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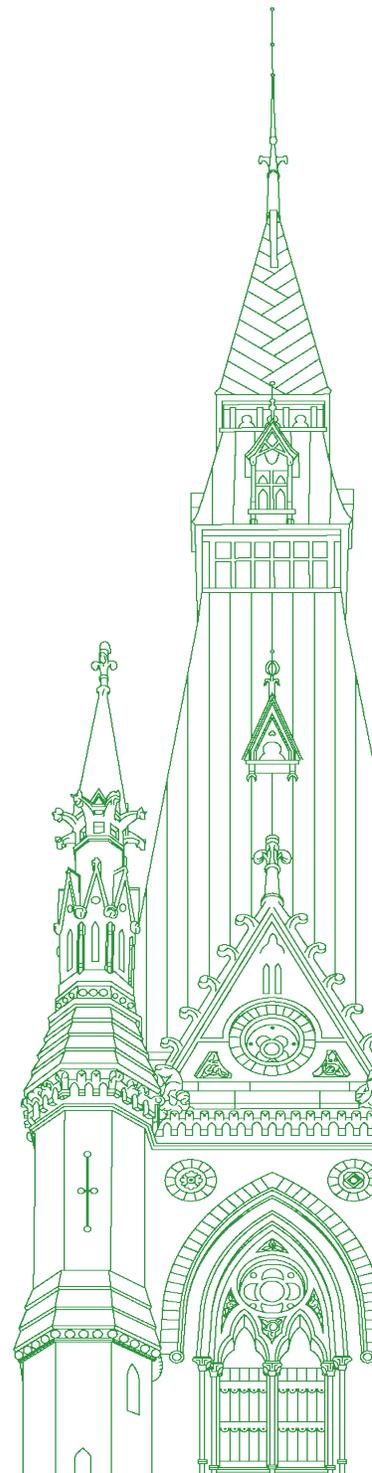
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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

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• (1115)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 6 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the subcommittee is meeting on its study of the recognition of international human rights champions.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Colleagues, despite her absolute best efforts, due to multiple flight delays, Nazanin Boniadi was unable to join us today. With the agreement of the committee, can we have her opening remarks taken as read and published in today's evidence?

I need your approval, please. Are we all good?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*See appendix—Remarks by Nazanin Boniadi*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

It is now my honour to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

From the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, we have the Honourable Irwin Cotler, founder and international chair.

Mr. Cotler, you are very welcome. As you know, your presence always adds value to this subcommittee.

From Voices of Children, we have Veronika Sheldagaieva by video conference.

Now I would like to hear a few words from Mr. Irwin Cotler. Then I will open the floor for discussion, questions and answers.

Mr. Irwin Cotler, the floor is yours. Take your time.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Founder and International Chair, Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

I'm very happy to be here and to be part of the common cause that brings us together.

[*English*]

I'm delighted to join Nazanin and Veronika, who are warriors for both human rights in Iran and justice for Ukraine, respectively, and I look forward to their testimony.

I would add that I regard this committee, as I said when I was an MP and reaffirm today, as being one of the most important—if not the most important—parliamentary committees involved in the struggle for human rights, the pursuit of justice and the defence of democracy.

Five years ago, I spoke of a resurgent global authoritarianism, backsliding of democracies, assaults on human rights and political prisoners as a looking glass. Today, we meet at a historical inflection moment in which we are witnessing a concerted, intensifying and collaborative axis of authoritarianism, with Russia, China, Iran and their proxies.

We are seeing an increase not only of the backsliding of democracies but also of polarization within and between democracies. The United States, formerly the linchpin of the rules-based international order, has now—under the Trump administration—been upending the transnational alliance and the same rules-based international order. We are witnessing not only assaults on human rights but also an age of mass atrocity. Political prisoners are not only a looking glass into all this but also torchbearers for human rights, defenders of democracy and pursuers of justice. They are the real champions of whom I will speak today.

I will say, parenthetically, that for those of whom I speak, I have been serving as international legal counsel and make representations in that context.

I will summarize briefly the cases and causes of political prisoners from the axis of authoritarianism—Russia, China and Iran—as well as from Eritrea, which has ranked last in the world press freedom index for the last 10 years.

I will begin with the case of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali, a Swedish Iranian physician now in his 10th year of unjust imprisonment, suffering not only torture in detention but also deprivation of the right to counsel, the right to a fair trial under Iranian law, the right to visitations by family and the right to representations by consular officials on his behalf. His wife, Vida, just days ago received a chilling message from him in Evin prison, in which he spoke of his imminent threat of death by execution or by the absence of any medical treatment for his serious medical conditions.

When I speak of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali, we are reminded of Canada's taking leadership in 2021, with the "Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations". His case, like the others I will mention, is a case study in how we can lead in making representations on his behalf. I'll close only by saying that all the UN special procedures have come out and called for the immediate and unconditional release of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali.

• (1120)

That brings me to the second political prisoner, and that is the heroic Russian dissident, historian and political prizewinner Vladimir Kara-Murza. Vladimir Kara-Murza first came to Canada in 2011 along with the then leader of the democratic Russian opposition, Boris Nemtsov, to support my initial draft legislation on Magnitsky sanctions. Boris Nemtsov was assassinated outside the Kremlin in 2015.

Vladimir Kara-Murza came and testified before our foreign affairs committee in 2015, calling for Magnitsky sanctions and the like. He went back to Russia and was poisoned. He survived. He came back here again in 2017. He testified again. I was with him at the time. He went back to Russia. Once again, he was the target of an assassination attempt. He survived.

In 2022, he was charged with treason for nothing other than advocating for justice within Russia on behalf of political prisoners and justice for Ukraine. He was sentenced to 25 years for treason. He was released a year and a half ago in a prisoner exchange; Canada played an important role in his advocacy. As we meet today, he is being threatened with imprisonment yet again by Russia.

As I said, we know of two assassination attempts, followed by his imprisonment for treason.

I would also mention Alexei Gorinov, whom I represent as well, who's been serving.... He became the first Moscow city councillor to be imprisoned for anti-Russian slander, for nothing else but supporting justice for Ukraine.

That brings me to China and its assault on the rules-based order—this committee is familiar with it—the mass atrocities targeting the Muslim Uyghurs that have been held to constitute acts of genocide, its dismantling of the democratic regime in Hong Kong, its persecution of the Falun Gong, its menacing of Taiwan and its repression of Tibet. What is not so well known, which brings me to a particular point here, is that China imprisons more political prisoners than any other country in the world.

I want to mention, in this regard, the case and cause of Jimmy Lai. You've heard about it at this committee, so I need not go into it other than to say that Jimmy Lai is imprisoned for affirming the basic foundational Canadian values of media freedom, democracy and promotion of the rule of law. He is in solitary confinement after five years. Here too we seek immediate and unconditional release, also called for by UN special procedures, as his life is at risk as we meet.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Dr. Wang Bingzhang in this regard. He is a Ph.D. graduate from McGill University who formed the overseas democracy China movement in 2002, when I was an MP. He was abducted back to China. He was convicted on the trumped-up charges of both terrorism and treason and sentenced to life imprisonment in solitary confinement, where he languishes today at the risk of death for these reasons. His daughter, Ti-Anna Wang, has taken up his case and cause, and I have been serving as his international legal counsel.

I will close at this point with regard to political prisoners by mentioning the case of Dawit Isaak, a Swedish Eritrean dual citizen, the longest-imprisoned journalist in the world. Along with his fellow journalists, he established a newspaper, Setit, in Eritrea in 1997. They disbanded in 2001. All of them were imprisoned. Many died in detention. We have reason to believe that Dawit Isaak is still alive. I urge those on this committee, who are apostles for media freedom, to take up this case and cause of a dual citizen in the country with the worst press freedom assaults of any country in the world.

I close, Mr. Chairman, by saying that it is our responsibility—I said this as a member of Parliament, and I repeat it and reaffirm it today—to speak on behalf of those who cannot be heard, to bear witness on behalf of those who cannot testify and to act on behalf of those who are putting not simply their livelihood but also their lives on the line.

• (1125)

At times such as these, *qui s'excuse s'accuse*: Whoever remains indifferent indicts him or herself.

I look to this committee for its continuing and exemplary leadership and to undertake the necessary action on behalf of these real champions of human rights.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, honourable Mr. Cotler. That was an excellent presentation. It enlightens all the members and puts on our shoulders a great responsibility to act. We promise you that we will act.

I now invite Madame Veronika Sheldagaieva to take the floor, please.

Veronika Sheldagaieva (Voices of Children): Hello. My name is Veronika Sheldagaieva.

I am from Ukraine, specifically from the city of Kherson, which has been my home city since the start of my life. Unfortunately, it has been occupied for eight months. It's now a city on the front line.

I'm really proud of the fact that I can speak here today. I am really grateful for this opportunity to be here. Now, more than at any time before, the control of the occupied territories is big and horrifying. Children my age, 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds, are becoming victims of forced militarization. People are becoming controlled by messengers, which they must put...and controlled through phones in occupied territories. The Ukrainian language, Ukrainian media and anything connected to helping people, such as volunteering, are politically forbidden. You could be tortured for this.

At this moment, when people are speaking about occupation as a form of peace and a form of...living occupation that is stopping war in Ukraine, I feel it's so important to speak to an international audience and make them aware of the human rights violations that are happening there and that are directly connected to my own story and my personal experience.

I want to talk to you about the non-violent resistance movement that is happening in the occupied territories. At one point, when I was 13 years old, I was standing with a yellow ribbon, which I had cut from my Ukrainian flag, near my old school. I loved this school so much. Back then, I was not able to speak about how I loved my Kherson, how I loved my Ukraine, how I wanted to help my people and how I wanted to volunteer. Back then, it was my hope that tying the ribbon around the school's door would be a form of resistance that I could have at the time.

I started with myself, because I was really uncertain. I had a lot of fear. At that moment, when I didn't know what to do—as many teens right now are experiencing—I started to erase the colonial narratives I had in my head. Unfortunately, I grew up learning, from propaganda news, about how Russia is good and stuff like this. In reality, we saw, with the control over the lack of products in the shops and the control over the schools, that it is not. It took a lot of time to understand what my thinking was and to understand how people around me acted and how much fear they had. I had a lot of time to think back then, because there was no Internet connection. I was basically left with my thoughts. Non-violence was the only instrument I had in my hands to change anything.

I found really big value in finding the Internet in my old school, where I had tied the ribbon. I connected to volunteering. I connected to Ukrainian communities online. This was also for maintaining my mental health, maintaining connections with the outside world and believing that it could end at some point. Hopelessness is

something that basically goes hand in hand with you in occupied territories.

Many people didn't know where I was. There was so much silence. This is something people are experiencing right now. There is silence. There is a ban on words, so much so that you sometimes stop hearing what could be said if you were free, or what other people think, because protests have been abandoned.

At first, a lot of my friends and family came to protests, but when people started to be killed in some protests, they stopped, unfortunately.

● (1130)

Because of the volunteer activity I did, which I tried to keep silent, a woman texted me in the messenger one day, writing that she could see from my Internet activity that I have a pro-Ukrainian position and that I needed to take more safety measures. Of course, I was scared, because a stranger following my contacts somehow knew this. Anyone, then, could do it. I knew what this was leading to, and I was really asking my parents to leave. Fortunately—and yes, it was a dangerous road—we went to Latvia later on, on a one-week trip. This had a lot of parts to it, but that's the reason I am speaking here.

A lot of teens who are still reliant on their parents cannot leave, speak at or join such conferences. I really want to mention the number of them waiting for people to say they exist and that they're not forgotten. This is the thing that makes us keep going and keep believing. There is still so much resistance from teens in the occupied territories, in the schools, to the extent that there are books written by occupational authorities on how to prevent “extremism”. By extremists, they mean those speaking the Ukrainian language or reading anything connected to Ukraine. That's the reason we need to keep going.

Ukraine cares about those people. They are people who are waiting and who have Ukrainian identity, which is really important to them. It's so important to acknowledge this from the outside when we see the news and propaganda coming from Russian sites.

You have a lot more knowledge than I do—I'm a high school student—about human rights conventions, laws and everything serious. For me, human rights are simply those you can feel in your life. You can understand what human rights are once you know how the lack of them can come on fast. It comes on very unexpectedly sometimes. You understand how many rights you had before, how freedom of speech is something that changes you and your personality, and how freedom of expression, association and helping others.... For me, helping others is one thing that keeps me going. You need to understand that it's important but not a given thing, sometimes.

I still have the yellow ribbon. In the place where I am now, I can freely have my Ukrainian flag with me.

Thank you.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Sheldagaieva.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Now the floor is open. If anyone would like to ask questions of Mr. Cotler or Madame Veronika, please feel free.

Madame Vandenberg.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you so much.

I just have to say that I am feeling incredibly inspired right now, Veronika, by your testimony. I'm sure people have used words like "bravery" and "courage"; I would say "incredible strength of character". The fact that you've been through what you've been through, and now you're still speaking out for those who still don't have freedom.... There's an incredible amount of wisdom in your words. I will come back to you with a question.

However, I want to start with you, Professor Cotler, because you have been.... This is recognition, of course, of a lifetime of achievement in human rights: If there's anyone who has dedicated his life to human rights, it is you. I have, of course, been inspired by you for many years. One thing that you've done today, but you've been doing since Nelson Mandela...is to speak out for human rights defenders who are imprisoned or who are in danger.

There have been many global networks. Of course, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre, which you founded, does a lot of this work, but we also had global networks such as the World Movement for Democracy, which convened 400 human rights defenders, every two years, in a conference. It was a lifeline. We heard, from Veronika, what one Internet connection and lifeline can be for a human rights defender who is being silenced. However, we also know that part of the secretariat was in the National Endowment for Democracy, and, earlier this year, it was defunded and disbanded.

I wonder if you could talk a bit about what is happening to human rights networks, how vital those lifelines of global networks are for human rights defenders and what the international community should do in order to maintain those connections. Without them, many human rights defenders would disappear, be imprisoned or worse. Could you talk a bit about the impact? Of course, they were defunded in Washington in March. I wonder whether you could talk about the loss of networks like the World Movement for Democracy and what we can do now.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You mentioned a really crucial challenge that we are now facing. I just spoke yesterday with Carl Gershman, who headed up the National Endowment for Democracy for 40 years with the joint support of the Senate and the House. He too lamented the undercutting of support.

I mentioned that the United States, which had been the linchpin of the rules-based international order and had been the linchpin, if you will, of the World Movement for Democracy, has in fact been upending the international Community of Democracies—the alliance of the Community of Democracies—through defunding and other measures that it has taken.

I'm pleased to say that, with Carl Gershman and with the Forum 2000 Foundation—the Czech-based convenor of Community of Democracies and the like—we are seeking to revive the World Movement for Democracy. We had, at one point, a declaration for democratic renewal back in 2017, and I was one of the signatories. We are now seeking to mobilize the various signatories, NGOs and democracy organizations that create a critical mass of advocacy for democracy.

This relates to the question of justice for Ukraine. One of the initiatives—as part of this advocacy for, and defence of, democracy—is to set up a coalition with respect to justice for Ukraine. We are working on that together with the core group of countries that helped establish a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine.

I can't underscore more the importance of parliamentarians in the World Movement for Democracy, whether it be the Parliamentarians for Global Action or the Inter-Parliamentary Union. We have to engage parliamentarians to be at the forefront of the struggle for the defence and protection of democracy and democrats.

Just the other day in Russia, they disbanded Human Rights Watch. Yet again, this is not just the defunding but the disbanding and criminalization of organizations operating on behalf of democracy and human rights. Here again, parliamentarians can take the lead in our promotion and protection of democracy and democrats.

• (1140)

Anita Vandenberg: May I respond to that?

The Chair: Yes, please go ahead.

Anita Vandenberg: I'll be short, Mr. Chair.

I thank you very much for informing the committee about some of the work to try to revive the World Movement for Democracy. I wonder if this could perhaps be studied further by our committee, because I think we'd like to know more about it.

Also, this is a consensus committee; these human rights issues are not partisan issues, and I note that the World Movement for Democracy and the National Endowment for Democracy, in the U.S., were always bipartisan. I think some of the members on the committee have experience working in that area, regardless of political stripe.

Thank you so much for that.

I know you chaired this committee. When I chaired the committee in 2018, you told me that it was the most honourable thing you had done in Parliament and that it's the conscience of Parliament. I wonder if you could reflect on what our committee can do to advance some of these files.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You're correct in saying that I regarded my involvement on this committee as the most important experience of my 15 years in Parliament, because I saw this committee, as I mentioned, as being at the forefront of the struggle for democracy, justice and human rights. The hearing today with regard to, among other things, the political prisoners, whom I see as champions of human rights, is yet another example of the role this committee can play.

I would support the initiative of having hearings devoted to democracy promotion and protection, as well as the role parliamentarians can play. I think the National Endowment for Democracy is a case study in which the issues of promotion and protection of democracy both domestically and abroad had a bipartisan consensus. Regrettably, that has broken down now under the Trump administration. It is still here in our Canadian Parliament. It is very expressive in this committee.

The committee could undertake at this point, as part of our commitment to the World Movement for Democracy, hearings about how we can best promote and protect democracy and democracy's defenders, and could invite people like Carl Gershman, Larry Diamond at Stanford University and others at the forefront of this to testify before this committee—as well as former political prisoners themselves.

The other two witnesses today are illustrations of that, both Nazanin and Veronika—a very heroic, inspirational figure. To have a young woman like that testify also attests to the resilience of the Ukrainian people, who, as we meet, are yet again under assault from Russian drones and missiles but have this continued resilience, which arises from their commitment to democracy. That's where it all begins with the Ukrainian people. Veronika is really a dramatic but compelling case study of young people's involvement and commitment to democracy.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cotler.

We'll go to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our fabulous witnesses today. Unfortunately, Ms. Boniadi cannot be with us, but the three people we recognize today represent three generations. It's great to see, and it gives hope for the future to know that this will always be perpetuated, that there will always be people standing up for international human rights. It warms our hearts and keeps us going.

I want to thank the members of the committee for agreeing to hold this special meeting in which we recognize champions. It was complicated, but everyone finally agreed. I really appreciate that.

I'm also proud to say that you're my mentor, Mr. Cotler. I'm a Quebec separatist and I'm proud to say loud and clear that, when it comes to international human rights, my mentor is a former Liberal minister. I think it's extremely important that I say it. This proves that the issue of international human rights has no political stripes or partisan orientation; it rises above all that. In my opinion, it's important to say it and say it very loudly.

I will address Mr. Cotler first, but I will turn to you right after, Ms. Sheldagaieva.

Mr. Cotler, you talked about the United States. If we look at what's happening in the world right now, we see that a geopolitical upheaval is taking place. Do you have any concerns about Canada's current approach to international human rights?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I would like to start by saying that I had the pleasure of working with your father, Gilles Duceppe, when he was a member of Parliament. We cared about a common cause; we worked together to fight for human rights.

As I said, we are at a historical inflection moment. Yes, I have concerns. I think it's important, if not urgent, that Parliament and members of Parliament lead the democracy movement.

I have concerns, because I don't see the commitment that's needed right now. We have to realize that this is a crucial moment. We must speak for those who cannot speak and defend those who are unable to protect human rights as they see fit. As I was saying earlier: Whoever remains indifferent indicts himself or herself.

This is an important moment, and it's an opportunity to lead the movement for democracy, the movement for political prisoners and the movement for the pursuit of justice.

I don't believe that the government or the opposition has made it a priority to fight for human rights and justice.

● (1150)

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, allow me to ask a question of Ms. Sheldagaieva, to whom I extend very distinguished greetings.

Ms. Sheldagaieva, we are really proud that you are with us today. Your background includes humanitarian support, justice and international advocacy.

In your opinion, what are the most powerful tools that will enable you or already enable you to speak for the children who are survivors of the current conflict in Ukraine? As parliamentarians who are on a continent across the ocean, how could we use these tools to help you, to help your cause?

[English]

Veronika Sheldagaieva: Thank you for your question.

I guess the most powerful tools actually come from collaboration. For example, when projects are realized by organizations such as Voices of Children, which helped me to basically start communicating with you, and when there is.... Voices of Children was not officially involved with me when I was in the occupied territories, but was factually involved. It is one of the most powerful instruments when you are connected online and when you're talking about how you can...support yourself back here and what you can do to maintain your education, your identity, etc. For now, when I'm talking about the instruments I have to support others, this is also really tied to the NGO sector and my work with educational NGOs to close the educational gaps that, unfortunately, come with war.

When we are talking about a lot of international support for Ukrainian civil society, this is one of the most interesting outcomes of the resilience and effort that Ukrainian people put into volunteering. Volunteering in Ukraine or civil society work is usually much more intense than, for example, what I saw when I was involved with my European colleagues.

This is a huge culture that started a long time ago through our history. It peaked with the revolution of dignity and then grew with the full-scale invasion. This is one of the biggest instruments that exist to solve humanitarian issues, maintain education and help people with their mental health, because mental health is...something that affects every person. It does not depend on whether a person is in occupied territories or is hearing shelling in the night or drones. Support for mental health exists and international support for it is also growing.

Some of my friends from abroad are coming here and becoming psychologists for the Ukrainian people, and I'm still really grateful for their understanding and their connection. For me, human communication is also an instrument, because it is, first, how you know others' problems and, second, how you help solve some of them.

I hope this gives you some answers.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Majumdar, please.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Professor Cotler, Minister Cotler, my friend, I've had the privilege of knowing you for over a decade. I should tell you that Natan Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy*, which is a book I think you had a significant hand in, was formative in my own career from a very early age.

I commend you, sir, for the work you've done. I recognize that your beautiful family is here as well: your wife, Ariela, and your daughter Gila. It's a family sacrifice to have contributed so much to the cause of human rights, probably sometimes even at the expense of the ruling class in Canada, whether it's Conservative or Liberal. The inconveniences that you present in this cause are respected by

all. It's a remarkable achievement that you hold the respect of so many across the House and across so much time.

I thank you for indulging me with a bit of a preamble.

I was thinking, as I was watching you provide your testimony, how much has been shaped in international humanitarian law by institutions like the International Court of Justice and the ICC and how much work has been put in through the special rapporteur's office exposing the kind of repression that authoritarians had been abusing their people with the world over. We see how, particularly in the context of the last decade or so, Russia, China and Iran have all taken advantage of these international institutions to disproportionately position themselves in such a way that they are participating in a real inversion of our values and how we assemble to enhance and expand those values for all human beings. In the last couple of years especially, it's become pronounced.

I wanted to turn to you and ask you this: Given the range of experience you've had with success, from Nelson Mandela onward to Vladimir Kara-Murza, more recently, and all those you championed, like Jimmy Lai, etc., what's your observation about those institutions that you've played such a big part in building?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I might give you an illustration of how these institutions can work and where they haven't worked. It is a fascinating example of how Parliament played a role.

This has to do with my taking up the case and cause of Anatoly Sharansky, who was one of the fathers of the Moscow Helsinki Group—we're meeting on the 50th anniversary. A lot of us have forgotten about the Helsinki Final Act. Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act talks about the right to know and act upon one's rights. We, in Canada, were some of the main architects of the Helsinki Final Act and of advocacy for political prisoners.

Sharansky was arrested in 1977 and was then convicted of treason, anti-Soviet slander and agitation. There was a trial in 1979. I went at the behest of his family, facilitated by the Canadian government, to defend him in a Moscow court. Before I could get there to help defend him, I was arrested and expelled.

He was released years later, in 1986, a year after Gorbachev became the president of the Soviet Union. In 1987, I had an opportunity to be on a panel with Gorbachev. I said to him, "You became president of the Soviet Union in 1985. Sharansky was released in early 1986. What role did you have in that, if I may ask?"

He told me something very fascinating that engages Canada and the Canadian Parliament; it may shine a spotlight on a lot of what we're talking about. He said, "I was the secretary of agriculture in the Soviet Union in 1983. The first overseas trip I made was to Canada to appear before the Canadian parliamentary committee on agriculture. They asked me questions about agriculture. Then, all of a sudden, they started to ask me about this Sharansky. I didn't know anything about what they were talking about. I left the Canadian parliamentary buildings, and there was a massive demonstration for this Sharansky. I spent the weekend with your minister of agriculture. Yes, we spoke about agriculture, but he kept bringing up this Sharansky case. I then became president of the Soviet Union, so I ordered up his file. Yes, he was a troublemaker, but he wasn't a criminal."

Then came the key point. Gorbachev said, "It was costing us. It was costing us politically. It was costing us economically. It was costing us diplomatically to keep him in prison, so I ordered his release in our self-interest." That became, for me, a fundamental advocacy principle. The community of the axis of authoritarians—Russia, China and Iran—won't release political prisoners for reasons of justice. Yes, we must point out injustices as reasons, but they will release them when it is in their self-interest. That's the tipping point. This has been my experience of the tipping point.

I might add, parenthetically but not unimportantly, that the political prisoners who were released and with whom I was involved always had a spouse advocating on their behalf. Whether it was Avital Sharansky, who came here and met with Pierre Elliott Trudeau, or Winnie Mandela making the case, spouses play a crucial role. We have to join the spouses, but we also have to join particularly those who may not have a spouse arguing on their behalf in order to bring about the tipping point. I use the Sharansky case as a case study of the role of parliamentarians in this regard.

• (1200)

I'll close by saying that we are right to have these concerns, because we could be at the forefront of advocacy for political prisoners. I don't see us, at this point, at that forefront. I would like to see us at the forefront. It's crucial. It's important with respect to domestic economic policies and the like. However, I don't see us at the forefront of the struggle for human rights, the defence of political prisoners and the defence of democracy.

The Chair: Thank you, honourable Mr. Cotler.

Our last question goes to Madame Anju Dhillon.

Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I'm sorry. It should be Mr. Majumdar's second question.

Go ahead, Mr. Majumdar.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: It's a rare opportunity to engage with both these individuals. I appreciate having the second question, Chair.

Veronika, if I could turn to you, your testimony in the last Parliament was moving, to say the least. You have a sense of optimism from Kherson, of all places, which is really quite remarkable. Having you appear here today to encourage you in how you advocate

for Ukrainian children was a key part for all parties and all members of this committee.

Let me ask you this. With the platform you have here, if in your mind's eye you could say something to Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin, if there were a message you wanted him to hear loudly and clearly, based on the experiences you've had to endure for years now and on what you'd like to expect for your own future, what would you tell him?

• (1205)

Veronika Sheldagaieva: Thank you for your question.

I hope that I will never see this person in my life, but if I were to address him, I would say there is not enough power in this world and not enough coercion to make everyone like me—who has experienced occupation and who is still there—give up. There will never be a point when everyone is compliant just because there is so much propaganda and so much violence going on.

I feel and I hope that at some point they are going to understand this. Also, it is not only them. The world in general needs to understand that it's not only a matter of time. It's also a matter of the motivation of people, and Ukrainian people have a lot of motivation—honestly.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Dhillon, please.

Anju Dhillon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to our witnesses for being here.

Veronika, you've empowered women, and you've empowered adults. You've given strength to those who were ready to give up. Thank you for the work you've done. I really pray to God that you keep having this strength and this uplifted spirit to carry on the work you're doing.

If you can, quickly please tell us about the people your age or even anybody who has come to you and talked about how you've helped them move along and empowered them through this struggle.

Veronika Sheldagaieva: I mostly work with education directly when I'm helping. The people with whom I worked have said that they were able to go back to Ukrainian university after leaving the occupied territories, learn in the Ukrainian language, study and have their career.

Also in Ukraine, unfortunately, because of the war and because of natural processes, there is a shortage of teachers. This is also what I'm working with. A lot of teens and young people have talked about the fact that they chose this career because they see its importance and see how they can shape the views of people around them when they share information they feel is worth sharing through the educational system, etc.

This is something that keeps me going and keeps me optimistic about the fact that this is the right direction.

Anju Dhillon: Honourable Mr. Cotler, it's incredible to be sitting here in front of you. You are also one of my role models. Being from Montreal as well, you were one of the motivations for me to go to law school. Thank you for empowering many others who came after you.

I don't want to take up too much time. Your beautiful family is behind you, and often this kind of work puts fear in them, fear for your safety. As you said—and I'm sure you have dozens of other such stories to share with us, but there's a lack of time—you were detained. Thankfully you were sent back, I guess you could say, unlike the Eritrean journalists you spoke about.

From the time you started this work until today, did you expect that things would look as if they're going from bad to worse? Personally, I feel sometimes that despite the Internet, social media, protests and everything going live within seconds, where everyone can gather and there can be public and worldwide outrage, these countries or agencies—whatever you want to call them—continue to commit human rights abuses, detaining people for no reason and abusing freedoms. I personally thought that with the Internet and the ways to expose these things, there would be an element of shame in the hearts of these people the world is watching. I don't know if I'm explaining it well or if you can understand my question.

Do you feel that it doesn't make a difference with all of this technology and these ways to expose people, dictators and abusers? What is your take from the time you started this work until today? Do you feel that things have gone from bad to worse, or do we just have to keep working to fight for the rights of others?

• (1210)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: It cuts in both directions. I remember that when I first started this work, we didn't have the panoply of UN special procedures, the ICC or the whole corpus of international human rights, humanitarian and international criminal law. We have a panoply of remedies we never had before. We also have an information highway we never had before.

As we've learned, while the information highway can transport the best, it can also transport the worst. Also, we're increasingly living in a post-truth, postliterate, misinformation, disinformation arena. You have these competing dynamics.

I think we can take heart from the testimony of courageous young women like Veronika and like Nazanin Boniadi, who's not here today. I take inspiration from these political prisoners, who, as I said, are putting their lives on the line.

Russia, if I can just mention it, is a case study because it's involved in both massive domestic repression and externalized aggression with regard to the aggression in Ukraine.

There are initiatives we can take that we never had before, but we have now. Let me just very quickly, in one-liners, mention them.

First, after we were advocating as part of a high-level working group, in June, we finally established—by way of agreement between the Council of Europe and Ukraine—the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. Now that we've estab-

lished it, we have to operationalize it and implement it effectively. Canada can play a role. We need to appoint special prosecutors. We need to appoint judges. We need to get other state parties from the global south, so it isn't seen as just a Eurocentric tribunal.

This is a very important tribunal to hold Putin and military and political leaders accountable for the crime of aggression. When I've been talking a lot about all the mass violations of human rights, regrettably, they've been accompanied by a culture of impunity. We have to, in fact, begin to initiate accountability. The special tribunal is very important in that regard.

Second, as we meet, Russia's mass atrocities under Putin effectively constitute acts of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. We have to hold the Putin regime accountable. We have obligations under that convention.

Third—and this is what Veronika has spoken about—I can speak about young Ukrainian children. We are witnessing both the deportation and the indoctrination of Ukrainian children. The ICC—it's available—has issued arrest warrants in that matter, but we have to, in fact, enlarge that advocacy.

Fourth, there is sexual violence against women.

Fifth, there is torture and other forms of inhumane and degrading treatment.

Sixth, there are mass casualty crimes. We talk about missiles and drones; as we meet, there's the criminalization of NGOs in Russia where there are no NGOs left. With respect to these critical mass violations, we can engage in a critical mass of advocacy. Parliamentarians are particularly suited to making representations directly to human rights violators, in what Dr. Andrei Sakharov used to call the “mobilization of shame against the human rights violators”. We can exercise our parliamentary interventions, whether they be take-note debates or S.O. 31s. There are initiatives that we can take internationally, and I mentioned Parliamentarians for Global Action, the IPU and the like. There is the use of UN special procedures, the special international court.

• (1215)

In other words, we have a panoply of remedies at our disposal. We just need to invoke them, utilize them, engage them and create a critical mass of advocacy. I've always looked to parliamentarians and this committee to be at the forefront.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, the floor is yours.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Cotler, it's sometimes difficult to strike a balance between public pressure and quiet diplomacy. As parliamentarians, it's not always easy to find that balance when it comes to defending people who are unjustly imprisoned. We must always remember the main objective, which is that the person whose file we are carrying be released.

I don't know how you can help us: How can parliamentarians strike that balance between public and media pressure, and quieter diplomacy, when the time comes to fight for someone who is unjustly imprisoned?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: It's a combination. It's not a question of choosing between a public initiative or a private initiative. It's more a matter of finding the best time and the best means. In my opinion, it starts with private diplomacy, but if that doesn't work, we have to rely on public pressure. In my opinion, we always have to strike a balance between the two; that's how we can succeed. In my experience, in the end, it's almost always necessary to make a public commitment in order to be successful in having political prisoners released.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Majumdar, you have the floor, please.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much, Chair.

The long arms of Beijing, the Kremlin and Tehran—as you mentioned earlier, Professor Cotler—have participated in a kind of transnational repression emboldened by technology that I think warrants bit of unpacking, if you have the time, sir.

You've encountered this in your own life, and it has been widely reported here. You are somebody who has been a proponent for human rights in one of those foreign regimes. Your family had to make big adjustments at the time.

Conservative deputy leader Melissa Lantsman also had to endure that. These are two politicians, but we have communities across this country and communities around the world that are subject to the advent of transnational repression.

First, how seminal is this as an issue that this committee could spend some time reflecting on in the future, in terms of how free societies work together to avoid that type of foreign interference? Second, what do you think ought to be some of the key things we should concern ourselves with when looking at issues of transnational repression?

• (1220)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: If we look at what I would say is an inflection moment, and we take the three major proponents of the axis of authoritarianism—Russia, China and Iran—we see they are each and all engaged in massive domestic and transnational repression and, indeed, assassination.

When we speak about the question of transnational repression and assassination, the head of CSIS, Dan Rogers, reported just two weeks ago that the questioning of transnational repression and assassination has now resulted in Iran's targeting of Canadians, not only for transnational repression but also for assassination. This came from our own head of CSIS. It is something that we have been, in fact, reporting upon. I reported last year about IRGC sleeper cells in Canada that get activated and use domestic criminal gangs as proxies to carry out their insidious plots.

For this committee, the issue of transnational repression and assassination would be appropriate subject matter; we should take the necessary initiatives to combat it in that regard. When the Hogue commission was established, if you recall, it was established with regard to foreign electoral interference, but foreign electoral interference was but one component. Ironically enough, when the committee was established and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre came before it, with a young lawyer, Noah Lew, testifying on our behalf, one thing we noted was that, while reference was made to transnational repression by Russia, China and even India, there was no reference made, in the initial framing, to Iran. Iran was perhaps the most insidious in that regard.

What we have to realize is the conflation between the massive domestic repression.... As we meet, I have to say that we are witnessing, to take as a case study, unprecedented mass domestic repression in Iran, with an unprecedented level of executions. I have not seen anything like it in all the years that I have been involved, and the empirical data is there. We see this massive domestic repression, unprecedented externalized aggression, transnational repression and assassination, which make those who stand up, the political prisoners, all the more brave and courageous, whether the political prisoners are in Iran, Russia or China.

In each of these cases—and I close with this—we have what I would call sevenfold threats. With regard to Iran, we have a nuclear threat, a ballistic missile threat, a hegemonic threat—it's the leading state sponsor of terrorism—a genocidal threat and a cybersecurity threat. Of course, as I mentioned, there is the massive repression of political prisoners. It's a critical mass of repression. If you take China as an example, there's the targeting of Uyghurs, with mass atrocities constituting genocide and the dismantling of democracy. One can go on.

In each of these cases, you have sevenfold threats, a critical mass of threats, which warrant a critical mass of advocacy on our behalf, inspired by the political prisoners in each of these countries. However, as I said, transnational repression and assassination have emerged as major threats to the rules-based international order.

• (1225)

It's the conflation of the two. It's the axis of authoritarianism or the axis of evil as a case study, as a looking glass, and it is something that, as the CSIS head has showed, Canada has now become a prime target. In addition to what I would call the critical mass of threat—there is the misinformation, the disinformation and the targeting—you have a critical mass of targets.

I say a critical mass of targets because they target the leaders of diaspora communities here. It could be the Iranian diaspora community or the like. It could be journalists or human rights defenders who are targeted. It's a critical mass of threat, and it's a critical mass of targets. We need a critical mass of advocacy in response.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Vandenbeld, please go ahead.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Forgive me, Mr. Chair. I think I get a second part.

Is it okay if I just share the second part of my time with Madam Kronis?

The Chair: Okay.

Madame Kronis.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thanks very much for giving me a chance to speak this morning.

Mr. Cotler—Irwin—you were one of the giants of my childhood. With a number of people and a community, you accomplished incredible things, and in many cases, I was privileged to be in the room or to be carrying bags, taking notes and being a small part of it.

What was incredible about that upbringing was that I saw you accomplish things as a group. You fought for Soviet Jewry, for Syrian Jewry and for Ethiopian Jewry, and you achieved the goals. I learned from you and from your compatriots when I was growing up that we could start organizations, fight for things, achieve the goals that we were looking to achieve, disband the organizations and move on to the next thing.

When I became an adult, I took that into fights, such as the fight for equal marriage in this country, a fight in which, again, we were privileged to be able to start organizations, fight for things, achieve our goals and then disband the organizations.

In the world we live in today, this feels harder and harder. It feels increasingly remote. I feel as though we start organizations, and instead of achieving our goals, we look for justice for wrongs that are done. We have an increasingly legal international relations, and we have people who are stuck in places all over the world as hostages or as people who aren't able to get on with their lives, have childhoods, and grow up and do the things we've been able to do.

To some degree, do you think the world has changed? What do you think has changed? Is there any hope that we can go back to advocating for things, achieving our goals and disbanding organizations? It's been a while since I've had the privilege of disbanding an organization because it has achieved its goals.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you for the question.

I want to say that seeing you here today brings back memories of my close relationship with your dad; it's a blessed memory. We were on different sides of the political spectrum—Liberal and Conservative—but we worked together for a common cause with regard to the struggles you mentioned. This is why I believe in matters of human rights and the pursuit of justice. We have to work together in common cause.

I have my family here, as you mentioned. My wife has always been in the trenches with me—though not always on the same side, I have to acknowledge. For the greater good and the public good, we work together on a common cause. In the last federal election, we had a Liberal sign and a Conservative sign outside because we were advocating for different candidates, but both candidates on whose behalf we were advocating, Liberal and Conservative, were excellent. That's the kind of thing the greater public good can do to bring us together in a common cause.

I'm pleased to have my daughter here as I see you and remember your father. I'm delighted to see that my daughter has taken up the case and cause of human rights and is working as CEO of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre.

All this brings me back to early lessons. It was my late father who taught me, before I understood the profundity of the message I will share with you, that the pursuit of justice is equal to all the other commandments combined. He said that must be my life's mission and must be my legacy. My mother, who would hear my father saying this to me, said that if you want to pursue justice, you have to understand that you have to feel the injustice about you. You have to go in and about your community, feel and combat the injustice. Otherwise, the pursuit of justice remains a theoretical abstraction.

We have to be there in the trenches, pursuing justice by combating the injustice. That has to be our common cause.

It's easy to get cynical sometimes, when we see the crimes of indifference and the conspiracies of silence around us, but it's our responsibility to shatter walls of indifference, to break apart conspiracies of silence and to see how political prisoners are the torchbearers and the lodestars of the struggle for human rights in our time—and take our inspiration from them.

As it's always said, it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Let's all try to be the torchbearers for human rights. That's what this committee has always been, and it is how these political prisoners are the real champions of human rights who inspire us.

• (1230)

Tamara Kronis: If my father were here, I know one thing he would say is to thank your wife for giving him hope.

I have a very short question for Veronika.

Veronika, if this war ends, what would you like to do with your life?

Veronika Sheldagaieva: This is a really philosophical question, and sometimes it doesn't let me sleep.

I am really interested in the intersection between the development of society and education. In my experience of both living through war and now being in an international school that focuses on peace building, I see how much it's not only about knowledge but also about how we build society and what we want from society.

In my life, I would like to create spaces and build them for people to learn how to advocate for their rights, along with the fact that they're receiving information and an understanding of who they are and what their role in society might be.

Also, in Ukraine, there is so much potential, and I really want to work there. When I was in Latvia, I understood that, yes, the European Union is an important place and is doing good stuff, but the only place where I see my future is in Ukraine, building our society and making it better.

The Chair: Thank you, Veronika.

Our last question goes to Ms. Vandenbeld, please.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I would like to follow up with Veronika.

I firmly believe that everything you set your mind to, you will achieve. I have one more question for you.

You talked about hopelessness in occupied territories. You talked about silence. I wonder if you could tell us why it's so important for any peace agreement to keep the territorial integrity of Ukraine so that people in those occupied territories will be able to have hope that they will still be part of Ukraine.

• (1235)

Veronika Sheldagaieva: I guess it's simply because, when people see injustice, they hope for a natural reaction of the world to say, yes, it is injustice. Lots of people, as I did, were losing general hope in the fact that something can be good, not only in terms of politics, but just that good exists.

I know it's a philosophical concept. It's something that can be really vague, but in this case, it's really specific. It's really about the fact that peace is also about speaking up and about the opportunity for people to choose who they are, to self-determine and to not

have others decide on their behalf to whom territory belongs, but reflect what people feel and the decisions they make.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Vandenberg.

On behalf of this subcommittee and all the members, staff and interpreters, we would like to thank our two great defenders of human rights.

You will have a page in the history of defending human rights. Your great efforts are profoundly appreciated by me, my family, all members and, I believe, people around the world. Thank you very much. May God give you a long life, health and good effort to continue to do the greatest job on the planet.

Is it the will of the subcommittee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

Nazanin Boniadi remarks — Subcommittee on Int Human Rights - Canada Dec 1, 2025:

Mr. Chair, Honourable Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. I'm honoured to be recognized alongside fellow human rights defenders, and grateful for your leadership in shining a light where it's most urgently needed.

I was born in Iran shortly after the 1979 revolution. I grew up witnessing repression's impact on my own family, and I have spent nearly two decades highlighting abuses, advocating for political prisoners, and working alongside Iran's civil society—inside and outside the country—to advance human dignity. Today, Iran faces one of the most severe human rights crises anywhere in the world.

More than 1,600 people have been executed in 2025 alone—an unprecedented pace that makes the Islamic Republic the world's leading executioner per capita. Protesters, ethnic and religious minorities, and individuals tried in expedited, opaque courts are killed after coerced confessions, torture, and the denial of due process. This is not justice; it's state terror clothed in law.

Women and girls remain primary targets of this machinery of control. Compulsory-veiling laws carry escalating fines, asset seizures, travel bans, business closures, and prison sentences of up to ten years. Even as the economy collapses, the state devotes hundreds of millions of dollars to enforcing the hijab—prioritizing control over women's bodies above feeding its citizens or keeping them safe. This repression has deep roots. One of the regime's first

actions was to dismantle the Family Protection Act, abolishing women's rights to equitable divorce and custody, lowering the marriage age for girls from 18 to 9, and returning family law to religion courts. Today, Iranian women have fewer rights than their grandmothers did—yet those same women have become the regime's greatest threat. They continue to defy the compulsory hijab en masse, not because the regime has reformed, but because they are unstoppable.

Their courage is exemplified by women who have paid an unbearable price. Fatemeh Sepehri, a prominent political activist, has been cumulatively sentenced to more than three decades in prison—much of it for “insulting” the leadership or “propaganda against the regime”—since she called for the resignation of the Supreme Leader. She has been detained since 2022, including in solitary confinement, and denied adequate medical care despite serious heart problems. Zeinab Jalalian, a Kurdish women's rights activist, has been imprisoned for the last seventeen years. Arrested in 2008, tried within minutes without a lawyer, sentenced to death for “enmity against God” and later sentenced to life, she has endured repeated transfers, denial of healthcare, and prolonged isolation. Fariba Kamalabadi, a Bahá'í human rights defender and mother of three, spent a decade in prison beginning in 2008, only to be rearrested in 2022 and sentenced to another ten years in 2023—reflecting the systematic persecution of the Bahá'í community. And Nobel Laureate Narges Mohammadi, separated from her children for over eleven years and imprisoned for more than a decade, recently requested a passport simply to see them. The regime's response was a permanent travel ban.

Mothers have always been at the heart of Iran's struggle for justice. The elderly Gohar Eshghi—known to many as “the mother of Iran”—has sought accountability for her slain son despite relentless intimidation. And she is far from alone. Across the country, the mothers of killed protestors continue to demand

truth despite threats, surveillance, and incarceration. Their perseverance reminds us that courage does not fade with age. It becomes a moral inheritance.

Nor does the repression spare Iran's youth. Student activist Bitā Shafiei was arrested on November 13th, held in solitary confinement, and denied access to her family. Her mother, Maryam Abbasi Nikoo, has also been detained. Their fate remains uncertain. These women are not only victims of an unjust system; they are its moral mirror. Their courage exposes the truth: when law becomes a weapon, resistance is the only path to justice.

And we must not forget Iran's brave men. Dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi, tortured and imprisoned for two years, continues to speak truth at immense personal risk. And Omid Sarlak, a young activist in his twenties, was recently found shot to death after posting a video in which he burned a photo of the Supreme Leader.

The intention of censorship, torture, forced confessions, and digital surveillance is simple: to break the will of the people. But forty-six years of repression have failed to extinguish the spirit of Iranians. If anything, they have fortified it.

All of this unfolds against the backdrop of converging environmental, economic, and political crises. Iran is experiencing its worst drought in more than sixty years. Entire cities are approaching water scarcity thresholds. Recent fires have engulfed UNESCO-listed natural sites, further eroding Iran's ecological heritage. Tehran's air pollution has reached life-threatening levels, forcing school closures and hospital warnings. Air quality monitors now classify the capital as one of the most polluted cities in the world. As the activist Sepideh Qolliyan recently wrote: "We can't breathe. We have no air, no water, no life."

Even the Islamic Republic's own president has said that relocating the capital from Tehran has become "unavoidable" because transferring water from the Persian Gulf would be prohibitively expensive—an admission of decades of mismanagement and corruption.

And while ordinary Iranians face suffocating restrictions online, recent revelations on X exposed thousands of "white SIM card" accounts—special, unrestricted mobile lines used by officials, state media figures, and politically connected individuals. These accounts bypass censorship entirely to smear dissidents and shape narratives, while ordinary citizens risk arrest simply for posting or sharing information. This digital double standard mirrors a larger strategy: the regime stays in power by engineering divisions—within Iran, across its diaspora, and throughout the democratic world. Its cyber army targets opponents so that no voice becomes strong enough to challenge the status quo. Its partnerships with authoritarian regimes aim to fragment democratic alliances. And its propaganda exploits our freedoms to manipulate political discourse beyond its borders.

Independent global indices paint a consistent picture. Iran ranks 176th out of 180 countries on the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, and remains among the world's largest jailers of journalists. It ranks 145th out of 148 countries on the 2025 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report. It is listed among the world's most corrupt and least transparent economies, and continues to suffer one of the highest rates of brain drain.

Yet despite all of this, the courage of Iranian civil society has never been stronger. Since September 2022, a new generation has risen with extraordinary moral clarity. Your solidarity matters to them. Canada's leadership on the annual UN resolution on Iran, your support for the UN fact-finding mission and the Special Rapporteur, and your feminist foreign policy—which helps advance the

recognition of gender apartheid as a crime under international law—have all made a meaningful difference. Your recent designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity is a crucial step, and the expulsion of regime agents helps protect dissidents within your borders. Thank you for heeding our calls.

I encourage you to go further. Use universal jurisdiction to prosecute perpetrators of atrocity crimes. Establish a dedicated immigration pathway to bring at least 200 at-risk Iranians to safety each year—while ensuring that their oppressors do not enter Canada to harass or silence them.

The recognition you extend today is not simply an honour. It is a message to those fighting for freedom in Iran—journalists, students, workers, artists, environmentalists, prisoners of conscience, survivors of the regime’s brutalities, families of the slain—that their bravery is seen, their dignity matters, and they are not alone.

My commitment, and the commitment of countless Iranian activists around the world, is to continue documenting abuses, amplifying the voices of those inside the country, and working toward mechanisms of accountability that protect the vulnerable and deter future crimes. The people of Iran have shown extraordinary resilience in the face of extraordinary repression. I stand here today because I believe—as they do—that a future rooted in freedom, equality, and human rights is not only possible, but inevitable.

This recognition belongs to them.

Thank you.

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