iran, and what we can do to support the Iranian people. That has to be our first priority.

I would like to start by getting a little more information about the impacts of this regime on the human rights of women, minority groups and youth in particular, and the way in which Canada can support them, both in Iran and outside of Iran, in Canada.

Perhaps I'll begin with Ms. Karimi and then go to Mr. Aarabi. I don't think we have our third witness with us any longer.

Ms. Karimi, let me start with you, please.

Ms. Maral Karimi: Definitely. As I mentioned, Iranian women were the first casualties and probably the greatest losers of the Islamic Republic. There is essentially a gender apartheid system in place in Iran. Women's clothing is regulated. Their movements are regulated. Sexism and essentially misogyny are the rules of the land.

However, how Canada can help these groups is... What I would like to ask you here is to frame Iran not simply from the perspective of its relationship with the United States: either as an evil terrorist or as a victim of imperialism. Iran, as is any other country, fifty shades of grey. So there are organic movements, democratic-seeking movements that are shaping up in the country, as well as the IRGC and the Quds Force.

So there is that conflict and contrast, and we need the democratic world, we need Canada to first and foremost recognize that and understand those different shades.

Another issue, which I think my colleagues and other witnesses here pointed out, is that many descendants of the IRGC and the offspring of the ruling elite in Iran live here and essentially use the resources brought over from that country here—resources that can be used in the country for those people. We need Canada to take a better look, a more serious look, at that and to acknowledge that.

We also need support in terms of media. We all know that as soon as an activist or a cause gets to media and gets that kind of attention, both on social media and traditional media, the regime of tentimes has to back out.

If I were to summarize, I would say that at this point, we really need Canada to understand that Iran is fifty shades of grey and there are democratic movements going on and to acknowledge that the resources of the country are being illegally brought to Canada. We need help with recognition of these movements in the media and elsewhere.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you for that. Certainly I recognize that, so we will continue to work from within this room to make sure that recognition is there.

Mr. Aarabi, may I turn to you next, please?

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: Sure. As I mentioned, Khamenei believes that he has not yet achieved the ideal Islamic society. He is moving towards that. That is why Raisi has been de facto appointed and that is why the revolutionary guard, the hardline enforcers of the regime, are forming the foundation of that administration.

First and foremost, the targets will be women. The clerical regime is not satisfied with the current role of Iranian women in society. Iranian women have resisted the regime's ideal of women being mothers and wives, and there are early warning signs as to what the regime is going to do to counter this effectively and, in their eyes, "restore" women's role as mothers and wives.

The first is, in practical terms, restricting women's work hours and reducing university quotas for women. We've already seen Raisi, for example, late last year, on November 4, say that working hours should not be planned in such a way as to neglect women's roles as mothers and wives. He declared that it is necessary for all companies and departments to set up work plans for women in a way that does not inflict disruption on family life.

Similarly, university quotas are likely to be reduced for women, and there is precedent for this. This happened during the presidency of hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Just to give you a flavour of the way in which the Islamic Republic views women, IRGC commander Ahmad Vahidi, who is current interior minister, said that if the Islamic Republic is going to be harmed, it will be by women.

There are many steps Canada can take to support Iranian women, who really are at the front line of resisting the regime. We really have a vibrant underground feminist movement in Iran, and they need the West's supports and they are looking for recognition. First, as I mentioned, are Magnitsky sanctions targeting the institutions and the individuals who are responsible for specifically repressing and targeting women. That's the first step that the Canadian government can play. But also—

• (1710)

The Chair: Could you just conclude with some brief remarks, as you have 10 seconds, Mr. Aarabi.

Mr. Kasra Aarabi: Finally, as other panellists have said, global recognition is absolutely key. Canada is, according to the Canadian government, pursuing a feminist foreign policy. As part of that, it

must recognize this vibrant feminist movement, underground movement, in Iran, and it must support it in every possible way. A big part of that is international recognition.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Aarabi.

Unfortunately, that concludes our time, but this has been very enriching testimony that you have shared with all of us.

I want to personally thank the witnesses, but also, on behalf of all the committee members, all the staff who are supporting all of the members here. Thank you today for taking the time.

We will be including what you've said in our reports.

Unfortunately, Mr. Kowsar had to leave a bit early to catch a flight, but we want to thank you, Ms. Karimi and Mr. Aarabi, for being here.

We'll suspend for a few minutes.

You can log off, and we're going to bring in our next witnesses.

• (1710)

(Pause)

• (1715)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

We're going to continue on with our second panel.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here, in particular Kylie Moore-Gilbert. We know you're joining us from Australia, where it's in the wee hours of the morning.

In person, we have Hamed Esmailion from the Association of the Families of Flight PS752 Victims. It's good to see you in person. We also have Maryam Shafipour, as an individual, who is joining us remotely. Finally, also joining us remotely, we have Karim Sadjadpour, senior fellow, Middle East program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Thank you all for being here.

Without further ado, we're going to start with Dr. Moore-Gilbert, please.

Dr. Kylie Moore-Gilbert (As an Individual): Thank you so much for having me and for your warm welcome this morning. It's very early in the morning here in Australia.

You were saying, particularly about the IRGC.... I guess I am a victim of the IRGC myself through my own experiences, but I also witnessed the gross violations of human rights toward Iranian prisoners, toward their own prisoners.

I can speak a little bit about my own experience and also more broadly about their attitudes and behaviours toward political prisoners and more generally within the system itself, building on what the previous speaker, Aarabi, said regarding the fact that there's been this process of state capture and that, often, the Revolutionary Guards really seem to be running the show in areas where the judiciary or the so-called elected wing of the government used to dominate.

I was essentially a diplomatic hostage of the Revolutionary Guards for two years and three months. I was arrested in September 2018 at Tehran Airport. I'm an Australian-British national. I have no link to Iran whatsoever, and I'd travelled to Iran for a brief three-week period to attend an academic conference in my capacity as lecturer on Islamic studies at the University of Melbourne in Australia.

I was arrested at the airport, whilst attempting to depart the country, by the Revolutionary Guards, who accused me eventually of being a spy. I was convicted one year later in a sham trial in a revolutionary court, which obviously is a parallel court system of the Revolutionary Guards within the judiciary. I was given a 10-year sentence. There was absolutely no evidence whatsoever—not even any presented in the closed-door, secretive court.

From the early days of my arrest I was viewed as a bargaining chip by the Revolutionary Guards—essentially a hostage, as somebody who they could exchange for some sort of concessional benefit from one of my countries, because they knew that I was both British and Australian. The Australian government took the lead in negotiating my release and—again, building on what the previous speaker said about the Revolutionary Guards taking over the state or acting as a deep state—the Australian government had to negotiate with the IRGC directly to secure my release, and not with the Iranian foreign ministry or the official law or recognized wing of the Iranian government.

Obviously, they tried talking to the latter at the very beginning, but diplomatically it became clear that they had no power over my case and that they had to go directly to the source, to the hostage-takers themselves, and find out what they wanted. What they wanted was the release of three of their citizens, three IRGC members and IRGC operatives. They wanted their own guys—and not just any old Iranian citizens—from a Thai prison, who had been convicted of attempting to blow up the Israeli ambassador's car in Bangkok about a decade prior.

When I was in prison, I personally was subjected to numerous human rights violations, particularly psychological torture methods and prolonged periods of time in extreme solitary confinement. I spent 12 months cumulatively in solitary confinement. All sorts of human rights of mine were abused. But that was actually the norm, and I saw treatment much worse meted out to Iranian nationals.

Some of the co-defendants of the Canadian citizen, Kavous Seyed-Emami, were my cellmates, and I learned a lot about his fate. Obviously he passed away in Evin Prison in 2018, a Canadian professor, and the circumstances surrounding his death have never been really explained by the Iranian regime. He died in IRGC custody. We were told by IRGC members in the facility, Du Alef, where we were kept at the time, that he actually had a heart attack

under interrogation and that it was covered up and made to look like a suicide.

• (1720)

The Chair: Ms. Moore-Gilbert, you have about 30 seconds left.

Dr. Kylie Moore-Gilbert: Sure. I'm sorry. This is a bit scattered. Obviously, if you have more specific questions speaking to any specific subjects, I'd be more than happy to answer them.

I just want to say that through my lived experience I can bear witness or testimony to multiple types of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Iranian state and the IRGC to not only innocent Iranians but also to foreigners who get caught up in a hostage-taking business model. I'd be happy to take any questions on that subject.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Moore-Gilbert, for that testimony and for sharing your ordeal with us.

We'll now turn to Mr. Hamed Esmailion from the Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims.

Just for everybody's witnesses here, I'll put up this symbol for one minute left and this one for 30 seconds.

Please, you have five minutes.

Dr. Hamed Esmailion (President and Spokesperson, Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the honourable members of the committee for giving me your time this afternoon.

Thirty months have passed since the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, of Iran committed a heinous crime over the skies of Iran by shooting down Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752. Canada's tepid and cautious approach to pursuing justice against the Government of Iran has left many of the families of the victims and many Canadians in a state of despair.

Two and a half years after this crime was committed, the most fundamental facts surrounding this crime remain shrouded in mystery. Knowledgeable observers have every reason to believe that the shooting of the missile at the plane was intentional. In a sense, the Iranian government used the 177 passengers and crew as human shields.

We can all agree that over the course of the past two and a half years, the Iranian regime has refused to provide essential facts to the investigators. Instead, it has systematically lied and misled to successfully impede the emergence of the factual matrix that led to this crime.

Apart from deliberately obfuscating, the Iranian government and the IRGC have subjected relatives of the victims to crushing psychological pressure. As publicly noted by the Prime Minister's special adviser, the Honourable Ralph Goodale, the report provided by the Islamic Republic was shambolic and riddled with lies. Similarly, Ms. Callamard, a former UN special rapporteur, has publicly stated that the narrative offered by the Islamic Republic is merely designed to confuse and bewilder.

Allow me to apprise you of the travesty of justice the families of the victims who are in Iran have faced in their country. The Iranian regime has subjected families in Iran to extreme psychological pressure and physical abuse. A report published by Human Rights Watch in May 2021 references physical torture. I can assure you that the practice has been widespread. Family members in Iran have been subjected to repeated interrogations. Some family members were barred from the courtroom while the entire proceedings were conducted under strict security conditions designed to intimidate. Finally, the show trials orchestrated by the military courts of Tehran were abandoned after challenges were raised by the families in Iran.

Among other such examples, the so-called Iranian Islamic Human Rights Commission has repeatedly harassed families with phone calls and personal visits in an attempt to force them to accept financial compensation or to compel them to sign waivers. According to these waivers, families are expected to waive all their rights and forgo any legal options that may allow them to pursue legal remedies. Fortunately, a majority of the families have rejected such offers.

I should also emphasize that the families of the Afghan passengers who reside in Iran have also been subjected to unimaginable pressures.

More recently in March, when some family members attended a rally in Tehran against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one of the victim's father was brutally beaten while the mother was dragged on the ground by her hair as she was taken to the local police station. Another one of the victim's father was slapped in the face. Intimidation extends to relatives of the victims here in Canada as well.

After 30 months, the Iranian government's thuggish behaviour and chicanery remains unchecked. None of the five governments that lost their citizens in the tragedy have referred the PS752 file to the International Criminal Court. The RCMP refuses to open a domestic criminal investigation. Moreover, there's no confirmation as to when the file will be referred to the ICAO council or the International Court of Justice.

Similarly, the families' demands to include the IRGC on the list of terrorist organizations in Canada or to impose Magnitsky sanctions have fallen on deaf ears. It is downright absurd and offensive that the United States has listed many more IRGC commanders on its sanctions list than Canada has. Instead, we were recently shocked to hear that the Islamic Republic soccer team had been invited to Canada under the guise of a friendly match. This ill-advised plan was fortunately cancelled thanks to the overwhelming support of Canadians.

The Canadian government's failure to take concrete steps in a timely fashion has emboldened the criminal Government of Iran and IRGC. Insofar as the Iranian government is concerned, it has succeeded in not being held to account for this horrific crime. In the face of all the grief, disappointment and despair, the Association of the Families of Flight PS752 Victims remain steadfast in their commitment to unveil the truth and bring the real perpetrators of this heinous crime to justice.

• (1725)

Let the PS752 and recent Russian atrocities in Ukraine serve as a sober reminder that appeasement of tyrants will only result in more suffering. True justice is not negotiable. We will never forget, nor shall we ever forgive.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you for that testimony.

Within five minutes, Mr. Esmaeilion, we're going to exchange with you further. Thank you for that.

Next, I will turn to Mr. Sadjadpour for five minutes.

Please go ahead, without further ado.

Mr. Karim Sadjadpour (Senior Fellow, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace): Thank you very much for inviting me today. It's a pleasure to be with you.

In particular, I want to say how honoured I am to be sharing this platform with Mr. Hamed Esmaeilion. I consider him to be a role model for the Iranian diaspora community. I consider him to be a moral compass for the Iranian diaspora community and all of North America. I really hope that the families of the flight PS752 victims get the justice they deserve.

I also want to recommend to all of you, Kylie Moore-Gilbert's remarkable book, *The Uncaged Sky*. I've read a dozen of these prison memoirs, and hers was really the most vivid example of the atrocities that are suffered on a daily basis in Iranian prisons. I also am honoured to share the stage with her.

I will be brief in saying that we now have a 43-year case study of the Iranian regime, and although Iran is inaccessible to independent analysis and journalism, perhaps no government in the world has had a more consistent and enduring ideology over the last four decades.

Essentially, there have been three components to Iran's grand strategy: Number one, Iran has sought to defeat what they would call the U.S.-led world order, to defeat a liberal democratic world order and try to replace it with an illiberal undemocratic world order. Number two, Iran has sought to replace Israel with Palestine. Number three, Iran has sought to remake the Middle East in its image.

Now, what Iran has done quite effectively, more effectively than any other country in the Middle East, has been to fill regional power vacuums. I think it's now well established that Iran has outsized influence in four countries in the Arab world: Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. They have managed to do so by using regional proxies to fill those power vacuums. As the previous panel attested to, I think the Government of Iran has one of the world's worst human rights records, and they have essentially exported that human rights record to their regional proxies.

There are five or six things that Iran's regional proxies have in common. Here we're talking about Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, the Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi, the Shia militias in Iraq, as well as many more ancillary groups.

One of the things that Iran and its militias have in common are an intolerance towards women. The second thing is an intolerance towards religious minorities and an anti-Semitism, which all the proxies share. Third is the persecution of LGBT communities. The fourth is hostility, repression of independent thinkers; we've had several assassinations over the years in Lebanon and Iraq. The fifth is accumulation of wealth through illicit means. As a previous panellist pointed out, increasingly a lot of that illicit wealth is showing up in Canada. It is something that I think you need to be mindful of, in the same way that illicit Russian wealth showed up in Europe. We saw the consequences for that. Increasingly, a lot of illicit Iranian wealth is showing up in Canada. Finally, which is also very troubling, is Iran's use of child soldiers. The Iranian proxies use child soldiers, in particular in Yemen, with the Houthis.

The final thing I will close on is that I want to emphasize something which I know that Kylie could go into much further detail on. It is the case of former Canadian resident, Niloufar Bayani, whom Kylie has written about very eloquently in her book. She is a graduate of McGill University. She has now been a hostage in Iran for four years.

Oftentimes we can speak about human rights in the macro and forget about the individual stories. I was very moved by her story in Kylie's book, and I think she has really been forgotten about. As a former Canadian resident, a graduate of McGill, in addition to the families of the victims of the Ukraine airlines flight, I hope that her fate becomes a priority for the Canadian Parliament.

Thank you.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sadjadpour.

We'll continue with our final witness, then on to questions and answers.

Mrs. Shafipour, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Maryam Shafipour (As an Individual): Hello. Thanks for having me. This is my second attendance as a witness at SDIR.

My family in Iran has been under attack and pressure since my first testimony in 2018. I reported this to CSIS a few months ago. I return today because.... I mention this, because I want to say how important this is for me—

• (1735)

The Chair: Mrs. Shafipour, if you could pause for a moment, we'll correct the audio. There is some background noise.

Mrs. Maryam Shafipour: Okay, sure.

The Chair: Do you have anything running in the background—any audio in the space where you are, Mrs. Shafipour?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Do you have ParlVU turned on?

Does somebody have ParlVU turned on to watch the meeting in the background?

The Chair: We're going to suspend for a few moments.

Mrs. Maryam Shafipour: Okay.

• (1735)

(Pause)

• (1735)

The Chair: We're going to restart.

You have about four and a half minutes, Mrs. Shafipour. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Maryam Shafipour: This is my second attendance as a witness at SDIR. My family in Iran has been under attacks and pressures since my first testimony in 2018. I reported this to CSIS a few months ago. I am attending again today, and I mention this because I want to say how this is important for me and how much I appreciate this opportunity.

Unfortunately, Canada has become a safe zone for Iranian authorities in recent years. This is so disappointing for me as a human rights activist. It's not only about human rights violations in Iran; it's about Canada's domestic security, and the Government of Canada should take it seriously. We will continue our efforts to make sure that Canadians are safe and respected.

Today I will do testimony on behalf of my friend Narges Mohammadi. She is a very well-known human rights advocate in Iran and is currently being held in Qarchak Prison in Iran. She wished to do it on her own, but, unfortunately, she was arrested for the 14th time on April 12 to serve a sentence of 30 months and 74 floggings.

Today I will read two parts of her writing. One of them was published in The Globe and Mail and one part is from her private letter to Canadian MPs.

She wrote that:

Any transformation in Iran must be driven by the Iranian people, although democratic governments, human rights groups and the international community may play a crucial role.

Holding human-rights violators in Iran accountable, whether by using the legal tools available, such as Magnitsky sanctions, or through diplomatic pressure, legislation or drawing international attention to the issue and embarrassing the Islamic Republic's authorities, would undoubtedly pave the way for our fight for justice and freedom, warming our hearts and bolstering our steps.

Also, she wrote a private letter to Canadian MPs, and I will read part of that. She wrote:

It will happen until Canada officially bars Iranian officials from entering the country. Just a few months ago, the IRGC commander and former Tehran police chief was spotted in Canada and definitely, many other Iranian governments and military officials travel to Canada freely and may have permanent residency status in Canada and they just have been so smart or lucky that they have not been yet captured by citizens' cameras. This is not called security for Canadians. As long as the ban does not become legal, not only Iranian-Canadians but all Canadians will not feel safe. Certainly no Canadian wants his family to be a neighbour to a terrorist or a murderer. They can travel to Canada legally today and invest their bloody money there. We don't call on Canadian government to liberate Iran or to do anything specifically for the Iranian people outside of Canada's border. We urge Canada to protect the security and well-being of its own citizens. Canadian[s] deserve better than this.

Thank you.

● (1740)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Shafipour.

Now we will continue to the first and only round of questions and answers. Given that we have to end at six o'clock sharp, we'll have four minutes per questioner per party.

We'll be starting again with Mr. Ehsassi from the Liberal Party, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the extraordinary panellists who are joining us today.

There's very little time, and there are numerous questions.

I'd like to start off with Professor Moore-Gilbert. Professor Moore-Gilbert, you were a pillar of strength while you were held for over two years in Iran, so I want to acknowledge that. I also want to congratulate you for the new book you have authored, *The Uncaged Sky*, which is truly incredible, because not only do you talk about your own harrowing experience but you also share the plight of others who were held arbitrarily in prison in Iran.

Given that your book is essentially a window into the Iranian prison system, is there anyone you'd like to mention today that you expect Canadians and other countries to remain focused on?

Dr. Kylie Moore-Gilbert: Thank you so much for those comments. It's so lovely to hear that. I'm amazed that my book reached the attention of anybody in Canada, so I really appreciate it.

Building on what Karim said, Niloufar Bayani is somebody I would absolutely like to mention. She's a Canadian permanent resident, as Karim said. She went to McGill University, where she studied biology and conservation. She has a lot of connections to Canada. All of her family members are permanent residents there and still, to this day, routinely travel to Canada for business purposes, as well as seeing family.

I also know that the family of Houman Jokar, who is another Iranian in this same case.... I'll mention that this is the same case as Kavous Seyed-Emami, the Canadian professor who died under IRGC interrogation, and the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation group of conservationists who were arrested in 2018 and charged with espionage.

Several of them have links to Canada. Houman Jokar's family, including his sister, migrated to Canada and are citizens. Several members of this group—not just Professor Seyed-Emami, who passed away—have links to Canada.

Niloufar Bayani is a permanent resident. She studied there and returned to Iran to do good in her home country. She only returned for nine months before being arrested. She also used to work at the UN Environment Programme. She has a master's from Columbia University. She's one of Iran's best and brightest, and she is very committed to saving Iran's endangered species, particularly the big cat species of Iran. She has gone on the record quite bravely as having been not only tortured in prison, but sexually assaulted and sexually harassed on a number of occasions, including as mechanisms to extract a false confession from her, which she has very vocally retracted since then.

I really hope that the Canadian Parliament and the Canadian public remember not only Kavous, who was their citizen, but Niloufar Bayani, who is a permanent resident and is still, more than four years later, suffering unjust incarceration in Evin prison.

● (1745)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much.

I am afraid I'm out of time for more questions.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, but it's up to you.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Professor Sadjadpour, you have truly been a font of erudition and insight for many years. In Foreign Affairs last month, you said the "Islamic Republic has proved too rigid to bend and too ruthless to break".

What are the implications of that for the international community?

The Chair: Answer in about three sentences, please.

Mr. Karim Sadjadpour: Essentially, this is a regime that has proven incapable of reforming. It's been around for 43 years and has proven incapable of reforming. My view on it, and this is both the analysis and a policy prescription, is that the fate of the Islamic Republic is going to be similar to that of the Soviet Union—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Karim Sadjadpour: —so we should think about a western strategy to—

The Chair: Thank you for that.

I apologize. It's out of fairness to all the members here. Maybe you can elaborate further.

We'll continue with the Conservative Party and Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I'm going to ask my questions of Dr. Esmailion. You spoke about some level of frustration that you've had with inaction of the Liberal government in seeing that justice is done for the victims of PS752. There were 55 Canadians and 30 permanent residents.

Can you speak to some of your frustrations and what it has been like engaging with this government? On the specific issue of designating the IRGC as a terrorist entity, why do you believe the government continues to drag its feet?

Dr. Hamed Esmailion: I can start with IRGC and the Magnitsky sanctions. We had a meeting with Minister Joly yesterday. All of the family members were invited to the call, and we asked that question several times. Why is IRGC not designated as a terrorist organization?

We see a mysterious resistance to doing that. We have a list of more than 50 people who were involved in shooting down the plane. We have offered it to the government. Nobody has acted to subject them to Magnitsky sanctions.

As Mr. Sadjadpour said, the head of the police department in Iran at the time of killing Zahra Kazemi was going to the gym a few hundred metres from where my wife and daughter are buried in Richmond. This is surprising to us.

Why has Canada been a safe haven for the criminals of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Going to an international forum, the government is not transparent with us. They haven't given us any time frame. Now I think it is a political decision to delay going to ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

You spoke about Canada being a safe haven. In that regard, could you elaborate on IRGC affiliates and their activities within Canada and the security threat they pose?

Dr. Hamed Esmailion: The victims' families who live in Canada have faced a lot of threats and intimidating actions from the Iranian regime. CSIS has twice prepared a report—this year and last year—saying that the families have been targeted by the IRGC.

I can say that the families receive phone calls and messages on different social media platforms. We have shown that to the RCMP and to the other parties, but we haven't seen any action. Nobody has been arrested. We don't know what they're doing.

I know that the RCMP has started an investigation about foreign interference, but we are not aware of the outcome of this.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Going back to your meeting the other day, what was the response of the minister?

Dr. Hamed Esmailion: She said that she would go back to the cabinet and talk to other ministers to make a decision about the IRGC.

As I said, it is a mystery. We know that in 2018 there was a parliamentary motion to put IRGC on a list of terrorist organizations.

They have killed 138 passengers heading to Canada: What could be done that would be worse than this? I don't know.

• (1750)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The minister certainly could be reminded that she was one of the members of Parliament who voted for that motion in 2018, along with the Prime Minister, and yet no action has been taken. It's completely unacceptable.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper, for returning a bit of time.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Trudel, of the Bloc Québécois, for four minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. Shafipour.

Ms. Shafipour, you used some pretty strong language in your opening statement. You said that Canada worked for the Iranian government. That's a pretty strong statement. You spoke a bit about why you thought that. You said that nationals who were members of the Iranian government lived in Canada and that you didn't understand how that was allowed. Mr. Esmailion also mentioned it.

Could you elaborate on what you meant exactly?

[*English*]

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mrs. Maryam Shafipour: Thanks for your question.

I want to give you an example. My so-called judge was listed as the 19th person to be sanctioned by the Canadian government under the Magnitsky act. Just imagine: He murdered thousands of people. He destroyed the lives of thousands of people, and he can freely come to Canada and be your neighbour. He can invest blood money and buy, I don't know, many apartments in your neighbourhood.

I have a specific question for Mr. Trudeau because I used to be his fan, as a kind of freedom lover: How would you feel if, for example, Mr. Salavati was your neighbour and lived in the same place, in the same apartments, that you lived in with your family?

It's so weird. I can't understand why Canada just does nothing about that. I don't know how I can explain my feelings. I'm really disappointed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Other than banning members of the Iranian government who may be our neighbours, what would you like Mr. Trudeau to do?

If the Prime Minister were here right now, what would you say to him? What would you recommend he do?

[English]

Mrs. Maryam Shafipour: As I mentioned, it's not only about human right violations in Iran. It's also about Canada's domestic security, and it's a very serious issue. I'm afraid that you will remember my words when some disaster happens. I don't think it's very far from us. They are murderers. They are terrorists.

For example, I think the Canadian government would recognize IRGC as terrorists when they murder white people or something like that. I don't know. It's so weird, and I'm so disappointed.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Ms. Shafipour.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Trudel.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. Sadjadpour, I'd like to ask you something, but whenever one of us asks you a question, we are almost out of time.

It's a somewhat complex question. Iran's policies are linked to Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. What are the consequences of those policies?

[English]

Mr. Karim Sadjadpour: I didn't hear the translation, but I think I picked it up. What are the consequences of Iran's role in the region? Essentially, Iran's regional proxies constitute an axis of misery. Everywhere Iran is, there are failing states, and Iran thrives where there are failing governments, and that is going to continue to be the case.

• (1755)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move on to our final questioner from the NDP.

Ms. McPherson, you have four minutes, please.

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

I want to thank all of the witnesses who are here today. I know how hard this must be, in particular, Dr. Esmaeilion, for you who are sharing your testimony with us and have lost your wife and daughter. It is heartbreaking. Thank you for continuing to be the voice of the community and continuing to be so strong.

As many people will know, many of the victims on that flight were from Edmonton. Many of them were from the University of Alberta community. I feel like we wore a lot of that pain with you. Certainly, in 2020, I brought forward a motion in the House that was given unanimous consent. It talked about the need for the government to do more to stop the harassment of the victims of PS752 in Canada. That's one of the things that's most disheartening. I'm not sure we've seen action on that.

Dr. Esmaeilion, I'd love it if you could talk a bit about that. When you met with Minister Joly, you said there was no road map for you, that there was no road map for the survivors and no way forward. Could you also talk about what that road map would look like for you?

Dr. Hamed Esmaeilion: The government has decided to go to the International Civil Aviation Organization, and ultimately to the International Court of Justice. It has decided to not try the Interna-

tional Criminal Court for reasons that we don't understand. The RCMP has decided not to open a criminal case.

If we're going to the ICAO, it has passed the negotiation phase, which was futile. On January 5, it said that didn't go anywhere. Now, after six months, Minister Joly calls the families and says, "Okay, now we have decided to go to the ICAO." It makes us wonder what we have done in the last 30 months, if now it wants to go for evidence and information gathering. It means that for the last 30 months, it has wasted time, and now it wants to go to the ICAO.

Iran has its own delaying tactics to not let this case go through ICAO easily. MH17 is a good case. We have been at the ICAO several times. We lobby ICAO council members, as well as the Canadian government. We know they do nothing at the ICAO. We know the Minister of Transport hasn't done enough at the ICAO. This surprises us. The families took the burden of this case, and they published a report about this crime, but the government hasn't done enough.

In my opinion, the politicians should not be leaders in this case. They should be followers. The families should be in the forefront for decision-making, and they are not.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Basically, what I'm hearing is that we are hearing delays from the Iranian government, which we expect, but we are also seeing delays from the Canadian government, which is unacceptable, of course.

Dr. Esmaeilion, do you feel you are in danger in Canada, being the spokesperson, being the voice of the community? Do you feel that you yourself are in danger?

Dr. Hamed Esmaeilion: Yes, of course, and it's only me, but other family members as well. I filed a report with the police a few weeks ago. For instance, I had two flat tires on my car when I went to the grocery store. The police came and did some investigating, but the car was not in the range of the camera, so the case was closed.

I know the RCMP has opened an investigation, but we are not being informed. Our cellphones were taken a few times to check them, but nothing is shared with us if we are under threat or not. We see suspicious cars around our houses, but we don't see much from the government.

The Chair: We'll have to conclude there, but thank you so much for that. That was a powerful conclusion to our two hours of testimony.

On behalf of all the committee members, staff and those watching and tuning in, we wish strength to all the witnesses and steadfastness.

Ms. Moore-Gilbert, we hope you get some rest.

Mr. Sadjadpour, thank you for joining us.

Our sincere condolences go to all the victims and their families.

Ms. Shafipour, thank you for being here also.

Mr. Esmailion, we personally wish strength to you and all the families you're supporting.

Thank you. We will adjourn for half an hour and there will be refreshments here. We'll see see you at 6:30.

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