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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Ahmed Hussen (York South—Weston—Etobicoke, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 27 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 12, 2026, the committee is meeting on Syria's political transition.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders.

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 make a selection for the appropriate channel for interpretation, floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the ear-piece and select the desired channel.

All comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the first hour.

From the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we have Gregory Galligan, ambassador of Canada to Lebanon and Syria, who is joining us today by video conference, and Stefanie McCollum, director general of the Middle East, who is appearing in person.

Welcome to you both.

I would like to thank Ambassador Galligan. We understand that your diplomatic mission is among the most in demand at present, and we really appreciate your participation in today's meeting.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions from members of the committee.

I now invite Ambassador Galligan to make an opening statement.

Gregory Galligan (Ambassador of Canada to Lebanon and Syria, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Chair and honourable members of the committee.

[Translation]

First of all, thank you for the opportunity to provide my views on the transition in Syria.

The study that the committee is conducting is timely, in that Syria has just celebrated the 15th anniversary of the uprising against the repressive Assad regime. With a new transitional government in place, Syria is now in a position to rebuild.

[English]

Canada has consistently backed the Syrian people. We have welcomed more than 100,000 refugees who are now part of our social fabric. We remain a top humanitarian donor, and we continue to pursue accountability for human rights abuses, including in partnership with the Netherlands before the International Court of Justice for violations of the Convention Against Torture.

Syrians are working to build a more peaceful and stable future. President Ahmed al-Sharaa has begun a political and economic transition, including a temporary constitutional framework and transitional government with a more representative legislative body.

Syria has also established a national commission on transitional justice and on missing persons, which are both important steps towards accountability and national reconciliation. Syria's fragility remains of deep concern, however. Sectarian tensions continue to manifest in violence and intimidation affecting minority communities, particularly Alawites, Kurds, Druze and Christians.

[Translation]

Nevertheless, much remains to be done in establishing a more inclusive society and political system. We are encouraging the transitional Syrian government to continue and broaden its efforts. Syria is also looking for support from the international community to deal with the disastrous legacy of chemical weapons and explosive remnants of war, as well as to close displacement camps.

• (1535)

[English]

Syria has largely avoided the current regional conflict, though it has not been untouched. Missiles and drones intercepted over Syrian airspace have resulted in debris falling in multiple areas. The country is also seeing the return of Syrian refugees fleeing Lebanon, with 140,000 returning in the first few weeks of war between Israel and Hezbollah.

The continued conflict poses a risk to Syria's already fragile stability and could worsen an already severe humanitarian situation. Today, 90% of Syrians live in poverty, and 70% require humanitarian assistance.

Syria has been a voice of de-escalation in this conflict, including condemning Iranian attacks and calling for restraint. The Syrian president has publicly supported the Government of Lebanon's decision to disarm Hezbollah, offered Syria's ports and borders to bypass risky trade routes and called for a joint security coordination cell between Levant and Gulf states. In recent months, Syria has also joined the Global Coalition against Daesh, of which Canada is a member.

[Translation]

Syrians are determined to rebuild their country. Those efforts must be led and conducted by Syrians, despite the fact that, according to the World Bank, the reconstruction will require up to \$345 billion.

In order to contribute to the success of the transition, Canada is continuing to work with Syrian authorities, leaders in the diaspora and civil society. As Canada's first ambassador to Syria since 2012, I travel there regularly.

[English]

Canada has recently removed several legislative barriers to engagement with Syria, opening new opportunities for Canadian investors and businesses.

In December 2025, Canada removed Syria from the list of state supporters of terrorism and amended the Criminal Code list of terrorist entities to remove Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS.

These decisions were not taken lightly and were guided by Canada's assessment of evolving conditions on the ground in Syria. They also follow efforts by the Syrian transitional government to advance stability, build a more secure future for its citizens and work alongside international partners to reinforce regional stability and counterterrorism.

On February 18, Canada amended the Syria sanctions regulations to facilitate lawful trade and investment while adding new mechanisms to address human rights violations and destabilization.

[Translation]

As a result, Canada has imposed sanctions on six individuals who took part in the sectarian violence in March 2025 and who financed the Assad regime's programs of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles.

Allow me to conclude by emphasizing that Syria is at a turning point. The transition remains fragile, but the stable progress made this past year means that Canada has an opportunity to support a more peaceful and prosperous future.

[English]

Canada has been among the strongest supporters of the Syrian people and is well positioned to support and to participate in Syria's economic recovery and political transition.

Thank you, Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

I will now open the floor for questions from members, beginning with MP Ziad Aboultaif.

You have six minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Your Excellency, thanks for appearing before the committee.

I hope you're staying safe in Lebanon, along with our members of the embassy in Beirut. We're thinking of you. Our thoughts are with you and everyone there.

Ambassador, Canada has lifted some broad sanctions on Syria, which were placed during the Assad regime. We know that ethnic and religious minorities are under attack by some of the fighters or groups from the government forces. Have you raised that with the regime?

Why would we lift sanctions the way we did after learning that ethnic minorities, religious minorities.... They're not minorities. They refuse to call themselves minorities. We're talking about millions of people, including Alawites, Druze, Kurds and Christians. They are still under attack, and they don't feel safe at all. They are very vulnerable at the moment, and the regime will not assure them of anything.

Why did we lift those sanctions knowing that the regime is still not protecting its own citizens?

• (1540)

Gregory Galligan: Thank you, Member Aboultaif.

First, I'd like to say that, yes, we definitely bring up the government's interactions and the government's approach to minority issues. We've also discussed with the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Syrian Minister of Interior and others the events that happened in March 2025 with the coastal massacres and again in July in Sweida. We have made it very clear that these conducts were not acceptable—more than unacceptable. They have to be fully investigated, and people have to be held accountable for these activities.

In terms of the lifting of sanctions, we did it in two ways. The first was to try to provide economic opportunity to Syrians. As I noted in my opening remarks, 90% of Syrians require some sort of humanitarian support, 70% direct humanitarian support, but 90% are around the poverty line, so it's important to provide economic relief and opportunities for the recovery of the country.

At the same time we did that, we also removed it from the list of state supporters of terrorism, which was also in connection to what was in place in terms of the Syrian regime's connection to Iran and Hezbollah, neither of which is there anymore. We also made decisions to add certain.... We updated the regulations to include human rights abuses and persons who are involved in destabilizing activity. As a condition of those additions, six new persons were sanctioned.

I think the government's approach is best characterized as trying to create space for economic recovery, while also recognizing that the government has further to go in creating tools that will allow us to take steps...or to sanction individuals who violate human rights abuses or conduct themselves in a way that undermines the transition.

Ziad Aboultaif: Ambassador, I assume from your answer that you've raised this issue with the current government there several times. Is that correct?

Gregory Galligan: That's correct.

Ziad Aboultaif: What was the answer of the current government to that?

There were multiple attacks on multiple groups. For example, the Alawites are about two-and-a-half million to three million people. It's the same with the Kurds. The Druze are almost a million people. The Christians are also a large community of over two million people. These are not minorities at all. They were under attack, and the government was part of it.

What would they say to you when you raised this issue? What was the government's excuse for being part of attacking these minorities? What would they say?

Gregory Galligan: The first thing the government has said is that there is no excuse for abuses, for human rights atrocities, for vigilante justice. They have said this.

The other thing the government has commented on is the coastal massacre in March. What they have said is that, at this time.... This was very early in the transition and before command and control procedures were in place. Of course, that doesn't excuse Sweida. I think, by all accounts, Sweida was deeply unacceptable in terms of the conduct of the government and, of course, the casualties.

On Sweida, what I think is different from the coastal massacres is that the government has taken a more robust stance in terms of investigating and trying to hold some of those people to account. I think it was only yesterday or maybe the day before that the government's own findings on the Sweida massacres were released. I can't remember the exact numbers, so you'll have to excuse me, but I think they identified close to 1,000 people who had been killed, the majority being Druze. I think there were 150 Bedouins and also government forces. What they've committed to is naming, taking action and holding those people to account. Again, I think more needs to be done, but I think there are improvements in process from what we saw in March versus July.

In the recent conflict, what we saw in the northeast, diplomats like me, I think, took a lot of time going in, speaking to the government and talking about how the way they proceeded would be determinative in terms of the relationship that could be formed or enhanced between the international community and the Syrian transition government. I don't, by any stretch, think that the conduct and every step in the northeast was perfect, but it was certainly a measured improvement from what we saw in July.

I think also just to close—

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you. We're way over the time. I have to go to the next member.

Gregory Galligan: I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: No problem.

MP Rob Oliphant, you have six minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank Mr. Aboultaif for his really fine questions. I don't think you'll see much daylight between our questioning and Mr. Aboultaif's.

I want to mention four areas. The first is minority rights, following up on his questions. The second is targeted sanctions and the change in the sanctions regulations. The third is the regional conflict and the effect that could have on stability in Syria. The last is on mobility of people.

On minority rights, I think it would be important for this committee to say that we have zero tolerance for the infringement of minority rights in any country, including Canada and Syria. We have grave concerns. Improvement is good, but I think zero tolerance is better. That's just a statement.

What are we as a Canadian government doing to ensure the rights of the Druze, the rights of Alawite, and the rights of the Kurdish people, who have fought and given their lives for us in their fight against terrorism in the region, as well as Christians? Could you elaborate a little bit more on that, please?

Gregory Galligan: In terms of the guarantee around minority rights, I think where we have come in as a government is our direct engagement and advocacy on these issues. We also try to support programs that will make a long-term difference in how the government interacts with its citizens and how minority communities and others, or Syrians, live together.

One area we have been engaged in is through the transitional justice space. We have a working group with Germany, which Canada is leading. We're trying to support some positive interventions there. We also do a lot of work through the Canada fund for local initiatives, which allows us to support small civil society organizations in Syria, some of which are focused on minority issues, human rights, freedom of the press and so on. We're pushing on that. We continue to try to focus on those efforts so that, at this very early stage, we can try to cement some of those protections for minority communities so that they can also find pathways within their government and can more effectively represent and lead in their communities.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I'm just hoping that you will hear from Parliament to the government that this is a concern to parliamentarians.

With respect to sanctions, I'm confused, because we have targeted sanctions that are not meant to hurt populations, but we lifted sanctions to allow for economic recovery. We have shifted to two new categories around human rights and instability. Can you explain how the previous sanctions and the new sanctions will contribute to keeping pressure on the regime?

Gregory Galligan: Sure. Under the Assad regime, we had more than almost 15 years of broad-based economic sanctions applied over a period of time. That really impacted all aspects of government activity. The best example of that is the Central Bank of Syria. The Central Bank of Syria had been sanctioned. Realistically, for Canadians to engage in economic activity in Syria, that sanction had to be lifted. That's what was done. What we also say on sanctions is that they shouldn't affect the general population. That's true, which is why we have the humanitarian carve-outs. Remittances were still allowed to be transferred. Humanitarian funding was moving very freely.

Where we couldn't engage, really, was on the economic recovery side of that equation. We didn't have Canadian businesses engaging in the Assad regime to support economic activity at the time. To support the government, we're now trying to change the dimensions of our sanctions policies so that we continue to apply sanctions on individuals, particularly those who were directly related to the Assad regime—chemical weapons, ballistics and human rights abuses—and add new measures that would also allow us to do that in terms of some of the human rights abuses that we still see, and also with destabilizing activities.

• (1550)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I want to get to my last question on sanctions. I would also point out that Bashar al-Assad's family fortune may be anywhere from \$2 billion to \$100 billion. Those are the estimates. I would hope that we would be looking at a recovery of those assets as well. It's unknown what his assets are.

With respect to the regional conflict right now with the U.S. and Israel bombing Lebanon, and even in a minor way Syria, what do you think is the effect on Syria of this recent conflict?

Gregory Galligan: The effects on Syria are similar to the effects that are facing many other countries globally. The huge increase in fuel prices has an effect on Syria. It's not really a self-sufficient producer of petroleum products and oil, so that has a large impact.

It's also, I think, what I mentioned in my opening remarks. Some 140,000 Syrians in Lebanon have returned to Syria since the beginning of the conflict. That means 600,000, almost 700,000, Syrians in one year have returned to Syria from Lebanon. It will be challenging for the Syrian government to accommodate and facilitate their transition in an easy way. They're doing their best. They are very focused on trying to make returns as easy as they can be, but obviously it puts greater pressure on the humanitarian response system in Syria at a time when humanitarian funding globally is on the decline.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ste-Marie, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette—Manawan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to offer my regards to my colleagues. I am replacing Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, who should be joining us shortly.

Ambassador and Director General, thank you for joining us. I very much appreciate the discussions that have taken place so far.

Ambassador, thank you for your presentation.

I would like to explore the matter of the organizations designated as terrorist entities. In December, Canada removed Syria, as well as certain groups associated with the transitional government, from the list of such entities.

Ambassador, which factors led the government to conclude that the designation was no longer appropriate?

Gregory Galligan: Was that question for me or for Ms. McCollum?

Gabriel Ste-Marie: It was for you, but if Ms. McCollum feels in a position to answer, it would be most welcome too.

[*English*]

Gregory Galligan: Perhaps I'll try first.

On the decision to delist, as part of the government's review, there has to be a broad-based agreement on this, so Public Safety, RCMP and Global Affairs Canada undertook a review. Based on that review and the changing situation on the ground in Syria, there was a decision taken, very much aligned with some of what our partners did also, to delist HTS.

Also, in the past several years, HTS has made a commitment to continue as the.... The new transitional government has made a real effort in terms of the anti-Daesh elements and has recently joined the coalition.

Based on the totality of the information and after a careful review, the decision of the government was to delist.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you.

Ms. McCollum, did you have anything to add?

Stefanie McCollum (Director General, Middle East, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): I just want to say that, after the transitional government was established, it was announced that the HTS group had been disbanded, meaning that it no longer exists.

I would just say that removing that group from the Criminal Code of Canada does not change history or the past, but it does show that there has been a change between December 2024 and now. Our legislation must reflect that.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you very much.

In a similar vein, which criteria is the Canadian government using today to evaluate the credibility and reliability of the transitional government led by Mr. Al-Sharaa?

Stefanie McCollum: Thank you for your question.

We take note of the announcements and the
[English]

public commitments that the government has made.

• (1555)

[Translation]

Much as the ambassador said, the constitutional declaration was opened, a cabinet was named, a national dialogue was established, as was a national commission for justice and missing persons, among other things. Parliamentary elections were held.

We take all that into consideration when we evaluate the intentions of a new government. We also consider the measures established to ensure a safe and stable transition for its citizens.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Ambassador, do you have anything to add to Ms. McCollum's answer?

Gregory Galligan: Not really. I just want to emphasize that it is important to evaluate Syria's transitional government not just by its words, but also by its deeds. Currently, I feel we have been able to see positive steps. It is certainly not perfect, but in general, the governmental transition is progressing.

We must therefore continue to evaluate the government, but we must do so in the context of all its actions, not just its words.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Ambassador, I would like to ask one last question on a matter that my colleagues have raised. President Al-Sharaa's cabinet has been presented as a reflection of Syria's ethnic and religious diversity.

To what practical extent would you say that the current government represents the major communities in Syria, such as the Alawites, the Kurds, the Druze and the Christians, as Mr. Oliphant said?

Gregory Galligan: The truth is that currently, it does not do so enough.

[English]

The government is taking steps. I think the creation of the legislative council is a positive step in terms of ensuring regional representation, but it's clear that this has not been.... I don't think it's been a perfect process. It does not reflect the totality of the state just yet. There are still areas that are not represented.

[Translation]

This is particularly true with the Kurds and the Druze in Suwayda because of the security situation. The same goes for women.

[English]

There are just not enough women participating in government yet, and that's something we'll continue to push for.

[Translation]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Michael Chong.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills North, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I appreciate the opportunity to ask our witnesses some questions today.

My first question concerns Russia and Turkey. Russia maintains military facilities in Syria, as does Turkey. What is the status of those military installations? Are there any discussions about whether those installations remain in place or whether they will be vacated?

Gregory Galligan: That's a challenging question for me to answer, because it's something the Syrian transitional government itself is wrestling with.

In terms of relationships, they have a very different relationship with Turkey, a close relationship. They will look at that very differently from the way they evaluate their relationship with Russia.

In the case of Russia, the transitional government has tried to approach the Russian government with a degree of pragmatism. That's partly because, first of all, it's challenging, because certainly the constituency around the transitional government remembers the conduct of the Russian government over the past 10 years in supporting Assad. Idlib was notoriously the site of many aerial attacks. On the other hand, Russia is a Security Council member, and its support is required for items like delisting at the UN and other things.

I think the Syrians are trying to manage that themselves, including what it means for their foreign debt and for other aspects where Russia has equity.

• (1600)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

Canada severed diplomatic relations with Syria in 2012. Do we have any diplomatic property in Syria? Do we have any diplomatic assets in Syria? If we do, what are they? Also, what are the considerations for re-establishing a diplomatic presence in Syria?

I'm sorry. I should be more clear.

In 2012, Canada closed its diplomatic presence in Syria. I'm wondering whether or not we still have diplomatic assets there. Also, what would be the conditions for reopening those diplomatic assets in Syria?

Gregory Galligan: Yes, we do still have diplomatic assets in Syria. In 2012, when we suspended operations, we did retain some of the properties at the time. There is the chancery that is there in Damascus, and there are a few staff quarters that we owned.

In terms of returning to Syria and opening an embassy, that's not something that's being looked at right now. For now, we're really focused on restoring diplomatic relations from Beirut and looking at how we can support Canadians in Syria. The decision around reopening in Syria is not one that's currently being considered.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Thank you.

Thirteen months ago, former prime minister Trudeau appointed Mr. Alghabra as special envoy for Syria, and he also spoke with the interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa.

What is the current government's intent with respect to a special envoy? Also, has any member of the government, has any minister or the Prime Minister, spoken with anyone in the Syrian government?

Gregory Galligan: Maybe I'll defer to Ms. McCollum. Those are more Ottawa-based questions.

Stefanie McCollum: I can say in terms of the special envoy that, to my knowledge, there are no conversations about appointing another special envoy, certainly at the political level. However, in the department, we have now, as the ambassador mentioned in his speech, a non-resident ambassador for the first time in over a decade who is building those relationships, travelling to Syria regularly and engaging diplomatically.

As for the second question, I can say that Minister Anand did have an introductory phone call with her Syrian counterpart, Minister al-Shaybānī, in December 2025.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We next go to MP Steven Guilbeault.

You have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being here, Ambassador and Ms. McCollum.

In your view, which criteria could Canada use in deciding to pursue greater involvement on the ground in Syria, by opening an embassy, for example?

Do you have an evaluation grid to show how that result could be arrived at?

Gregory Galligan: Thank you for the question, Mr. Guilbeault.

We do not really have a list of indicators that could lead to the reopening of the embassy.

[*English*]

However, I'd say that if we were going to make the assessment, we'd evaluate it against the objectives of the government and the strategic priorities moving forward. If we were to see, for example, a large number of Canadian companies showing interest in Syria, that might be one indicator. If we were to see large numbers of Canadian tourists travelling to Syria—although that's not currently the travel advice—that might force a re-evaluation in terms of what kinds of consular services we could provide.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

No one action or single point will lead to that decision. It's really a combination of factors. However, the decision must also be considered in the light of all the other missions in the region.

[*English*]

We need to decide what the real priorities for Canada are at this point.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Earlier, a number of colleagues spoke about the importance for the government of reflecting the diversity of Syrian society. I am thinking particularly of various minorities who actually are not always minorities. I agree with Mr. Aboultaif on that.

The matter of representation aside, what do you feel to be the criteria needed for more stability in the Syrian state?

Gregory Galligan: I often find that the transitional government is very effective in its actions. When it has an idea, it moves quickly to implement it. Examples are the constitution or the national day of dialogue.

[*English*]

What I think is probably needed is a more sustainable process for national reconciliation, so a process that is not just about the constitution. I think the constitution is important. I think representation is important. However, what I think is really required is a sustained effort to rebuild national cohesion, to discuss what actually happened over the last 15 years or more. I mean, the Assad regime was 54 years long. There are deep wounds within the society. I think the government is taking positive steps in terms of appointing committees focused on missing persons—this is a cross-cutting issue that affects all Syrians—and on transitional justice, which is really also about reconciliation.

I think that is going to have to be a very sustained process. This isn't something that's going to be accomplished

[*Translation*]

in two or five years. I believe that the process should be generational.

[*English*]

It will require symbolism, which I think is important. Steps like making Nowruz a national holiday are very important.

[*Translation*]

But that's not enough.

[*English*]

It has to be accompanied by actions and a commitment by the government to prioritize this as necessary for national stability and cohesion and ultimately for peace and economic prosperity.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go next to Gabriel Ste-Marie.

You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My next question is along the same lines as the discussion with Mr. Guilbeault.

In your view, what are the main risks that could threaten Syria's political transition in the coming years?

What do you feel Syria needs most from the international community today in order to achieve a sustainable and inclusive transition?

Gregory Galligan: I think humanitarian needs are still the most important and humanitarian assistance is needed most in Syria. When 90% of the population is living below the poverty level, it certainly creates a risk. It also creates a risk in terms of social tensions.

I also believe that education, health and governance systems must be rebuilt. Public services in Syria are clearly not very strong at the moment. That is a weakness, and it must change.

The risk is in social cohesion, for sure.

[*English*]

There's no question about that. There are vulnerabilities there. I think this is why, as I previously mentioned, a sustained process of dialogue, reconciliation, will be required.

Also, I think we're going to need to continue to see progress with the constitution and with the legislative process. There is still no parliamentary body. Until that is sitting, it's very difficult for the government to pass new laws and to also, I think, put in place some of the steps it has talked about but has not really been able to execute because of the lack of legislation.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: You talked about access to humanitarian assistance. In the northeast of Syria, that's still extremely fragile.

Which concrete measures is Canada taking in order to stabilize and secure those corridors in the northeast?

Gregory Galligan: We are working with the UN and with other partners whom we trust.

In all our interactions with Hind Kabawat, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, and with other ministries, we always insist on the concept that humanitarian assistance must be free and without restriction.

[*English*]

There can be no barriers. Humanitarian access must be at all times, and that's what we continue to push for.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go next to MP Kramp-Neuman.

You have five minutes.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington—Tyendinaga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The focus of my first few questions will be on the different ethnic and faith-based groups in Syria, such as Alawites, Druze, Kurds and Christians.

We can appreciate coordinated assaults involving state forces with affiliated ISIS extremist groups against civilians, with gravity of scales of crimes, including killing and raping, and the capturing of women and children in public squares, homes, hospitals and schools. There have been hundreds identified as dead and thousands injured or captured. Villages have been burned.

My first question is, what exactly is the position of the Canadian government, and why was the government silent on this?

Gregory Galligan: I'm not sure I totally understand the question.

In terms of the position of the government, any killing of civilians, any atrocity or any human rights abuse is unacceptable.

To my knowledge, we were not silent on this. I believe ministers have put out statements and other things on this. Certainly, in my own engagements, it's something that comes up regularly.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Thank you.

What was the basis of the government's decision, then, to lift sanctions on a regime that is failing to protect its own people and that has taken part in attacks against civilians?

Gregory Galligan: I'll go back to my response to the question on sanctions.

There was evaluation. It certainly has not been a perfect transition, and I don't think anybody would characterize it as such. Any death of civilians or massacre is unacceptable, and the government needs to hold those persons to account.

There have definitely been improvements from where we were to now. March 2026 will likely be the least violent month in 15 years in Syria. I think the total number of people killed is 12—four by UXOs, four from ISIS and four in other events. Those four are unacceptable. The government needs to do more to lower it and put in place structures and systems so that communal violence can't happen.

The decision to remove sanctions is about trying to find a way to support that transition and build a government that is more stable and inclusive.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Is it safe to suggest that the government is supportive of the regime's five-year transitional constitutional framework?

Gregory Galligan: I don't think we would take a position on timelines or the process itself.

What we want to do is ensure that whatever the Syrian-led process is, it takes into consideration some of the concerns we have. We want to ensure that we take this time to advance our objectives and concerns around human rights protections, minority inclusion and the participation of women.

If, on one hand, the government decides in three years that it's ready to move forward and there's legislative support and broad community support, and that it results in a process that has been more free and transparent, with full participation among minority communities and women, we would look at that and say that it's been positive. If, on the other hand, this hasn't happened after five or six years, we would say that this probably hasn't been an effective process.

I wouldn't say that the time itself is the consideration. It's really how the Syrians use this time to build a better constitution and a more stable architecture for the country's future.

• (1615)

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: That suggests to me the department will probably do an assessment as to the feasibility of the framework itself.

Moving on, has the government done any assessments of the elections held in October of last year?

Gregory Galligan: We've definitely looked at how the process was undertaken and the results of that process.

What I'd say is that it certainly wasn't a broad-based democratic process where every Syrian had a vote. It was much more of a—I don't know what the correct terminology is—representative process through selective bodies. It's hard to tell what the future of that will look like. Will it be emulated in a constitutional process? Is that what the Syrians envision for the future, or does the Syrian government envision something more like a broad-based election, where all Syrians have a way to participate?

We haven't been able to go into the exact details of how committees were selected. It wasn't an open and transparent democratic process in that sense.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Thank you, Your Excellency.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Mona Fortier.

You have five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ambassador, thank you for joining us today. We are most grateful.

My thanks also to you for being with us, Ms. McCollom.

The constituency of Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester has a very large Syrian community. A number of them, of course, are refugees now making a life for themselves here. I am often talking about how Canada continues to play a role in Syria. We know that the diaspora is hugely concerned about it.

You mentioned the importance of women's representation. Could you talk to us a little more about that? You mentioned it, but you did not explain what needs to be done to ensure that women are more represented.

How possible is that, do you think? What could we do here, in this country, to encourage women to become involved?

Gregory Galligan: Thank you for the question.

I do feel that it is one of the areas where Canada can play a really positive role in Syria. My first meeting in Syria was not with the government. I chose to meet with young members of civil society organizations; most of them were girls. A number of them had been refugees in Canada but had decided to return to Syria.

[*English*]

For me, it's personally important that, in whatever we do, we make an effort to ensure that women's voices are present in the meetings we have. Also, when I go to meetings, I make a point to raise any issues that have been brought to my attention by members of this community.

I also think it's worth highlighting at this moment that there is a very important woman in the cabinet, Ms. Hind About Kabawat. She is a Canadian citizen, and she is a champion for women and for minorities. She is the Minister of Social Affairs, so she has an important role in this. She brings a lot of experience, in terms of what she learned and her experience as a Canadian, to this new role. That's a real positive for Canada.

Also, on the trade side, trade is an area that has been dominated by men.

[*Translation*]

That's not the case in Syria alone. It's like that all over the region. In February 2026, we organized an iftar in Syria. Our goal was to start a discussion about trade ties between Canada and Syria. I insisted that members of the women's chamber of commerce in Damascus attend.

At the meeting, I met Syrian women entrepreneurs. I also emphasized the message that having women participate in the economy, in society and in politics is a Canadian value that is important for us.

• (1620)

Hon. Mona Fortier: I am delighted to hear that. I hope that our report will show that we, as a government and as parliamentarians, will still be able to support not only women, but also those who really do want to represent their communities.

Do you have any other recommendations or suggestions for us? You said earlier that declarations are all well and good, that it's fine to make them, but action is what's really important.

Can you recommend any other initiatives to us, as a government or as parliamentarians, so that Canada could contribute to the transition in Syria? I would love to have your opinion.

Gregory Galligan: Thank you for the question.

In terms of positive actions that the government or parliamentarians could take, I feel that the next step is to evaluate the options that lifting sanctions has created for Canada.

[English]

It was impossible, really, to consider stabilization or development programming in the context of where we were previously. Now there are options, and I think it will be important for us to evaluate those options and to decide where our priorities are.

I'm currently in Lebanon. One of the real successes we've had, with the financial and market collapse in Lebanon, are programs that provide small grants to women entrepreneurs. That might be an interesting model to look at as we try to rebuild civil society, but also as we try to ensure that women have a greater participation in Syria's economic recovery.

Let's see where we are. Right now it's still very early days. We have a long way to go, but we'll definitely have to consider ways that we can support civil society, freedom of speech, free press, all of those. However, I think that women will be at the heart of all those decisions.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That brings us to the end of the first panel.

I want to thank both the ambassador and Madam McCollum for appearing before this committee.

Before suspending and organizing for the second panel, I'd like to inform members that the clerk circulated earlier today a draft budget in the amount of \$22,350 for the committee's study on Syria. Our next meeting on this study is scheduled for April 14 and we may be welcoming witnesses travelling from Europe. While this is not yet confirmed, it accounts for the proposed amount.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt this budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now suspend for five minutes to get ready for the second panel.

• (1620) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: I call this meeting to order, colleagues.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the second hour of this hearing.

We have Dr. Elliot Tepper, distinguished senior fellow, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University.

We also have Laurence Deschamps-Laporte, professor of political science and scientific director at the the Montreal Centre for International Studies, Université de Montréal, by video conference.

We expect another witness, Khattar Abou Diab, political analyst and director at the Conseil Géopolitique Perspectives, to join us by video conference, but they're having some technical issues. We hope they'll be able to succeed in joining us.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we'll proceed with rounds of questions from members of the committee.

I now invite Dr. Tepper to make an opening statement.

Elliot Tepper (Distinguished Senior Fellow, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. It is truly an honour to be here and to spend this time together.

You have my formal credentials. Basically, I'm a lifetime professor of international relations at Carleton University, where I've studied a lot of things, including following the Middle East for a very long time. It's a great honour, indeed, to be here.

I've prepared some opening remarks, but I'd like to give you a one-sentence executive summary, and then I'll try to expand on it a bit. You may not even need much more.

I think that Canada has been handed an extraordinary, totally unexpected opportunity regarding the shifting geopolitics of the region. Nobody saw this coming. I think we have an opportunity to help change and shape the direction of the Middle East, and we should seize upon it in as positive and effective a way as possible. That's my overall view.

You've heard a lot of details already from the distinguished ambassador and the director general. My perspective on this is a bit broader. Whenever I can, I like to quote my favourite philosopher, Yankee catcher Yogi Berra, who said, "The future ain't what it used to be." That is certainly true when it comes to the region we're talking about now.

As I said, something extraordinary has happened, and we have an opportunity to play a role, and I think we should seize it. That's my central message of the day.

A lot of the specific developments in regard to Syria have already been discussed by the ambassador and the director general.

Syria sits at the heart of a very tumultuous region. It is undergoing an enormous change in a very short time, but I think we have an opportunity to test our own commitment and our own abilities, not only in regard to the Syrian national government but also ourselves. How quickly can we move? How nimble are we? How much can we bring to the table in a very short time when the circumstances are so different?

Why does Syria matter to Canada?

I think the unexpected fall of the Assad regime, as I suggested, provides a genuine geopolitical opportunity, and it's one that we should be pursuing with energy and purpose. For over 50 years, Syria was an Iranian client state. It's a transit corridor for Tehran to arm its proxies in the region, particularly Hezbollah in Lebanon. It was a brutal oppressor of its own people, and it was also a prop for Russian interests. It was a chronic destabilizing force for the whole region, and now it's suddenly gone.

The new government is overtly anti-Iranian. It does seek accommodation with all of its neighbouring states. It has very quickly tried to reintegrate an isolated Syria into the broader international arena. The main thing here is that the Iranian axis of resistance has been broken. It opens things up that weren't available before, and we should take advantage of it.

Canada is already invested, as I suggested. Canada doesn't start from zero when it comes to Syria. We've already heard some of the figures on this, like over \$1 billion in humanitarian aid and steadfast support for the White Helmets. This is something in which some of you may have played a role in the past when the White Helmets representatives came here. Now one of those White Helmets is a member of the transitional cabinet in Syria. We, as you know, have taken in over 100,000 refugees, so we have earned goodwill in Syria and we should spend that goodwill effectively.

We also have considerable expertise to offer a transitional Syria. The demand of the hour, humanitarian relief, remains, but nation-building is now on the agenda, and that's an area in which we have considerable expertise. Constitution building, security sector reform, demining and removing noxious materials, we have a whole range of things that Syria needs right now.

• (1640)

By the way, the mention of trade was made earlier. There's a lot of money that's going to be pouring into Syria now, and perhaps we should take advantage of that by opening up trade in a constructive way to help build the country.

What should we expect in return? This engagement is going to come with expectations. When we invest, as we do around the world, we think we should get something that's important to us. Accountability clearly is on the agenda, but the main thing I think to emphasize here is that we have always around the world emphasized our democratic values and our capacity for multilateralism. That combination can be put to use in regard to assessing our impact, looking at what we get out of our engagement with Syria.

However, I think it's important to suggest that we don't have to impose our own standards on the issue of human rights. What we need to do, I think, is to hold Syria to and assist them in achieving what they have said they wish to do in regard to setting up a pluralistic society and a constitution with separate—

The Chair: Thank you.

Elliot Tepper: I would just conclude quickly on this, sir.

The Chair: Sure.

Elliot Tepper: Very quickly, there are three central questions. How genuine is the break of the government from its terrorist past? I think this is an open question, and it's an important one. How real

is the commitment to inclusive government? Is it just for show? You've already heard about some of the steps that were taken. Also, can accountability actually be measured? Can we put in place those measures?

That's my conclusion.

Syria is a work in progress. I think we can be helpful, and also at the same time demanding.

With that, I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your remarks.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Ms. Deschamps-Laporte to make her opening remarks.

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte (Professor of Political Sciences and Scientific Director, The Montreal Center for International Studies, Université de Montréal, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for this important study and for inviting me today. It's a great honour to be here.

Thank you to the diplomats we heard from for their important work, as well as my colleague, Dr. Tepper, who spoke very holistically about the situation.

[*Translation*]

I am a professor of political science, specializing in the Middle East, and the director of a research centre on international issues that brings together about 150 researchers at the Université de Montréal. I have also spent some time at the Government of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs in the service of my country. With that background, I would like to share with you three main observations on the current situation in Syria. They pertain to the political transition, the role of diplomacy and the situation in the region. Before answering your questions, I will conclude my remarks by addressing Canada's role.

In terms of the political transition, you already have a good picture of the situation. Nevertheless, although Syrians were liberated and happy to know that Assad had left the country for good and that the war might hopefully end, it cannot be denied that grave concerns about the political transition remain. Power is now in the hands of a government with its roots in violent Islamic groups. If we are not careful, certain sectarian dynamics could emerge again. While they may be different from the previous dynamics, they are no less troubling.

Last week, for example, the political transition brought about new restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol. Some of those restrictions existed under previous regimes, but as public measures, they may indicate a tendency to limit civil liberties. Some caution is called for.

The second observation is on the role of diplomacy. This is a tool that can resolve conflicts and support the citizens, but it is not a gift that automatically guarantees legitimacy. It does not in itself legitimize the other country. Just because we are careful and well aware that there are grave concerns about the origins of the current regime and about the possibility of preserving and nurturing pluralism in Syrian society, it does not mean that we must disengage. I see an important role for the ambassador and his ability to work in Syria on Canada's behalf. It is possible to develop diplomatic relations and to remain careful at the same time. It's not an easy dance, but dance we must. If Canada as a nation chose not to develop diplomatic relations, it would be the same as disengaging. I do not think that is the solution, but care is required.

Third, I'll turn to the situation in the region. I imagine that, when the committee previously discussed conducting this study, it was deemed a worthy one because Syria is both important and fragile. The current conflict only makes the fragility worse. It is dashing some hopes in the region. That existing fragility will affect the conflict, and the most vulnerable people even more. They are the internally displaced and the returning refugees. They are the women and the groups that, whether or not they are called minorities, can fall prey to political repression, depending on the regime at any one time. These are the fragile groups who deserve our attention even more.

Finally, Canada's role is important. I fully concur with the remarks made by my colleague Mr. Tepper. Currently—and this is rare—Canada is well regarded by both the regime and the people. In fact, we have almost unparalleled legitimacy in Syria, for various reasons. The welcome Canada extended to Syrian refugees is one, but another is that we are not perceived as polarizing. Let us seize this opportunity to acknowledge the fragility and to strengthen the country and its institutions by supporting, but not encroaching on, the positive forces in the country. Civil society in Syria is hungry for dignity and human rights. Canada can champion those efforts in the knowledge that, despite the war, various groups have implemented some rather innovative programs, with impossible amounts of money, especially in matters such as evidence gathering and justice.

Canada can play a role in three areas: supporting institutions and the transition; justice; and women and gender issues. We know that budgets are limited, but huge amounts of money are not required. The positive forces, whether in the diaspora or the experts in non-governmental organizations, NGOs, are not actually looking for major funding. They are looking for support for their efforts.

Thank you for your attention. I will be happy to answer your questions.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you for your remarks.

[*English*]

We will suspend for one minute because we have to test the technology for the connection of the next witness.

• (1645)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Mr. Abou Diab to make his opening statement.

[*English*]

Please proceed.

[*Translation*]

Khattar Abou Diab (Political Analyst and Director, Conseil Géopolitique Perspectives, As an Individual): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the committee.

It is a great honour to appear before you to present my views on this thorny question of the transition in Syria. I will be brief. I will then be ready for discussion, on the heels of the valuable presentations of my two colleagues.

Above all, I have to say that the Islamic government, which took the place of the Bashar al-Assad regime, is redoubling its efforts internationally to help the country out of deep isolation. The overall climate is less oppressive in Damascus today, and civil society is relatively active.

However, the political transition in Syria is experiencing serious setbacks. We could mention the hasty and not-at-all transparent process of national dialogue and of the elections that were held in 2025. The process did not meet expectations. The need for internal political dialogue sustained over time must be emphasized, as must the implementation of transitional justice, without which the rule of law cannot take root in a state. The Syrian economy must be further improved, given that it is still degraded. Social conditions cannot be forgotten, especially the conditions faced by the more vulnerable and the internally displaced. The country is in need of major rebuilding. Most in need of rebuilding are its people. Syrians' confidence needs to be restored.

Syria is a social and ethnic mosaic, a country of distinctiveness. Unfortunately, after the regime with roots in al-Qaeda came to power—they were previously linked to the terrorist group al-Qaeda—there were terrible incidents of murder in the Sahel and massacres of Alawites in March 2025. Between May and July 2025, there were also deadly confrontations in Damascus province and in the south. Another community, the Druze, was hugely targeted in those confrontations. We also must not forget the executions of Christians that are still being carried out, the attacks against the Kurds, the continuing acts of foreign interference—principally from Turkey and from Israel in the other direction—or the extremist practices of the authorities targeting moderate and secular citizens. All this to demonstrate the fragility and flaws of the transition in Syria.

Building an inclusive Syrian identity will require concerted efforts from the provisional Syrian government, from civil society and from international players. The new transitional power, basically dominated by the interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, is under the control of the HTS, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has its roots in al-Nusra and al-Qaeda. The HTS is behaving as if it is the only party in Syria and has infiltrated the state as it rebuilds. In addition, corruption continues to gnaw at the entire Syrian system in a number of ways. Imposing a single narrative on Syrians seems impossible to us because it's a country of various components and origins. The solution we seek is a state under the rule of law, a state with institutions. Given that it is not a secular society, a viable approach to the primacy of its citizens seems to be through partisan participation in religious and ethnic organizations.

● (1655)

In addition, a process of democratization in sequential, well-defined steps is needed. In order to preserve Syria's national unity and regional integrity, a federal system, a confederation, if you will, must be built.

Finally, international commitment to the success of the transition in Syria should have as a priority the protection of all the facets of Syrian society, human rights in general and women's rights in particular.

Canada has welcomed a major Syrian diaspora and many refugees. It has a clear, respected position in that part of the world. It could play a role in supporting civil society, in protecting Syrian minorities and in the country's evolution.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation.

The Clerk of the Committee (Simon Larouche): Mr. Abou Diab, you are going to need the interpretation because some members of the committee will speak in English. You have an option for that at the bottom of your Zoom screen.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will now open the floor for questions, beginning with MP Ziad Aboultaif.

You have six minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for joining us, Dr. Tepper, Dr. Deschamps-Laporte, and Dr. Abou Diab who is in France, I believe, where it is late.

Since December 8, 2024, when the regime changed in Syria, the country has had inflamed communal conflicts—persecution, threats, abuse, rape, humiliation and murder—with Alawites, Druze, Kurds and Christians.

Dr. Abou Diab, do you believe that these ethnic religious minorities I've mentioned feel safe? Do they have any level of security from the current government? If yes, why, and if no, why?

[*Translation*]

Khattar Abou Diab: Those minorities have no security in the country nor is the country under the rule of law. The previous

speaker gave examples like prohibiting alcohol in Damascus. But that's not all.

The greater danger is that Damascus has been divided into two sectors. In the smaller, Christian sectors, alcohol is allowed. In other areas, it is not. As a result, citizens are somewhat divided into first-zone, second-zone, third-zone, etc. categories.

It is true that most Sunnis, who now govern the country, suffered great discrimination during the Assad regime, including murders and massacres. However, that does not mean that the Alawite, Christian and Druze minorities, or even the Ismaili and Kurdish minorities, can now be punished for the wrongdoings of the former regime.

It is also true that, for example, the regime has agreed to form investigative committees to examine what took place in the Sahel and in southern Syria, in Suwayda. Actually, though, they are not implementing the communities' recommendations or decisions.

A viable justice system has not yet been established in Syria, because no transitional justice happened and no justice bodies have been reformed. Canada and the European Union, for example, might well take an interest in the area of justice and put a stop to some actions.

A country like Syria cannot be governed by sharia law. A legal system based on a single religion is impossible because, as I have explained, the country is very pluralistic. Syrian pluralism has to be respected.

Given the major change and the re-examination of the whole regional structure, I greatly fear that the minorities are still paying the price in Syria.

Thank you.

● (1700)

[*English*]

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you, Dr. Abou Diab.

War crimes and sectarian violence by the interim government forces and informal militias that are supporting the government forces took place. Is there any legitimate structure to hold the government and these affiliated groups accountable? Are you aware of any attempts or any actions to do so?

We're talking about war crimes, about sectarian violence, about people being killed and captured, the burning of villages and a long list of violence against humans and vulnerable people.

Is there legitimate structure available there? Has anyone been held accountable for these crimes?

[Translation]

Khattar Abou Diab: No, there is no legitimate structure. One of my students, Almutassim Al Kilani, was appointed to a position to study the problems associated with transitional justice. He resigned shortly afterwards. When I asked him why he resigned, he told me that al-Qaeda people were in charge of Syria. It was a chilling answer, but it was real.

At both the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence, those in charge come from pro-Turkish groups affiliated with the Turkish army, or from HTS, a highly extremist group seeking the liberation of the Levant, or from other groups like Ahrar al-Sham. Even the leaders of what is now called the general security directorate, and of other groups, are still under their influence. Tribal militias and informal militias still exist.

Many Alawites have been abducted. Many Alawite women have been raped. In the south of Syria, 33 Druze villages are still occupied by government forces and their affiliates. In the south, a kind of semi-blockade still prevents the free movement of 600,000 people. The whole situation is infected as a result. The Kurdish problem is still not resolved. There is still tension in areas around Kobani, among other places. Even the Christians around Hama, in Damascus or in other cities, are still being executed. Sir, please really look at the number of Christians in Syria at the moment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Khattar Abou Diab: There is a huge difference between the situation before the war and the one after the war. Syria has really changed.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Next we have MP Steven Guilbeault.

You have six minutes, please.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Abou Diab, thank you very much for those very enlightening answers.

I have some questions for Ms. Deschamps-Laporte.

Just now, we were trying to gauge the difference between 2016 and 2026. How do you and your colleagues in the academic community evaluate the change in the situation during that decade?

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte: Could you specify whether your question is about the political situation or the civil society situation, like poverty in Syria, for example?

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: That's a good question. I am referring to civil society.

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte: Of course, in 2016, the war was escalating, or expanding internationally, we might say. Let me remind you how the conflict started. It began with what seemed to be another revolution as part of what was then called the Arab Spring. It was thought to be the last frontier, given that the al-Assads had ruled for decades. The country that was thought to be immune to

popular uprisings finally rose up, with uprisings in the plural. Religious groups, secular groups and groups of students took to the streets. One would be hard-pressed to name any single group at the origin of those revolutions.

The repression was brutal in the extreme. A turning point came in 2015-16, when foreign forces started supporting the groups. This was followed by stronger intervention by Russia, a refugee crisis, of course, and then the emergence of Daesh, which had had a number of names before that one.

Canada acted firmly in the crisis. I don't want to say that the country is stable today. It is not, but the situation is more hopeful. Amid that hope, Canada is seen as a legitimate player that can contribute to a more just transition with the ability to support the institutions.

Yes, there are things Canada can do. The world is presently in conflict. Generally speaking, though, the difficult work comes when things are going badly. Canada is a welcome player when a number of others do not always agree among themselves. At the Syrians' invitation, certain efforts can have great added value in terms of what Syria becomes, so I encourage you all to join their ambition.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you.

In your opening statement, you, like others today, spoke about the role that Canada could play. You mentioned that it need not involve a major investment.

Could you tell the members of the committee the two or three actions that, in your view, could be Canada's most meaningful contribution to support the transition in Syria?

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte: First, Canada could contribute in the area of justice. We know that a justice system must be established, even before decisions on the parliamentary system that would be most appropriate in any democratization. The justice system would have to give people some assurance that crimes are not being hidden and that, for example, sectarian groups are not seeking revenge.

Canada has already contributed to justice in the matter of evidence gathering. The UN system had what I would call an investigative body known as the UNIIC. It was not part of the Security Council, but it was a somewhat parallel structure. A lot of Canadian jurists took part. Some wonder whether that might work. It's happened before, and the parallel processes for such investigative bodies do exist. In a process of establishing justice for Syria's future, that could be a credible path.

The work has already been done. A number of legal experts are working in international institutions. They already have roles, they are already hired and they believe in the system. They want to work with a country like Canada, which is seen to be legitimate. That's the first thing.

Second, Canada could play a role with women in Syria. We talked about the White Helmets. The White Helmets have had female units. Canada has also supported the roles of female mediators in Syria, when there was still a process in Geneva. My colleague Mr. Tepper mentioned Ms. Kabawat. In Montreal, we also have Ms. Muzna Dureid. She has won several awards for her leadership in the Syrian refugee crisis. Today, she is back in Damascus. I could name twenty or so such women. They are all Canadian now, or they have ties to Canada. They are known here. We have to listen to them, to bring them together. I am sure that they have ideas.

We have had dialogue days on Syria. They were half-days, actually, but they could have gone on for three days. If we had had more than a half-day, we would have added value by inviting more Kurdish groups, more women. Starting processes seems simple, and at the moment, simplicity is the key: it will set a course for the next decades in the country.

To conclude, I would say that we must not just look away. We must continue to gather information, and from good sources. Historically, in fact, during the war, Canada supported organizations that had a good picture of things on the ground. We know that access for journalists is not easy and that Syria is a dangerous country. We must continue the work that you have started in this committee, so that we know what is really happening in Suwayda and the Kurdish areas. The regime in Syria has to understand that no one is looking away and that international attention is on them. That attention is often where regimes find the greatest path forward.

• (1710)

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: My time has run out. However, I would be grateful if you could provide the committee with the list of the 20 names you mentioned. I feel that would be very useful.

Thank you.

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte: Are you talking about the list of women mediators with ties to Canada? Yes, I will gladly send that to you in writing.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to Gabriel Ste-Marie—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Chair, Mr. Ste-Marie has left.

The Chair: My apologies.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My thanks to the witnesses for joining us for this important study.

Ms. Deschamps-Laporte, you have just been talking about collective ambition and referring, among other things, to certain international assistance programs that normally come with a budget allocation.

In terms of collective ambition, what we are currently seeing around the world is that humanitarian assistance to the tune of billions of dollars is subject to budget cuts. We have seen it with USAID, the United States Agency for International Development. We have seen it all over Europe, and we saw it in Canada's most recent federal budget. I agree with you entirely that international assistance does indeed produce concrete changes when it is used appropriately.

Do you see any danger in further reductions in international assistance? Countries like Japan have reduced their international assistance considerably and are about to move to other things entirely in terms of international assistance.

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte: Thank you for the question.

Of course, the subject of international assistance is something that keeps the experts on the region awake at night. Although the vision is for a return to a secure world, international assistance was not wholly altruistic. Assistance in that form was intended to provide lasting security for the world. With no more international assistance, with no more programs to facilitate the transition, recruitment for violent groups becomes worse. In other words, violence feeds on vulnerable populations. It's not a direct link, but it's a link nonetheless, so I agree with you.

This is not just about international assistance. Canada has a very specific program using diplomatic channels, in a way. It would count as assistance financially but it's not strictly development aid. The program I am thinking of is the peace and stabilization operations program. The program funds microprograms and, sometimes, civil society initiatives. They are defined by conditions on the ground and make it possible to implement evidence-gathering and transition-to-justice programs.

For a long time, Canada was one of the six most innovative countries in the world. The budgets were quite limited, but the investments really did allow some countries to return to democracy and pluralism.

I agree with you that budget cuts are extremely troubling.

Thank you.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much, Ms. Deschamps-Laporte.

Professor Tepper, you mentioned the importance of measuring engagement, the assistance provided to the new Syrian government. You left the subject open.

In your view, should the priority not be on the criteria for measuring the engagement of democratic countries, of which Canada is one, vis-à-vis the Syrian government?

If we want responsibility and accountability, we have to base it on priorities.

[English]

Elliot Tepper: That's a a complicated question, but Professor Diab also mentioned earlier that there are steps toward democracy. We can refer to that more technically, as we do in talking about aid and benchmarks.

The possibility exists that we, as part of our engagement, insist not only on accountability, which we must do, but also on benchmarks toward the goals. This is standard aid stuff, but in the case of Syria, our basic goal is to keep nudging them in the right direction and determining what would be the most effective way to get them to live up to the most aspirational goals and where they plan to go. We can help them. We have enormous expertise not only in the aid program, but again, as we talked about earlier, in terms of democracy and constitution building.

The goal in Syria can't be met by flooding it with a little money here and a little money there, although if we had it, that would be great, but the people of Syria need to have structure. The outside world can assist in that by providing targeted assistance with benchmarks, and then that leads to a positive cycle. You do this and then there's more, and you do this and there's more. A positive cycle is what we're looking for in Syria.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much for that very interesting answer, albeit to complex questions.

Mr. Abou Diab, you told us about the Druze and the Christians, particularly what is going on in the northwest with the Kurds. Human rights organizations are saying that things are not going at all well in that region.

How do you see the ability of the government to protect civilians and to abide by international law, when credible organizations are telling us that civilians are living through quite harsh difficulties.

Khattar Abou Diab: Thank you for that very specific question. It raises an essential point.

It is true that international commitment to the transition in Syria must, as I have said, consider not only human rights and women's rights, but also freedom and plurality for Syria.

Even today, there is a kind of discrimination against the Alawites. Many women have been raped and many children have been abducted. With the Kurds, the whole issue of the Syrian flag and the Kurdish flag has really aggravated the situation.

Major conflicts are being fought between the Kurds and Daesh in and around Kobani. We must not forget that the Kurds have lost more than 20,000 people in that fight. They have sacrificed a lot.

It is true that, under American pressure, the new regime agreed to appoint one Kurd to work with the Ministry of Defence. In reality, though, the Druze, the Christians, the Alawites and the Kurds have no real presence in the new regime. That regime, therefore, is made up of one group only. That is serious.

The inclusive Syrian identity I talked about is neither enshrined in any rights nor evident in any security. As I said, in Suwayda,

33 towns and villages are still occupied. Almost 200,000 people have had to leave their homes. There's a partial blockade.

In the south of Syria and close to Damascus, ever since Iran's hold ended, there has been a new form of indirect confrontation between Israel and Turkey. The assistance of the international community is therefore required to prevent other massacres occurring in Syria. Nothing in Syria is guaranteed. The security situation remains fragile.

The Chair: Thank you.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My sincere thanks to the witnesses

[English]

The Chair: We'll start the second round with MP Michael Chong for five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to direct my questions to Dr. Tepper.

The first question is regarding the agreement that was reached between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian government just over a month ago to integrate civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the new Syrian state.

What do you know about the implementation of this agreement to date, and how likely is it to endure?

• (1720)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

Since the bells are ringing, could you confirm that we have unanimous consent to go until 5:30?

The Chair: The issue is that there's a 27-minute bell now, and then we'll go to the—

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Do we have unanimous consent to go to 5:30?

The Chair: Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Elliot Tepper: Perhaps that's what we need for Syria—the bells are ringing.

The question of the role of the Kurds in the evolving situation in Syria is really the broader picture. What we know about this is that the people Canada has been closest to are the Kurds, who in the past had a semi-autonomous area that was secular and included women. That, totally unexpectedly, was defeated by force of arms in the recent past. The agreement was then reached that they will now integrate with the army of Syria.

What little I've been able to determine—since implementation was your question—is it's not going well and it's not going to be easy. There were four divisions that were going to be integrated.

The disagreement over secularism and the role of women is one of the stumbling blocks, because it's so central to the Kurdish approach and not so central to the current Syrian government. What to do with the Kurds and the future of the Kurds within Syria is a core issue for the evolving state.

There has been an agreement to have a unified army. There has been an agreement to have unified command and control. We'll have to see how that goes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you. I appreciate that answer.

I have a second question.

According to recent reports, Canada is among a group of western and Arab countries expected to participate in a multilateral effort to identify and eliminate the remaining chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria.

Can you tell us what you know about this initiative?

Elliot Tepper: Unfortunately, I know very little about that particular aspect, except to emphasize once again that multilateralism is the way we leverage our impact, and we are doing so in regard to this very crucial area.

There are also all of the related matters of removing unexploded ordnances, demining, and we have a role to play in that.

Again, our leverage is amplified because of our long-standing capacity to work with others.

Hon. Michael Chong: The third and last question I have concerns something I raised earlier, which is the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation has military bases and assets in Syria. What is your assessment of the future of those military installations?

The department indicated to us that they viewed Turkey's installations as part of a co-operative bilateral relationship between Syria and Turkey, but they did not take the same view of the Russian installations.

What's your assessment of Russian assets in Syria? What is the status of them and where will they be in the future?

Elliot Tepper: We have to remember that the Russian assets in Syria originated with the massive intervention by the Russian air force killing a lot of the people whose parties are currently related to the government. They used to be much more widespread across Syria. They are now clustered in two areas.

It's a genuine puzzlement to me, sir, that somehow this remnant of Russian influence has not been expunged, either by the government itself or by pressure from America. In this case, they could so easily say, "If you want our support, close out that influence."

This is a gateway into Africa, by the way, by Russian influence.

The possibility exists that a deal or an agreement of sorts has been arranged by the government itself to maintain those bases, because the co-operation of Russia and other areas is so important.

Again, I'm baffled as to why that hasn't been cleaned out.

• (1725)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Chair.

I have no further questions.

The Chair: We next go to Ron McKinnon for five minutes.

Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

This has been touched on by many people, both our witnesses and members. I'm interested in the state of law in Syria.

I hear about the collapse of the Assad government. Collapse of a government means, typically, loss of the law and the whole legal structure that pertains to that government. I'm assuming that the current provisional government was created on the basis of it being the strongest faction out there. Is that correct?

Elliot Tepper: My colleagues are well-placed to answer what's happening on the ground.

In the bigger picture, the approach is that the government is trying to see that it has, by the definition of the state, exclusive monopoly on force. It is making progress. We just talked about the Kurds.

In terms of the law and order situation on the ground, I would defer to my colleagues.

Ron McKinnon: Mr. Abou Diab, perhaps you could comment.

[*Translation*]

Khattar Abou Diab: The new regime has inherited old structures but is not improving them. In addition, it is imposing a kind of sharia. The justice system now contains elements of pure Islamic law. The system is confusing and corrupt. On top of that, the terrible economic situation means that judges are not paid very much. In one way or another, they are not independent. Justice in Syria has no independence, rigour or integrity.

I would just like to share with you what I know about the history of Russian facilities.

Turkey is an essential player in Syria. Without Turkish support, the regime could not have taken its place. It has strong ties with Turkey and a few with Saudi Arabia. In addition, Turkey made a kind of arrangement with the Russians to not intervene in the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. In exchange, Russian facilities in Syria were preserved. Even today, President Ahmed al-Sharaa has Syrian money printed in Russia. The ongoing ties between Russia and the al-Sharaa government have not been broken. The al-Sharaa government is trying to cover all bases.

[*English*]

Ron McKinnon: Is the current government, the provisional government, taking steps to transition things like property rights that existed under the previous government? Are property rights, contracts, debts and so forth transitioning into the new society as well?

[Translation]

Khattar Abou Diab: A lot of chaos and injustice exist in Syria. In terms of property rights, for example, a lot of houses were seized by the former regime. They were given to clan members, cronies and the military, that is to say officers and senior officials with ties to the regime.

Although the regime has changed, the same things are happening. Former executives have been replaced by members of the HTS, the dominant party. There has been no reform. In other words, it's still the old regime with new tools.

[English]

Ron McKinnon: To develop and recover from these many years of turmoil, there need to be well-established property rights, well-established contract laws and so forth—

[Translation]

Khattar Abou Diab: Reform is needed.

[English]

Ron McKinnon: —or they're not going to get any investment anywhere. Is that stability coming?

[Translation]

Khattar Abou Diab: It's a complete vacuum. In the south of Syria, there's no authority. In other places, the courts do not work. In some places in Syria, no one is in charge.

As I said, right now the old system has been inherited. Small attempts are being made to improve, but they, meaning the ministers and their associates, are sadly lacking in experience and know-how.

• (1730)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ron McKinnon: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Finally we go to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have three minutes.

[Translation]

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

This is incredible. My colleagues are being magnanimous to us, even though our party is smaller.

Mr. Abou Diab, I would like to go back to what you were just saying. You were talking about Türkiye and Saudi Arabia.

Internationally, can the new Syrian government rely on any other regimes as staunch allies at the moment? Is it mostly Turkey and Saudi Arabia?

Khattar Abou Diab: Syria certainly relies on Qatar. Unfortunately for Syria, Lebanon and other countries, the Arab countries in the Gulf region, which were an economic backbone of sorts, are

now greatly affected and need assistance themselves. That brings more responsibilities. The situation is deteriorating.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That is just what I thought. You are ahead of me.

What are the current repercussions on Syria of the war that the United States and Israel are waging against Iran?

Can you give us some more details about that, for the benefit of the analysts and the members of the committee?

Khattar Abou Diab: That is a very important question. Until now, Ahmed al-Sharaa has been trying to establish his position as one of benevolent neutrality. He says he wants to keep Syria from becoming involved in the conflicts in the Middle East. Despite the kind of security zone that Israel has put in place, he is suffering in silence. He says that his army was destroyed by the Israelis or by the former Syrian army. He is trying to be a kind of buffer between Turkish influence and Israeli influence.

Nevertheless, the situation is very serious. We hear a lot of rumours about Syria possibly interfering in Lebanon. Sometimes, the United States and Israel are said to want al-Sharaa to take action against Hezbollah in Lebanon. At the moment, al-Sharaa and the Syrian government are saying that this is not so, but information from the region does not put the rumours to rest. We cannot exclude a scenario in which Syria intervenes in Lebanon again. This time, it would be religious in nature, by which I mean a return to the inter-Islamic wars between Shia and Sunni.

One very troubling event happened yesterday. Pro-Iranian militants from Iraq bombed a Syrian army base in the northeast of Syria. It seems that American soldiers and advisers were on that base.

That is the only very troubling event that has occurred as part of the war on Iran being waged by Israel and the United States.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

I'd like to commend the witnesses for the high level of discussion that we have had today.

My thanks to you all.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes the questions.

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing before the committee.

Our next meeting will be on Thursday, March 26, when the committee will consider two draft reports, which you have received.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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