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Chair: Ms. Lena Metlege Diab



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.)): I declare the meeting open.

[Translation]

Good morning.

Welcome to meeting number 107 of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on March 21, 2024, the committee is beginning its study of Islamophobia.

[English]

In regard to avoiding audio feedback, I want to remind members and all meeting participants in the room of the following important preventative measures. To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from all microphones at all times.

As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to members on April 29, the following measures have been taken to help prevent audio feedback incidents. All earpieces have been replaced by a model that reduces the probability of audio feedback. Please use the approved earpiece. For all unused earpieces, if you're not using them, keep them unplugged. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines.

These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and protect the health and safety of participants, including the interpreters.

[Translation]

I thank you in advance for your co-operation.

[English]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. All our witnesses are appearing by video conference this morning. In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I'm informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

For the benefit of members and witnesses, wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. As a reminder, all comments are to be addressed through the chair.

For the benefit of any new members attending this morning—welcome to our meeting—and for the benefit of our witnesses, I will use a card to tell you that you have 30 seconds left. When the time is up, I will gently pull up another card. I might give you a couple of seconds extra to wrap up; otherwise, I will need to interrupt you. Don't take it personally. That's just how things are done in committees.

This morning we will have one panel. It will go until one o'clock. All witnesses are appearing by video conference and they will all be on the same panel.

I've been given the names of members who will be asking questions. I will start with—

• (1105)

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Madam Chair, if I may, I'd like to get a clarification before we begin hearing the testimony.

The Chair: I'm listening, Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: You say that the witnesses we're hearing from today are part of a single panel. Usually, we hear from two groups of witnesses in succession and after the first hour, we go back to where we started in terms of time for questions. So, when the second panel arrives, each party has the floor again for six minutes.

Are you going to manage this in the same way today, Madam Chair? In other words, will each party have the floor for six minutes in the first round and for six minutes in the second round as well, so that Mr. Garrison and I don't have speaking turns of only two minutes throughout the two hours after our first intervention?

The Chair: Yes, we will follow the same order and speaking time as usual, but I must enforce it, given the time we have.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: First, we welcome Omar Babili, a student who is testifying as an individual.

[English]

We have Ali Islam, who is also here as an individual.

[Translation]

We also have with us Mr. Shaffni Nalir, who is the executive director of the Islamic Centre and Community Services of Toronto.

[English]

Finally, representing Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia, we have Maryam Al-Sabawi, Daren Shilbayeh and Hamza Omer.

I will begin with the first person on my list and ask Omar Babili to start.

You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Omar Babili (Student, As an Individual): *Assalam alaikum.* Peace be upon you all.

I would like to respectfully acknowledge that I am an immigrant settler living, studying and playing on the unceded lands of the ɫəkwəŋən people, known as the Songhees and Esquimalt nations, whose historical relationship with this land continues to this day.

Good morning, Madam Chair and honourable members. Thank you for the invitation to appear before this committee to share my experience and perspective for this committee's study on Islamophobia.

My name is Omar Babili. I am 25 years old and am currently studying civil engineering at the University of Victoria.

My first encounter with Islamophobia was in 2017 in Bellevue, Washington. The Islamic Center of Eastside, a place of worship and community for many Muslims, was burned down in an act of arson. This incident deeply affected me, as I was attending Bellevue College at the time. The destruction of our Islamic centre was a stark reminder of the hatred and bigotry that exists in our society.

Following this incident, my family suggested that I leave the United States due to concerns for my safety. They believed that Canada would be a safer place to practise our religion. However, my subsequent experience revealed that Canada is not immune to Islamophobia.

I am deeply concerned about the drastic rise of Islamophobia and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism across Canada. Let me be clear here. The hate my community is subjected to is not abstract. It manifests in many ways.

On December 3, 2023, my fear became a stark reality. I was volunteering at a peace protest in my city of Victoria, exercising my right to free speech and assembly and calling for a ceasefire, a cause I deeply believe in. I hope this committee and the Canadian government realize how important it is for Canada to stand for peace in the crisis in Gaza.

As the day went on, I decided to renew my parking meter. On the way back, I noticed there was some commotion along the path that I had taken. I saw a man in a red car arguing with a protester. To my utter shock, the situation quickly took a turn for the worse. Suddenly, the same individual who was in the vehicle arguing with a peace protester started accelerating towards me. The sight of the vehicle accelerating towards me was terrifying. My heart started pounding. Adrenaline surged through me. Thankfully, I managed to jump out of the way, avoiding serious injury or perhaps even death.

Following the incident, I was still shaken. I decided to attend an open office event held by Dean Murdock, the mayor of the city of Saanich, B.C., to voice my concerns and to seek reassurance that

my incident would not happen again. Surprisingly, after Mayor Murdock was informed that I was the victim of the incident, he showed very little concern and did not express any words of empathy or reassurance to me.

The lack of response and concern from our elected official was disheartening to me. It felt like my experience and the broader issue of Islamophobia were being ignored and did not matter.

Around this time, I had to write my final exams. The anxiety from the incident was overwhelming to me, so I reached out to my university department explaining my situation and asking for an exemption from taking my finals. Their response was far from supportive.

Throughout this ordeal, I received no support from the university. No one contacted me or checked on me, leaving me to navigate this stressful situation on my own.

The trauma of that day has been etched into my mind. I experience sudden flashbacks of what happened, and I cannot help but live in constant fear. Every time I leave my house, I am gripped by anxiety wondering if this could happen to me again or to someone else just because they are exercising their freedom of speech.

This whole experience has made me feel like I have lost my right to express my beliefs freely and safely. The lack of support from our elected officials and the university has only reinforced this feeling, leaving me uncertain and feeling isolated.

This incident is not an isolated one. It's part of a broader pattern of violent Islamophobia and harassment that many Muslims in Canada face every day. The psychological toll of living with this fear is immense and impacts our daily lives. Hate and violence towards our community or any other community should not be tolerated.

Today, I want to ask members of this committee to take strong action against Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism and to protect our civil liberties, including the right to peacefully protest.

Thank you.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much

We will continue now with Ali Islam for five minutes.

Mr. Ali Islam (As an Individual): Good morning.

I speak to you from London, Ontario, the traditional home of the Anishinabe people for over 13,000 years.

This Thursday will be the third anniversary of the day my niece Madiha Salman, her husband Salman Afzaal, her mother-in-law Talat Afzaal, her 15-year-old daughter Yumna Afzaal and her nine-year-old son Fayez Afzaal were deliberately attacked by a pickup truck driven by a young man.

Three generations were erased with the aim of scaring Muslim Canadians into leaving Canada. What was the crime my family committed? They were being visibly Muslim in public. That attack was neither unspeakable nor unimaginable to happen here. For decades, Muslim Canadians have been deliberately portrayed as a fifth column. I'll repeat that. In a pervasive narrative, Muslim Canadians are being actively and intentionally portrayed as outsiders and foreigners—as the “other”. This is a depiction that continues and thrives, an intentional depiction that eventually has real, brutal and deadly consequences. Which of you will say that the conditions that led up to June 6 no longer exist today?

The perpetrator behind the attack on our London family took direct inspiration from two men, highlighting the international interconnectedness of ideological hatred. The first was a 2019 terrorist attack at a mosque in New Zealand that left 51 dead. The second was a California attack, also in 2019, inspired by the New Zealand manifesto. This man tried to set a mosque on fire, and when that arson was thwarted by congregants who happened to be inside the mosque, the man escaped and shot three people in a synagogue instead. What this tells us is that hate is transferable.

The innocence of all the children in my family vanished, especially that of my nine-year-old great-nephew, now an orphan. He has come face to face with the most evil fruit of what is a socially acceptable and unchallenged othering, the end result of a monolithic labelling of Muslims that believes deviant acts committed overseas are somehow the responsibility of individual Canadian Muslims to shoulder. The shameless othering of Muslims in daily life doesn't even feel the need to hide its face. I told Faye Afzaal that a criminal just a few years older than Yumna ran over everyone, leaving nobody alive. “Not even one?” is what he asked. This is the price of Islamophobia that Faye has to pay for the rest of his life.

My youngest son thought, “How could someone kill another person without knowing them, and even if someone hated a person, why would they kill them?” In his sweet innocence, he thought that if the criminal had taken the time to sit down for kebabs and a mango smoothie with our family, the criminal would have changed his mind. My son now wonders if his native Canada is really a safe place. Does his Muslim identity make him less Canadian?

As Muslims, we pray five times during the day. In the past, when my son had to pray in public, he had no issue, but now when he has to pray, he's conscious that people are judging him, or worse, that someone will desire to hurt him. He wonders when he puts on his hockey jersey with the name “Islam” emblazoned on the back what name or comments other parents may throw. He says that he used to look at his home as a safe place. “Canada is still my only home,” he says, “but now I'm not so sure how welcome or safe I feel.” He is 13.

My middle son, a teenager one year younger than Yumna, told me that hatred of Muslims has taught him that it's dangerous for a Muslim Canadian to feel attached to anything or anyone because nothing is guaranteed, not even tomorrow. He's 16.

My daughter, my eldest child, just two years older than Yumna, lost her vivaciousness and sense of belonging. She fell into deep isolation, using it as a shield in an environment that was telling her that Muslims do not belong. She says that she didn't feel heard or

valued by society. She has learned that striving for happiness is unrealistic; instead, we should strive for peace. She is 18.

For my wife, the effect of the violent expression of Islamophobia is that, in her mind, she now says a final goodbye whenever the children and I walk out the door every single day. It's exhausting for her, but this is her reality. She has lived through a war and seen and experienced violence overseas, but she never felt as vulnerable as she does now. She says perhaps it's because she felt lied to about Canada's diversity and promise of equality for everyone. She feels short-sighted for believing that this promise was for everyone. Since the attack, she has lost faith that society will give equal worth to its citizens. Is equal worth only for Canadians of European heritage?

• (1115)

A young woman in my family who wears the hijab is scared about the what-ifs when she steps outside. The hijab, a sign of humility, a signal to others about her honesty and devotion, now makes her a walking bull's eye. Not only does it put her in danger, but it puts anyone alongside her in danger, so on top of carrying fear, she now has to carry guilt.

As we approach the third anniversary of the attack on our London family, let me read to you some of the comments sent in over the last few weeks to the volunteers and the City of London employees organizing the vigil on Thursday evening. “Islamophobia is not a thing.” “When will the City of London stop sucking Islamic ****?” “Stop pandering to a people who would sooner slit your throat than help you.” “People like you are the problem.” “What have ‘muslims’ done for us, besides nothing?” “No sympathy.” “Stop terrorizing Jewish folks in Toronto.” “Piss on Islam.” “You all will be held accountable. We are coming for all of you.” “Keep London Pure.”

As a family that was the victims of a hate crime, we feel there is an unrealistic lack of resources and insufficient willpower to understand hate and to talk about how it develops, how it's propagated and how it can be combatted. I ask Parliament to do a better job of explaining why Islamophobia matters if it only affects 5% of the population. Is it real? Is it being exaggerated? Why should 95% of Canadians care about it? I ask parliamentarians to say what should be obvious: Is Canada ultimately a nation for the descendants of white Europeans, or is it something else?

Listen to your conscience. Stop the intentional othering and dehumanization of Muslim Canadians. Look to your right and left when you sit in the House, and call out your colleagues. We are Canadian. Pass or amend the online harms bill to protect our youth, but get it passed.

I've seen foot-dragging at the provincial level with no passage of the our London family act, the act that includes proposed changes to education and creates safe zones around religious institutions. There's a Senate report on Islamophobia that came out in November 2023. Will this committee be taking that off the shelf?

I saw, Madam Chair—

The Chair: I'll step in. I've given you a bit of extra time since we have one panel of witnesses today. We'll come back to you in the rounds of questioning.

We will now go to Shaffni Nalir, general manager of Toronto Islamic Centre and Community Services.

Mr. Shaffni Nalir (General Manager, Toronto Islamic Centre and Community Services): Good morning, Madam Chair and honourable members. Thank you for the invitation to appear before this committee for its study on Islamophobia.

My name is Shaffni Nalir. I grew up in Toronto, where I currently live with my wife and four children. I immigrated with my parents, who fled civil war and religious persecution in Sri Lanka. I grew up going to the Bond Street Nursery School, which was operated by the Metropolitan United Church. I grew up, like most Canadians in my age group, with 50¢ freezies, saving up pennies to buy candy from the corner store and watching *The Elephant Show* with Sharon, Lois and Bram. However, unlike most Canadians, I can brag that I saw them live—twice.

Growing up as a visible minority, you learn to have thick skin. Don't disrupt the peace. Stay quiet and absorb the offhanded insults, sarcastic comments and occasional physical bullying. Up until recently, I stopped seeing myself as a grateful guest in Canada and realized that I am in fact a host, and I hope to be a gracious one. Canada is as much my country as any other Canadian's.

I want to share our community's experience with Islamophobia and hate-motivated violence targeting our places of worship. I'm the general manager at the Toronto Islamic Centre and Community Services, the first and only mosque on Yonge Street and the only mosque in the University—Rosedale riding. On October 10, 2020, our mosque received a threatening email from an individual claiming to be associated with the Jewish Defense League, or JDL, an organization listed as terrorist by the FBI. Some of the content of the threatening email included, "We will [kill] every muzzie. We have the guns to do a Christchurch all over again". We reported this threat to local law enforcement, and they advised us to close the mosque for a few days as they assessed the threat. For four long weeks, our mosque was closed to the public and to our congregants. There was fear and panic among them.

I want to remind this committee that our community lives with the trauma of the Quebec City mosque terrorist attack that took the lives of six worshippers in January 2017. During this time, my family was concerned for my safety and would often discourage me from going to our mosque to do any administrative work for fear that I would not return home. Since that incident, we've had several hate-motivated graffiti incidents at our mosque and the occasional banging on our doors and windows while we were inside praying.

However, on November 18, 2023, threats to our mosque turned into action. At around 6:30 in the morning, just after the morning

prayer, I, along with around 50 congregants, including small children, heard several loud bangs on the windows and door of our mosque. A few congregants and I rushed outside to see what occurred, only to be met with an individual on a bike hurling racist threats at us, saying, "You effing Arabs. You effing Muslims. We're going to finish you all." Then this individual spat several times in our direction and rode off.

I went inside to call the police and report what happened. Shortly after, this individual returned and threw a large rock at a group of congregants who were socializing in front of the mosque. Thankfully, he narrowly missed the elderly caretaker of the mosque by a few inches. He then yelled, "You're all dead" and sped off once again.

I and a few congregants chased him down and managed to corner him. Thankfully, at the same time, a traffic officer happened to be in the area to help control the situation. Police arrived on the scene shortly after. After the officers learned what had happened, they proceeded to arrest him. I felt a huge sigh of relief. Later that evening, Toronto police released a statement. We learned that this individual had also committed several other offences a few days prior and had attacked two other individuals because of their faith. He was charged with a total of 14 charges.

Since that day, I cannot fully focus on my prayer in the mosque because I'm always thinking about who will walk in and how I will respond to protect my community members. Every time I hear the door open, my whole body tenses up because I fear the worst. My children grew up at this mosque. In fact, my youngest son took his first steps in this mosque. My wife and I, along with many other parents, consider our mosque to be a safe space for children to roam freely, without parents feeling the need to worry. This individual robbed our community of its sense of safety at our mosque, which is the foundation of our community.

I admit we were afraid, but we were not deterred. We still pray in congregation but have increased our annual security budget from \$4,800 to \$36,000. Our budget includes 24-hour monitoring and recording, and active-shooter drills and training for our congregants. Nowadays, we always have worshippers standing guard while others pray.

Today, I want to ask this committee to take action against the Islamophobia and violence that our communities are facing and ensure that our government provides protection for our places of worship.

● (1120)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia. I understand that Maryam Al-Sabawi will be presenting on behalf of the group and that two others will also be available to respond to questions.

I will be lenient with my time, because I understand you thought you had a bit extra. We'll do our best.

Ms. Al-Sabawi, the floor is yours.

Ms. Maryam Al-Sabawi (Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia): Good afternoon.

My name is Maryam Al-Sabawi, and I am a grade 12 student.

Yumna was my close friend. Yumna and I had been in the same class since the second grade. In high school, we joined the International Baccalaureate program together and shared almost every class. We ran for student council as a duo. We planned to start a business together, whose profits, we agreed, would be donated to charity. We planned to go to university together. We often spoke of our futures, our hopes and our dreams, like most young kids do.

Yumna was more than a friend to me. She was a confidante, a support system, a study partner, a secret keeper and a giver of hope. Most importantly, she was a constant reminder that good friends do exist.

I miss Yumna. Not a day passes that I don't think of her. I miss her laughter, her smile, her kindness and her sense of humour.

If only we could press rewind. This is what I do each night. I rewind the memories, rewind the sound of her laughter, rewind the endless text messages and rewind the conversations that so deeply connected me to her. I even rewind June 6, 2021. That's when I wish I could press pause. But I can't.

The thought of my friend being targeted, hunted in the streets, mowed down and killed just because of her Muslim faith has been very debilitating, especially as a 14-year-old Muslim girl. Can you imagine how difficult it has been to process what happened? Can you imagine the difficulty of simply existing, feeling safe or trying to move on?

Three years have passed, and parts of me have gone with it. Losing Yumna has left a gaping hole in me. There aren't enough words in the dictionary to describe how difficult these past few years have been. I have been consumed by the thought of what she used to be, what she could have been and what she is. Night after night, I've awoken to the same dream—Yumna being run over as she walks home with her family. I wake up in a sweat, thinking, "Don't worry, Maryam. It's only a dream." But it's not.

The grief is overwhelming, so much so that at times I'm no longer recognizable to those who love me. At times I'm not even recognizable to myself. I'm not the same. None of us are. How could we be? Most 14-year-olds don't have to worry about burying their friend and then having to figure out how to make sure they don't have to bury any others. I never imagined that the most formative years of my life, my teens, would be spent fighting hate and Islamophobia so that others would not experience the pain that my friends and I have had to experience.

The world placed a responsibility on our shoulders that would have crushed a mountain, but we had to carry it because others haven't. We had to carry it so that no one else would feel the pain that we have felt. We had to carry it because if we didn't, it seemed as though no one else would.

Sleepless nights, fear of trucks and an inability to go for walks have caused me to reflect on what was actually taken from us on June 6, 2021. We didn't just lose Yumna and her beautiful family. We also lost our sense of belonging, our sense of community, our sense of safety and our sense of self. We even lost our innocence. The world isn't as kind as we had believed it to be. All of it was taken because of hate that was left unchecked, hate that was given endless opportunities to grow and hate that was carefully incubated through the silence of others.

I often think of Yumna's last moments. I often imagine her lying alone. I wonder if she was afraid, if she felt pain or if she knew that death was imminent. These thoughts keep me up at night. Just when my mother had finally convinced me that she had died on impact, I learned at the trial that her eyes were open, that she was foaming at the mouth and that perhaps she was trying to speak. I wonder what she wanted to say. I wonder what her message to you would be. I wonder how many others have to die.

Once again, I feel paralyzed, moving through the motions, struggling to exist and struggling to make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else. I'm exhausted. My family is exhausted. My friends are exhausted. My community is exhausted. We cannot even grieve in peace. He took from us what did not belong to him, and there is no way to give it back.

The grief is overwhelming, and we have been forced to carry the weight of that grief. That grief hurts. It stings, it burns, it shatters, it crushes and it can even kill. It has robbed us of our dreams, our hopes, our peace and even our sense of self. That grief has been the greatest equalizer in our community, as no one has been able to escape it.

• (1125)

It is our hope that our government will stop using language that dehumanizes us, whether it's referring to Muslims here or Muslims abroad. It is the continuous dehumanization of Muslims that enables others to justify our killing and enables the violent Islamophobia we continue to experience in our schools, in our streets and in our communities.

It is our hope that our governments, on all levels, will recognize the importance of education in addressing hate towards Muslims and will use education as a tool to combat this hate. It is our hope that our government will put politics aside and put people first.

I have to leave because I have a class, but my friends Hamza and Dareen from the YCCI will be answering questions on behalf of the YCCI.

Thank you.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you. I was advised ahead of time.

Before you go and before we start questions, let me thank all of you for coming today and for the bravery you have shown by appearing before this committee to give your heartfelt remarks. We deeply appreciate that and our condolences go out to you and all the family for the loss you have suffered.

We will now begin with our questioning and will have six-minute rounds. We will start with Mr. Moore.

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses—including Maryam, who's just left for her class—for powerful testimony and for turning the pain and personal loss that you've experienced into trying to solve some of the problems of today and hopefully improving the situation here in Canada.

I want to ask Dr. Islam a question.

First, Dr. Islam, thank you for your powerful testimony. You've suffered personal loss and we appreciate your perspective on this.

I noted in an article I read that cited you that you don't use the name of the perpetrator who took the lives of your family members. Likewise, with the Quebec City mosque shootings, where six individuals were killed, you said that you wouldn't use the perpetrator's name. I want to ask you a question about that.

The law had been changed previously so that in cases in Canada—fortunately rare cases—of mass murder or multiple murder, for individuals who perpetrate these heinous crimes, there would not be a sentencing discount, so to speak, for the fact that someone took more than one life. They would get consecutive life sentences.

Previous to the change in law, if someone—we heard recently of the story of Paul Bernardo—took multiple lives, they could only get one period of parole ineligibility, which is 25 years. Subsequent to the change that was brought in, an individual, like the individual who shot three RCMP officers in Moncton, could receive consecutive periods of parole ineligibility. That person received a 75-year sentence instead of a 25-year sentence.

We heard from victims' families. The widow of one of the victims of one of these crimes said that while this doesn't bring back her loved one, she does take solace in that her daughter will not have to attend parole hearings every two years to try to keep this individual behind bars.

As you are probably well aware, a few years ago the Supreme Court of Canada struck down this law on consecutive periods of parole ineligibility. There was some strong commentary afterwards. I know that the former president of the Islamic cultural centre, where the shooting took place, expressed disappointment with the court's decision, saying, "In our view, this decision fails to take into due consideration the atrocity and the scourge of the multiple murders which are multiplying in North America, as well as the hateful, Islamophobic and racist aspect of this crime." He also said, "Our deep concern is about the orphans that will see the murdering person in the roads of Quebec City 25 years after this tragedy."

Do you feel that we as a Parliament or the government should take some strides to respond to this court decision?

• (1135)

Mr. Ali Islam: Mr. Moore, the way I understand it, the sentencing and the court system fall under the purview of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, while the parole system, as it is, falls under the purview of the Minister of Public Safety. There are probably some good reasons for making this separation. Personally, I don't think it is working properly for Canadians, particularly the Canadians who have been victims of a hate crime or who have been the victims of, let's say, a mass murderer or serial killer.

The mandate for the public safety minister and the parole system seems to be rehabilitation. It seems to be weighted very heavily toward rehabilitation without giving proper weight to deterrence. Maybe there was a formula at some time that worked, but the formula isn't working now.

I think one easy solution to make sure that people who have committed the most heinous of crimes—terrorizing Canadians—stay in prison lies with the parole system. It should be making sure that they stay in. Whether one is rehabilitated or not, weigh the other variables that were behind the circumstances of the crime. Weigh all the other victims. With hate crimes, the victims aren't just the immediate family and the people who died. They're everyone else who was affected.

Hon. Rob Moore: Thank you, Doctor, for your response.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Moore.

Ms. Zahid, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

My first question is for Omar Babili.

First of all, I'm happy that you are safe today and that the incident involving you did not turn fatal. I have a simple question for you. Do you believe the person who attacked you did so because you are Muslim? What do you believe drove him to take the violent and despicable measure of going out and trying to ram someone with his car who was visibly Muslim?

Mr. Omar Babili: Multiple factors came into this. First of all, I think what agitated him was that we were protesting for Palestine that day. However, I can say there was Islamophobia in it as well, because after the incident happened and the police arrested him, he was making racist comments to the other protester who was arguing with him earlier, saying, "Go back to your country" and making other racist comments.

It was both Islam and us protesting for Palestine that day that agitated him into doing what he did to me.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My next question is whether you feel your university stood by your side in this horrible incident. Do you feel it is protecting you and the other Muslim students on campus? Can you explain that?

Mr. Omar Babili: After that incident happened, no one reached out to me from my university or the department, even though I contacted them. I explained my situation and what happened. It seemed like they did not care what had happened to me. No one reached out to me.

I had to go through my exams. It was very stressful for me to go through them. I had four exams, and they were finals on very hard subjects, but I had to get through them on my own. No one reached out to me or showed any concern.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

My next question is for Ali Islam.

Mr. Islam, first of all, I'm so sorry for the loss of your family members in an Islamophobic act of terrorism. Do you feel that justice was served through the court process, or do you feel that the same environment of hate and Islamophobia that led to this tragic act of terror still exists in Canada today?

• (1140)

Mr. Ali Islam: I think the justice system did what it could under the limits it's operating under. There are constraints, and I'll explain some of them.

The committee is interested in learning about Islamophobia. It is not one disease entity. There are many different types, and it has many different manifestations. The most benign form, if we can look at it from a disease model, is borne from ignorance about Muslims. There's a sly and sinister form borne from, let's say, geopolitics, where anti-Muslim hatred is used as a justification to keep Muslim voices out of the top spheres of power and influence—and that's intentional.

There's a form of Islamophobia that comes from the far left, and there's a form of Islamophobia borne from white nationalism. That type goes hand in hand with anti-Semitism, misogyny, anti-Black racism and being anti-LGBT. There are many different paths to the same end result. What we don't understand, I think, is how Islamophobia, when it goes up in one of these categories, affects the others. This is where governments, Parliament and academics can add value. If you don't look at all the different building blocks of hate, I don't think you'll get to some of the root causes behind the hatred that exists.

There's another element that is trying to catch up to the times. The way that hatred was spread in the past is very different from the way it is now. Technology companies have a large role to play, because they're not simple conduits of information. There's a way of getting radicalized and falling into echo chambers and filter bubble. That happens online. That's another big piece that we have to catch up on, and simple fact-checking isn't enough to keep people falling into circles of hate. Source-checking needs to be a big variable in how we look at how hate is spread. I don't think we're doing a good job there right now.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I have a quick question. You mentioned in your testimony that hate is transferred. The second aspect that you touched on was about your son...mentioning to learn about your neighbours. You mentioned to CBC that people should take the time to get to know their neighbours and people who are different from them. How can we encourage that at the community level, and what can we as public leaders do there?

Mr. Ali Islam: If I go back to some of the building blocks of Islamophobia, the most benign form of Islamophobia is a general lack of exposure to or ignorance of Muslims. Maybe you've never come across a Muslim in your life. There are large parts of Canada where that's certainly possible.

Telling more Muslim stories and having more Muslim voices would be one method of doing it. When you go back to the role of government and Parliament, I think Parliament has to figure out how to tell Canadians—the 95% of Canadians who are not Muslim—why it's important to combat Islamophobia and other forms of hatred. If it doesn't affect the majority, how is protection of the minority better for the whole country?

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Islam.

We now move to Monsieur Fortin.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, esteemed witnesses, for joining us this morning. Your testimony is important.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm learning things. I learned some at the meetings we held on anti-Semitism, and this morning I'm learning some about Islam. I don't think we've finished learning.

I'll pick up on what Mr. Islam just said: Maybe we don't know enough about Islam, the Muslim religion, and maybe there's a need, indeed, to know more about the precepts of this religion.

That said, we all want to have a safe living environment, obviously. We want our streets to be safe, and we want everyone to be able to live the religion of their choice freely and without persecution.

Recently, the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights has focused a lot on anti-Semitism. Now, we're looking at the issue of Islamophobia.

Mr. Islam, should we treat all forms of discrimination equally? Think, for example, of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, which you were just talking about, or discrimination based on skin colour or sexual orientation. All of this is detrimental to maintaining a healthy climate in Canada and Quebec. In your opinion, should we treat all these forms of discrimination in the same way, or are there particular challenges that we need to tackle differently, particularly in the case of Islamophobia?

Mr. Islam, my question is for you.

Madam Chair, can the witness hear me?

• (1145)

[English]

The Chair: Dr. Islam, I don't know if you heard the question that Mr. Fortin asked.

By the way, I've stopped the time.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: I think his microphone is on mute.

[English]

The Chair: His microphone is on.

Were you able to hear Mr. Fortin's question in French? He was addressing it to you.

Mr. Ali Islam: I was able to hear it in French, but my French is grade 11 and it's been a while.

The Chair: Did you put on the interpretation?

Mr. Ali Islam: No.

The Chair: To whoever on the screen is not able to put it on, the clerk will explain.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Jean-François Lafleur): Thank you, Madam Chair.

If you go to the lower part of your screen, you have an interpretation button. You can push it and then select the language of your choice.

Do you see it?

Mr. Ali Islam: Yes, I see it now.

The Chair: I am going to roll it back a bit.

[Translation]

Mr. Fortin, I'll give you a little more time to put your question to the witness again, but could you make it more concise?

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Can all the witnesses hear me when I speak in French? Can they all hear the English interpretation?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, they can.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Are you sure?

You'll understand that I want to make sure I don't talk unnecessarily.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): I have a point of order.

Mr. Fortin has this happen to him quite a bit. It would be nice, in the remarks that you make at the beginning of the meeting, to include directions on how to put the interpretation button on so that Mr. Fortin doesn't have to continually experience this.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: If I have to repeat my question, will you reset my time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes. Please repeat your question.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As I was saying, I thank all the witnesses for being with us today.

Anti-Semitism is an important, even major, concern for all of Quebec and Canada. Personally, I'm delighted to learn more about the Islamic religion and the lives of Muslims in Canada. Your testimonials will certainly help us.

We've just conducted a study on anti-Semitism. This has enabled us, in my case at least, to learn a great deal about the Jewish religion and the various challenges facing the Jewish community in Canada. This morning, I'm learning about the challenges you face. I find these lessons very valuable. So thank you for being here.

I have a question for Mr. Islam.

As I understand from the testimony we've heard so far, people feel fear when they walk in the streets, go to school or go to public places. Ms. Al-Sabawi and a few other witnesses mentioned this to us today. This is important.

The question I have is: Should we treat different forms of discrimination and the challenges they pose in the same way? Let's think about Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism based on nationality or skin colour, or discrimination against LGBTQ groups, for example. Should we treat all these problems in the same way, or should we consider different solutions in the case of Islamophobia, since the challenges are different?

Mr. Islam, I'd like to hear your opinion on this matter.

• (1150)

[English]

Mr. Ali Islam: All the forms of hatred that you mentioned, each and every single one, absolutely deserve addressing. There is some overlap, and where there is overlap, there are common solutions that would work to address some of the similarities.

I mentioned that one of the forms of Islamophobia comes from white supremacy, a belief in the great replacement theory. The Islamophobia that comes from that goes hand in hand with anti-Semitism. I quoted one of the inspirations of the perpetrator of my family's killing. He was inspired by New Zealand. He was inspired by California. The terrorist in California, when he wasn't able to set fire to the mosque, shot people in a synagogue.

You can certainly draw a chain of killers—even in Buffalo, New York, which happened in 2022; in El Paso, Texas; and at the Pittsburgh synagogue. The great replacement theory, the echo chambers that people fall into and the rabbit holes people go down are real things, so addressing them would address many types of hate at the same time. However, doing that wouldn't provide a complete solution.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Islam.

In your opinion, could something be done to largely satisfy the needs of the Islamic community and the Jewish community in Canada? Obviously, I'm not talking about conflicts abroad. Although we all suffer from them, we may have less power in that respect. What could be done here, in Quebec and Canada, to improve the situation for both the Jewish and Islamic communities?

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: This is where tech companies and media companies bear responsibility. Communication is not just the transmission of a fact from one person to another. It's the transmission of ideas and stories. Any idea that links to an emotion or is in a message that evokes fear, anger or a sense of injustice will trump any communication that tries to be factual. The creators of hate speech will use memes, sarcasm, humour and rhetoric to appeal to adolescents and young people, and the more time people spend online—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Islam. I don't mean to be rude, but my time is running out fast. I only have a minute left, and I'd like to ask Mr. Babili the same question.

Mr. Babili, in your opinion, could anything be done to improve the situation for both the Jewish and Islamic communities?

Your microphone is muted, Mr. Babili.

[*English*]

Mr. Omar Babili: As Dr. Islam said, this is where the media takes part. Sharing awareness is what will help Muslim and Jewish communities. We have to share awareness of Islamic beliefs and Jewish beliefs, and share awareness among Canadians. I think this will make people understand what Islam and Judaism are about, and we can come to one solution to reduce hate towards both religions here in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you.

Could I hear, in a few seconds, the response of one of the students accompanying Ms. Al-Sabawi?

• (1155)

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll come back to the others later.

We will now go to Mr. Garrison for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Madam Chair, with your permission, I'd like to make a quick comment.

I could see one of the students' lips moving, but we couldn't hear him. Perhaps the clerk could remind us how to activate the microphone, to make sure no one loses any of their speaking time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Does anybody not know how to put the microphone on to speak? You were all tested and the microphones are all working. When you want to speak, just unmute yourselves. Thank you.

Mr. Garrison, we will now go to you for six minutes.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to start by expressing my condolences to the families that have lost loved ones. I thank the witnesses—and I agree with the chair—for the bravery of being here today.

I know that all members of the committee will want to know of any consequences of your appearance today. I heard from one of the witnesses who appeared in our anti-Semitism study of an attempt to retaliate for their appearance at the committee, and we will be taking measures to make sure that we follow up on that. We care very much and will be very vigilant about any attempts to intimidate people who appear before our committee.

Your powerful testimony today illustrates what I hoped we would achieve. When we started with the idea of studying anti-Semitism, I believed we should also study Islamophobia, not necessarily because they always go hand in hand, but because these are two of the most virulent forms of hatred presently in our society.

What you have said to us today about the loss of a sense of belonging and the loss of a sense of safety is very powerful and is something that Parliament really must address. I want to ask Mr. Nalir from the Toronto Islamic Centre and Community Services what he feels has been most effective in helping restore a sense of security, if that's been possible, and what would be most helpful in trying to restore a sense of security to the members of his mosque.

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: Engagement with law enforcement and having them present have put a band-aid over the wound and it has helped. We're seeing more engagement than before.

As to the different programs that exist, the SIP program that the government has put out has helped. However, applying for the program and getting approved are extremely difficult. I hear from many mosques in our communities that the program is wonderful as long as you can get into it. When we applied to the program, we had to make a bit of noise before we actually got approved.

I'd say it's about more engagement with law enforcement. The other thing is that when we called the police, it took them quite a while to respond. When places of worship or institutions that are responsible for many people call police, maybe something can be done to have a quicker response time. That would be helpful.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Within the community, have you been able to marshal resources for those who feel most affected by these things? Are there ways that programs can be developed to help the resilience of the community at the mosque?

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: There are different programs, but to be honest, we just raise it among ourselves. It's too much work to apply for government grants. We're talking about the safety of people, the well-being of people and the trauma that people are going through. We have no time to sit and wait, send applications, hear a response, this and that. We've been told no too many times. It's unfortunate, but we'd rather just protect ourselves by trying to raise money. We have little kids selling cookies to raise money to pay for our security guard. That's the reality at our mosque and at many other mosques I think.

• (1200)

Mr. Randall Garrison: I think all members of our committee would thank you for the work you are doing in your own community.

I'll ask a similar question of the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia. In the work that you're doing as youths, can you tell me what you find is most effective and most helpful in combatting Islamophobia?

Mr. Hamza Omer (Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia): Our main focus at the YCCI is an education and awareness aspect. We have seen a lot from that. However, unfortunately, what remains is that these youth, me included, have to deal with the reality of the situation, as Brother Shaffni was saying. Ultimately, we can only accomplish so much with our numbers when the institutions and governments we are living with use rhetoric that is pushing the line further back every day. There's only so much we can do to educate, while so much of that education is trying to be reversed by institutions and the government through the rhetoric they're using.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you for that.

Dr. Islam, I have heard from a number of people suggesting that what we need are community forums to talk about the importance of combatting Islamophobia and other forms of hatred. Do you feel that community forums, perhaps financed by the federal government, might be an effective tool?

Mr. Ali Islam: No. The messages the government has sent on this I don't think are convincing. I keep hearing "Diversity is our strength". It's a mantra. It doesn't carry any meaning for me. Why is it our strength? How has government shown that it's our strength?

If you don't have an answer to that, I don't think people are going to believe it at face value when you say it.

The protection of any minority, not just Muslims, has to be conveyed by the government. I think it's the government's job to do a much better job of saying, "This is how we protect the most vulnerable or marginalized communities, and this is why we should be doing it." I don't think putting out more facts is going to sway people who think otherwise. There has to be a much more compelling reason for bringing Canadians, all Canadians, together, and that's the government's job to do.

The othering of minorities happens. As Hamza just alluded to, it's happening at the institutional level. That could be from people who, for political reasons, want to make Muslims the "other". That has to be addressed.

Parliamentary committees play a role in this. Particularly after the 9/11 era, the individuals and organizations that were asked to speak at parliamentary committees were pulled in from organizations and think tanks that are funded by private donors and private family foundations, not supported by the general Muslim populace or scholars at reputable universities. If you invite pseudo-scholars or partisan ex-Muslims to testify at Parliament, you're playing a role in the othering, and that's not right. House and Senate committees need to start an executive task of source-checking and not just fact-checking, because fact-checking in the modern era doesn't work.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Islam.

As you can all appreciate, I'm being very flexible with the time, particularly with the responses the witnesses are giving. Given that we have only one panel today, I'm able to do that. Otherwise, I would not be able to.

We will now go to our second round.

For five minutes, we'll go to MP Ziad Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Chair, for including me today on this important issue.

Omar, Ali, Shaffni, Hamza and Maryam, *assalam alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu*, and welcome to the committee.

I'm sorry to hear all these factual stories about what has happened, about the suffering. Especially in Canada, it hurts to hear that we still have to deal with these issues, although we believe that we live in a world that is different from what we've experienced in past decades. There is no lack of evidence. There is no lack of incidents happening. I think there's a lack of action.

Dr. Islam, you've mentioned a few things. You said that the government message is not efficient. You believe that there are still things not being acted upon as far as how to tackle and deal with this issue goes. You examined what you call the "disease", and then you mentioned that there are many types of Islamophobia, which we realize. It could be regional. It could be ethnic. It could be religion- or sect-based. It could be any type or form.

We are facing a big challenge. I know that the Muslim community is not alone. There's anti-Semitism on the rise in the country too.

Dr. Islam, what is the action plan? We need a short-term plan and long-term solutions in this work in progress we are faced with. You're a community representative and you're attached to a family that went through this hardship. How do you see the solution? How can everybody work together? Is there a plan in your mind and in the community's mind? Do you think that's going to put things in a perspective that helps tackle this issue?

• (1205)

Mr. Ali Islam: It's a great question, Ziad. Obviously, it will take people from many disciplines to do it. It's not just government. It won't just be community leaders.

The role of education is not something to be overlooked. We may tend to pass it off as a provincial responsibility, but for the sake of national unity and cohesion, the education system cannot be overlooked.

One of the drivers of hate is also one of the drivers of polarization. Generally speaking, no matter where you look, polarization has increased over time, and the middle is drying up. People are going one way or the other, and everyone is moving apart. It can be on a variety of issues. It could be on climate change. It could be on vaccines. It could be on anything. This is where the study of polarization has to overlap with the study of hatred. It will take many disciplines to come together.

The reality is that we don't get information anymore from benign conduits. We're being fed more and more information about what we like. If you interact with it, forward it and comment on it, the algorithms assume that you like it. You're going to get more and more. Tech companies know this and they take advantage of it. This serves their purposes. They don't have a duty to be responsible citizens. I think this is creating a wedge in society.

The answer is very complex. As I said earlier, the messaging to the public has to be very effective. It has to appeal to emotion and not be just fact-based. If we start with the education system to inoculate people against different types of echo chambers and inoculate people against logical fallacies and mental traps, that can start at a very young age. This goes beyond teaching math and spelling. This goes to the heart of logic. If we start in the elementary school system, I think we're going to be better off as a populace.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to Mr. Zuberi for five minutes, please.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here and to all members for studying this important matter.

This is a very apt conversation. We're having many important conversations about anti-Semitism. Now it's Pride Month. Our government addresses all forms of discrimination, be it anti-Black or other forms that exist in society. This is an extremely important study, and I want to thank the witnesses, especially those who have gone through personal tragedy, for their strength and courage. I hope their healing process is moving ahead.

I only have about four and a half minutes, so I'm asking for concise answers. I want to start off with Mr. Nalir.

Mr. Nalir, you mentioned the security of institutions—places of worship and community institutions. First off, are you aware of the security infrastructure program? If so—and I'm hoping you'll say yes—do you find it hard to access? Give a simple answer on those fronts.

• (1210)

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: Yes, I'm aware of it. It's easy to access, but hard to finally put the application through.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: What I hear is that you're aware of it, and that, in effect, it's hard to access because it's hard to put the application together. Is that correct?

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: Yes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'm assuming you want ease, facilitation and help in putting that package together. Would that help your institutions and, to your knowledge, other institutions be better secured in the future?

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: Yes. Anyone in an emergency should be given a liaison for the application.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you so much. The liaison idea is a great idea.

I'd like to move on to Mr. Ali Islam.

You referenced a really important piece of legislation, Bill C-63, which is the online harms act. I'm quite preoccupied with the online space. I've noticed on my own social media that when I post about certain issues, there's a lot of trolling. I don't know if it's from trolls in particular or bot farms, but I have a lot of trolling and a lot of it's hateful. I can't delete the middle fingers. I can't delete the hateful comments towards other identifiable groups.

I'm wondering if you think, from your knowledge, that Bill C-63, the online harms act, will help address the issue of misinformation, bots and hate that's being spewed online.

Mr. Ali Islam: What I know about Bill C-63 I've heard through the media. I haven't read the bill myself.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Answer succinctly based on your general knowledge, please.

Mr. Ali Islam: To my general knowledge, this is a very positive development and it's overdue.

The online space is really a wild west. I fully expect to get—and maybe every member of this panel will too—comments through social media about our appearance here today. I typically expect to get comments like “Go back where you came from” or “You should feel lucky that you're here”. I expect to get those types of comments.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I appreciate that.

Would you say you have a fair amount of knowledge when it comes to the online harms act in the sense that you, as a layperson, have been following it in the media?

Mr. Ali Islam: That's correct.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: To your knowledge as a layperson following it in the media, would you say that the online harms act would help address the concerns being brought forth to this committee and other forms of discrimination?

Mr. Ali Islam: Yes, in short. I know that the bullying—

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Excellent. Thank you for that.

Mr. Ali Islam: I was going to mention that the bullying and protection of young people are addressed in the act. There's a concern about balancing the rights of free speech with the types of comments people make online.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: It is an important balancing act, certainly, and that's really important. I personally promote the protection of civil liberties and free expression. Both principles are important. Addressing discrimination squarely and balancing them are important.

In the 30 seconds that remain, I want to open it up to whoever can answer in about 20 seconds.

Over the last seven months, have you found that discrimination as it relates to Islamophobia has manifested differently in your personal experience, in particular around expressions of freedom of speech on the rights of Palestinian people?

Maybe we can go to Ali Islam.

Mr. Ali Islam: Actually, I'll let one of the university students comment about this.

Ms. Dareen Shilbayeh (Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia): I can touch on that really quickly.

Absolutely—that is the short answer. Being a student on campus and being a passerby and community member in London, Ontario, I have seen an incredible spike in confidence in carrying out hate crimes or verbal assaults. I have been a victim. Almost everyone I love who is visibly Muslim has been a victim of verbal assaults and physical harassment.

• (1215)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Do you think anti-Palestine racism should be part of the government's strategy?

Ms. Dareen Shilbayeh: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We will now go to two and a half minutes each.

Mr. Fortin is first.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thought that at the beginning of the second hour we would each have a six-minute turn.

The Chair: I want to follow the plan I have in front of me.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: I understand, but, in my case, I had a six-minute first round, and now I'm wondering if I'll only have two-and-a-half-minute speaking turns until the end.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're still in the first round. We haven't finished it yet.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: I asked you the question right from the start, Madam Chair. I've had discussions with, among others, our colleague Mr. Housefather, who suggested that we do what you decided to do, i.e., that we hear a single group of witnesses for two hours. The problem is that the opposition parties, the NDP and the Bloc Québécois, lose about four minutes of speaking time in each round. So there was talk of resetting, as I said earlier, the speaking times at the start of the second hour.

[*English*]

The Chair: If I ask for consent, we can do five minutes each, then, for Mr. Fortin and Mr. Garrison.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: That's better, but you'll understand that, without wanting to quibble, I'm going to object to our proceeding in this way next time. I'm going to ask that the usual speaking turns be maintained.

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Moore: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Moore.

Hon. Rob Moore: Not to belabour this, because we'd be delaying hearing from our witnesses, but we have agreed to a format for questions in this committee. Mr. Fortin is on his second question. Some of our members haven't had one question yet.

I think we should just stick with the format that we agreed to at the start of the committee, which provides for this exact scenario.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: With all due respect, Madam Chair, I would say that there was no agreement on this format. That's what you indicated you would do, but the format under our rules is two one-hour periods.

That said, I don't want to spend an hour on this. I'll be satisfied with the five minutes of speaking time you're giving me, but I'm just telling you that in all fairness, speaking times should be reset after the first hour.

The Chair: Mr. Fortin, we are applying the same formula as before.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: That's fine, I don't want to waste the committee's time. There's only three quarters of an hour left. So I'll make do with the five minutes.

The Chair: I'll start the clock now for your two and a half minutes.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: You told me you'd give me five minutes. Is that five minutes or two and a half?

The Chair: I didn't get the committee's consent to give you five minutes. So you now have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: All right. I'm going to end this discussion, but we'll resume it, Madam Chair, if you don't mind. Thank you.

Mr. Islam, in your opinion, could the various current problems be solved if we ensured that all government stakeholders held secular viewpoints, that is, that the government managed the affairs of state without showing preference for one religion or another on Canadian territory?

I would ask you, if possible, to answer me in 30 seconds, since time is running out.

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: No, I don't think that works. I think you may have seen some illustrations about equity and equality. If everyone is not starting at the same standing point, then everyone won't realize their full potential.

• (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Mr. Islam—

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: If you are a community that's marginalized, you're going to need—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Mr. Islam, I apologize for interrupting, but there are only a few seconds of speaking time left.

If the state is not secular, what religion should the state favour? I suppose you're going to tell me it should be the Muslim religion. Either the state is neutral, or the state favours one religion or another. Which religion do you want the state to favour?

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: That's the wrong question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: That is my question. It's the answer that has to fit the question.

I'm asking whether you think the state should be secular or favour one religion or another.

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: The government should be responsible for building cohesion and for stopping hatred. If you're forcing secularism and taking away people's rights, then—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: No, no, Mr. Islam—

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: —that's not secularism anymore. That [*Inaudible—Editor*] religion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: You misunderstood me. I was talking about the state.

My time is now up. We'll resume the discussion another time. I'm sorry.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: I would need examples from you when you ask that question.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Garrison, you have two and a half minutes.

The clerk will explain to you, Mr. Fortin, how the minutes work.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I hope we don't continue our internal bickering at the expense of witness time.

I want to go back to the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia. We had very powerful personal testimony from Ms. Al-Sabawi, but we didn't get to hear as much as I would like to hear about the activities of the YCCI. I would like to give its representatives more time to talk about what they have been doing to combat Islamophobia.

Ms. Dareen Shilbayeh: I can touch on that.

What the YCCI focuses on is advocacy and making Muslim youth feel more empowered in their identities. It's advocacy in the sense of knowing your rights. Unfortunately, Muslim youth have to take that into their own hands now, and really, it's a responsibility that should not fall on their shoulders. Maryam mentioned that over and over in her talks, and it's unfortunately a responsibility that has been put on a few of us, people who are just trying to figure their way through life, just as all of you were at our age.

It's about empowering Muslim youth to know their rights, to be proud of their identities and to not be afraid of who they are and what they believe in.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Can you talk specifically about how you carry out the activity of making people unafraid and more proud?

Ms. Dureen Shilbayeh: There are a couple of aspects to what we do, one of them being creating environments where Muslim youth are surrounded by each other and feel supported.

Another aspect is legislation, policy and the work we do within education systems. We have created curricula within the Thames Valley District School Board, which is a great starting point nationally, to look into this, and we apply them so that responsibility doesn't fall on victims again and again. It's about education. Even in police training, we have input parts of the curriculum, which are now mandated in training. It's about standardizing education on anti-Islamophobia, absolutely.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thanks very much for those specific examples.

I have very little time. Can you tell me if other communities have organizations parallel to the YCCI?

Ms. Dureen Shilbayeh: I am sure they exist. Are you talking specifically about youth combatting Islamophobia—

Mr. Randall Garrison: Yes.

Ms. Dureen Shilbayeh: —or within other communities?

I'm not too sure. I'm sure they exist, but I'm not—

The Chair: If you're aware of any, you can submit them to the committee if you find out after the meeting. That's not a problem.

Thank you very much.

We will now continue our first round, with five minutes for MP Van Popta followed by five minutes for MP Ali.

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being with us here today.

Dr. Islam, my first question is for you. First of all, I offer my sympathies to you and your family because I understand that you're related to the Afzaal family, who were the victims of a brutal attack in London three years ago.

I'm not going to use the person's name. The person who was ultimately convicted of this attack was charged and convicted of four separate charges of first-degree murder and one charge of attempted murder. In addition, the Superior Court of Ontario found that he had committed acts of terrorism. That didn't make any difference to the sentencing, but I want to know from you, in your opinion, whether it made a difference.

Does it make a difference to you, to your family, to the broader Muslim community and, I would say, to all Canadians that this person was found guilty of an act of terrorism?

• (1225)

Mr. Ali Islam: I'll speak about what it means to me.

It came as a very necessary and very healing type of decision. The day after that decision came down, I was driving my son to the gym, and on our drive there, we passed by two men wearing turbans who I assume were Sikh men. I thought to myself, "Boy, from what happened yesterday, you guys are safer today." That was a big, important message of safety and security to any visible minority in Canada, and I think the decision was correct. It makes me feel safer that this is a possible deterrent to someone who might think in the future of using a vehicle as a weapon.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you for that, sir.

I'm going to turn to the youth representatives and Dureen particularly.

Your friend Maryam gave testimony, but she's not here at the moment. I have a quote from her that I found in a publication. I think it was from the CBC. I'll just read it, and then I'm going to ask you to comment on it. "We didn't just lose Yumnah and her beautiful family. We lost our sense of belonging. We lost our sense of community. We lost our sense of safety and our sense of self. We even lost our innocence."

If Maryam were here, I would put the question to her or just have her expand on that. I'm going to put it to you instead, Dureen: What do you say about that?

Ms. Dureen Shilbayeh: I think that statement will mean something special to each person who hears it. I don't want to completely speak over how it may touch her, but to me it means that I don't feel as Canadian as everybody else. I don't feel safe when I walk the streets. I remember I was thinking about how a few years ago, after we tragically lost the Afzaal family, no one wanted to go on walks anymore. Everyone was scared to leave the house. In the past year, with the increase of Islamophobic incidents and anti-Palestinian racism, we have seen that increase significantly.

It's really heartbreaking to know that we are not supported and we are not protected. We have to use the buddy system. For the past few months, we've had to use the buddy system just walking from one building to the next on campus. It means that we consistently have to go out of our way to look out for ourselves, because we're not being looked out for by our representatives, by the people who are supposed to be speaking for us and protecting us.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Dureen, I'm going to continue with you. You were quoted on CTV a couple of years ago in response to federal party leaders making promises to condemn Islamophobia and making promises to fight it. You said, "I don't think they've addressed it in any sense. Act on what you say."

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Perhaps you could comment on that very quickly. What, in your opinion, has the federal government done? Have they kept this promise?

Ms. Dareen Shilbayeh: I'm going to try as briefly as I can to elaborate on that. It's the idea that the language and narrative that Hamza touched on—and Dr. Ali also touched on this quite a bit—are very shaky in condemning and standing against what we are seeing today. When you are passive about the Muslim lives lost, thousands of them across seas, you are passive about Muslim lives lost nationally. That's what teaches the populations.

What we are seeing is firm language being used by the government in firm policies, such as Bill 21. That shows where the government stands, because shaky words of empathy don't hold, but policy and firm action do.

• (1230)

The Chair: For the benefit of members asking questions and our witnesses, I am going to hold to time from here on out because we need to conclude within 30 minutes and I need a minute at the end. When I interrupt you, and I probably will, please do not take offence. It's not personal; I have no choice.

We will now go to Mr. Shafqat Ali for five minutes, please.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here and for the powerful presentations, especially by Maryam.

Dr. Islam, I'm a father of three, and I was in London after the tragedy happened. My daughter goes to school. She's in grade 9, and she wears a hijab. Since that incident, I haven't let her walk home or walk to school. My wife picks her up from and drops her off at school.

That incident has had a lasting impact on every Muslim in Canada. I'd never felt that way before. My kids and family had never felt that way prior to this event. When you were talking about the incident and the feelings of your son and daughter, I could relate that to my family.

I want to ask how you feel about the court decision. I know you talked about it. You can see the government's response and our law enforcement and court's responses to that incident. Do you think we are working on improving how we tackle Islamophobia and anti-Semitism or not? What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Ali Islam: Mr. Ali, there are several things that my wife and I are speaking about to people at the provincial level regarding Islamophobia in the court system. On a federal level, one measure I would like to see is the ability for a judge to include a vehicle as a weapon when they say there's a weapons ban. Currently, it doesn't apply to a vehicle if a vehicle is used in an index crime. It applies to guns, knives and explosives. The perpetrator of this crime specifically said he wanted to inspire people to use vehicles because guns are harder to come by in Canada than, say, the U.S.

The Criminal Code can be modernized to reflect the reality that people may use non-traditional weapons. It should be under the purview of a trial judge to include that in a weapons ban. That's one measure I would be pushing for.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: The recent report on Islamophobia by the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights notes that according to several witnesses, "Canada now leads the G7 in terms of targeted killings of Muslims motivated by Islamophobia." Given the 2017 Quebec City mosque attack, which killed six men during evening prayer and wounded several others, and the 2021 attack on the Afzaal family in London, could you tell us how awareness of these acts of violence has affected the level of fear among Muslims regarding their safety and security?

I will refer this question to Mr. Nalir, please.

• (1235)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: I'm so sorry. Is it possible to have the question repeated?

Mr. Shafqat Ali: I had 30 seconds. It's gone. Maybe you could send your answer in writing.

The Chair: If you want to repeat the question, Mr. Ali, you have time. Perhaps the response can come in writing, unless he is able to respond to it quickly.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: A recent report on Islamophobia by the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights notes that, according to several witnesses, "Canada now leads the G7 in terms of targeted killings of Muslims motivated by Islamophobia." Given the 2017 Quebec City mosque attack, which killed six men during evening prayer and wounded several others, and the 2021 attack on the Afzaal family in London, could you tell us how awareness of these acts of violence has affected the level of fear Muslims have for their safety and security?

If you can, kindly submit that in writing.

The Chair: Submit that in writing, if possible.

Given the time, we will have five minutes for each of the four parties, beginning with Ms. Gladu, followed by MP Ehsassi, Monsieur Fortin and Mr. Garrison. That will conclude our day.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today. For those of you who have experienced the loss of your loved ones, I want to add my personal condolences as well.

I was really struck by what Omar Babili talked about. He talked about the impact when his church was attacked. Local politicians really did nothing. It resonated with me, because we've had a hundred Christian churches in this country torched, and the Liberal government has said and done nothing. On the anti-Semitism study that we're just finishing up, we heard about the 500% increase in anti-Semitic hate events. Others felt as well that the federal government had not adequately acted.

I'm interested in hearing about Islamophobia, because since 2017, there's been a House of Commons study on Islamophobia, which brought forward 16 recommendations; the Senate report that was mentioned, which made 60 recommendations on what the government could do; and a national summit in Canada on Islamophobia. The government also put a special representative in place to combat Islamophobia.

With all of that, Omar, do you feel that the efforts of the federal government have decreased Islamophobia in Canada?

Mr. Omar Babili: I'm not quite sure since I don't know what the federal government is doing about Islamophobia. I would have to come back on that question.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: It's the same question for Mr. Nalir.

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: As you mentioned, things have been done, but they could be communicated better to people on the ground. That's what I would say.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

What do you think is contributing to the rise in Islamophobia that we're seeing in Canada?

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: As Dr. Islam mentioned, when people look different, naturally there's ignorance. However, when that's addressed, not just among the common people but by people in power, I think it gives strength and makes it okay to talk about Islam. It's okay to address Islamophobia when the people at the top are also addressing it. It's not a taboo topic anymore and I think that helps.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: This is a question for all of you.

We've seen lots of incidents in the news that have to do with the situation in Gaza and what's happening on the ground in Canada: rail being blocked in B.C., the occupation at Union Station and the many blocked infrastructure demonstrations. What impact do you think this is having on Islamophobia, if any?

We'll start with Omar.

• (1240)

Mr. Omar Babili: From my perspective, the peaceful protests happening in Canada show the good side of Muslims. For example, we have lots of Christians and Jewish people coming to support us. It just shows, since they're very peaceful protests, that they're not doing anything illegal.

I think people are changing their minds about Islam. Lots of people I've met have started reading about Islam, they've started liking Islam and they've shared their opinion with me about Islam. It's helping to reduce Islamophobia rather than increase it. That's my opinion.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: That's great.

Dr. Islam.

Mr. Ali Islam: As I mentioned, the rise of anti-Muslim hatred from one category of the building blocks has an unknown effect, but it probably has a real effect on Islamophobia coming from other building blocks. There certainly is a small but real minority of Canadians who think that Canada is a construct for people of European heritage. That construct, that belief, leads to the othering of many different minorities, not just Muslims.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to MP Ehsassi for five minutes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you very much to all the witnesses.

The testimony you have provided has been very powerful. I know it wasn't easy, but I think you have all established that Islamophobia, regrettably, is alive and well and that as a country, we should be doing much better to combat Islamophobia, much as we do with other hate crimes.

I will start off with Dr. Islam.

Mr. Fortin started off with a question about whether there are commonalities between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. The reason is that he was wondering whether we could use the same tools for combatting Islamophobia. Obviously, both of them are disconcerting.

You had the opportunity to say that in certain respects, there were overlaps between the two. However, I suspect you also wanted to elaborate on what the particularities of Islamophobia are and why that's significant. Am I correct in my assessment, and would you care to elaborate on that point?

Mr. Ali Islam: Yes, you are correct in your assessment. Even the word "Islamophobia" is hard to define and is much harder to define than "anti-Semitism". People are confused and wonder if not liking Islam as a theology makes one an Islamophobe. That's not true. The word is difficult to define. I think it would be clearer if we used the words "anti-Muslim hatred" when it's a more appropriate term to use.

The maintenance of the status quo internationally has a role in Islamophobia here at home. It's done on purpose to make Muslim Canadians into an outside entity or a fifth column. That type of Islamophobia does not have an overlap with anti-Semitism.

As to the people who fall into the great replacement theory in white nationalism, there's a strong overlap there in the root causes and explanations. In fact, the great replacement theory says that it's a Jewish conspiracy to have Muslim, Black or other minorities come to North America to replace the voting bloc. That's ludicrous, but that's what they believe.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much for that.

Mr. Babili, I'm so terribly sorry about the indifference you encountered with your elected official and with the University of Victoria. It truly is unacceptable that you went through such a terrible and harrowing experience and that they did not address it appropriately.

Here is my question now for the panellists, and I will start with Mr. Babili. Unfortunately, we've seen a steep rise in anti-Semitism over the course of the past seven months. Is it your assessment that the rise in Islamophobia has increased considerably in the last seven months as well?

• (1245)

Mr. Omar Babili: That's a great question.

For the past seven months, Islamophobia has increased incredibly. We can see this in the streets, at universities and at protests, where a counterprotester will make racial comments. I believe the answer to that question is that, yes, it has increased.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Let's also go to Dr. Islam, Mr. Nalir and Ms. Shilbayeh.

Dr. Islam, very briefly, has Islamophobia multiplied in the last seven months, in your opinion?

Mr. Ali Islam: Yes, it has multiplied. Anything that's adding to the reservoir of hate causes the reservoir to rise. It doesn't matter what source it's coming from.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'm sorry, but because of the limited time, I will go to Mr. Nalir.

The Chair: I'm sorry. The time is up.

If there is anything to send in, I would encourage you to do that.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That's fair enough.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: For what could be the last five minutes, it's over to Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is for the student, Mr. Omer.

Currently, section 319 of the Criminal Code prohibits promoting hatred or fomenting anti-Semitism. However, there is an exception to this prohibition. Section 319(3)(b) states that “no person shall be convicted of an offence ... if, in good faith, the person expressed or attempted to establish by an argument an opinion on a religious subject or an opinion based on a belief in a religious text”. It is therefore forbidden to foment hatred or anti-Semitism, but one can do so if, in good faith, one expresses an opinion on a religious subject.

A bill has recently been introduced to eliminate these exceptions, so that no one can, under any circumstances, foment hatred or anti-Semitism. It doesn't matter if the person is basing their statements on a religious text. It should simply be forbidden.

I'd like you to tell me what you think, in about thirty seconds, Mr. Omer. Then, I'd like to put the same question to other witnesses.

[*English*]

Mr. Omar Babili: In my opinion, it should be forbidden. No hate should be allowed. That's my short answer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you.

Actually, my question was more for student Hamza Omer, who has been added to the panel, but hasn't had a chance to answer any questions yet. That's okay, I'll let it go, since time is running out.

I'd like to hear Mr. Nalir's response to that same question.

Did you hear the question, Mr. Nalir?

It seems not, so I'll let it go.

So I'll turn to you, Mr. Islam. I apologize, but I only have a few seconds left to hear your opinion on the matter.

Section 319 of the Criminal Code prohibits the promotion of hatred or anti-Semitism. There is an exception that says you can do so if you base it on a religious text. We propose abolishing this exception. What do you think?

[*English*]

Mr. Ali Islam: I'll have to take your word for section 319. I do not know what it is. However, if what you're describing is the case, you can certainly disagree about theology. I don't see how it should extend to hatred or a promotion of prejudice—and certainly never to violence.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Islam.

I'll come back to you, Mr. Nalir. I don't know if your microphone is working properly. Can you answer the question? Did you hear the question?

[*English*]

The Chair: He is trying.

Go ahead, Mr. Nalir.

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: Yes, I got the question.

As Dr. Islam mentioned, I'm not too sure what criticizing theology has to do with hate, but you've heard us testify about the rise of Islamophobia.

We've told you about our loss of life—Dr. Islam's family—Omar almost getting killed by a truck and the risk to us. We're not allowed to grieve. I'm not sure why member Gladu came with questions about protesting and things like that. We're telling you that people have almost been killed, and then you reply with that kind of stuff. That's odd to me.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: In summary, Mr. Nalir, you would be in favour of abolishing the religious exception provided for in section 319 of the Criminal Code, so that it would be illegal to promote hatred, regardless of whether or not a religious text is used as a basis.

Is that what you mean? Have I understood you correctly, yes or no?

[English]

Mr. Shaffni Nalir: Hatred should not be incited, but I have to look at the bill to respond to that.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you.

Ms. Shilbayeh, what do you think? In your opinion, should the prohibition against fomenting hatred be subject to an exception if based on a religious text, or should we abolish this exception?

Ms. Shilbayeh, did you hear my question?

[English]

Ms. Dareen Shilbayeh: Yes. Unfortunately, I'm not too familiar with the bill so I'm not able to give a proper answer, but hate should not lead to violence [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: I didn't quite hear the answer, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

For the final couple of minutes, because Mr. Garrison is okay with not doing a full five minutes, I'll hand it over to him.

Go ahead, please, Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to return to something I mentioned earlier. One of our witnesses from a previous session reported to me that disadvantageous action was threatened against them as a result of their appearing before the committee. This witness does not wish to be identified publicly at this point. My office is working with them.

If this threat continues, I will bring the appropriate motion regarding contempt of Parliament before this committee. The testimony of witnesses is protected, and they must not suffer adverse consequences from an appearance here.

I would just like the committee to know that this has happened. I also don't wish to put that witness at further risk, if we can solve this problem before it goes any further. I just want the committee to be aware that this has happened. If it does not cease—the people who know about this can hear me—I will bring in a motion to committee regarding contempt of Parliament.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Zuberi.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Madam Chair, I'd like to note that this has happened at other committees that I've been part of, such as the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. It's on the record that Mehmet Toti, who is a Uyghur advocate, was threatened in advance of his testimony. I think we need to take these sorts of threats to life, or the life of a loved one, very seriously. They have happened to him in the past. He's been on the record as such.

I think these points are important. We call our witnesses here to testify freely.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Witnesses, thank you very much for coming today. Again, all members appreciate very much your being candid and appearing with us. If there is anything you feel you can contribute to us that you were asked and were not able to fully respond to, please send in your answers.

That brings me to what I need to ask the committee about. I'm proposing that the date of Friday, June 21, be the deadline for briefs for the study of anti-Islamophobia. I want to put on the record that June 21 will be the deadline for anybody to submit any briefs for this study. I think the reminder was that they are to be three pages in length.

That brings us to the end of our committee.

Witnesses, thank you very much.

Members, thank you very much. Does anybody have their hand up based on what I said?

Mr. Garrison.

• (1255)

Mr. Randall Garrison: I think we need to be careful about the deadline given the holiday.

The Chair: What holiday?

Mr. Randall Garrison: We're talking about the national day for reconciliation, which is an official national holiday. I just want to make sure there's no conflict with the dates we're setting.

I'm sorry. I wasn't listening carefully enough.

The Chair: I think people can submit until June 21. If there's anything wrong with that date, we'll move it to June 20 or 22. I'll come back on Thursday after I hear from the analysts and the clerk. It's not for the committee. It's for the submission to the House of Commons. It's not coming to me personally. I hope I won't be here.

We will continue with our study on Thursday morning.

[Translation]

I wish you all a good day.

[English]

We are adjourned.

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