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Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Ahmed Hussen (York South—Weston—Etobicoke, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 29 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. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Before we continue, I would like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents, and to protect the health and safety of everyone, including our interpreters. You will also notice a QR code on the card, which links to a short awareness video.

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. 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 remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

Joining us from the International Crisis Group is Noah Bonsey, senior adviser for Syria. He is joining us by video conference. From the People's Democratic Party of Turkey, we have Hisyar Ozsoy, former deputy chair and member of Parliament, joining us by video conference. From the Syrian Women's Political Movement, we have Muzna Dureid, co-founder, also joining us by video conference.

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

I now invite Mr. Bonsey to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Noah Bonsey (Senior Advisor for Syria, International Crisis Group): Thank you for having me today. It's an honour to join you all.

Sixteen months in, Syria's transition is going better than could reasonably have been expected, given the extremely difficult circumstances in which it is taking place. However, there have been tragic setbacks along the way, and the challenges ahead are immense. Achieving durable stability will require further course adjustments by the country's new leadership and increased support from the international community.

First is the good news. Syria's people and new leadership have, to a great extent, managed to hold their country together. That's no small feat, given what they have lived through. Over 14 years of civil war, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were killed and more than 13 million were displaced. That's more than half of the country's pre-war population, and it includes some six million who became refugees outside of the country.

The former Assad regime ruled and fought with extreme brutality, and it deliberately exploited fault lines between communities in this diverse country. Extremists among rebel ranks did too, contributing to a vicious cycle of polarization and radicalization on both sides of the conflict. In late 2024, as opposition forces advanced and the Assad regime collapsed, many wondered if the country would fragment or plunge into new cycles of civil war. That hasn't happened, thanks to the incredible resilience of Syria's people and commendable, albeit incomplete, steps by Syria's new leadership to steer toward reconciliation rather than vengeance.

I'll speak in a moment to challenges and shortcomings, but it's worth underlining that Syria's abrupt shift from horrific, seemingly intractable civil war to a post-war transition is itself a massive collective accomplishment. As a result, Syrians are beginning to return home. Some 1.5 million have travelled back to Syria from abroad, and another 1.8 million Syrians displaced within the country have returned to their homes.

The new leadership's success thus far in building international credibility has been a key factor generating positive momentum and mitigating concerns about their jihadist roots. The pragmatic foreign policy pursued by President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Minister of Foreign Affairs Asaad al-Shaibani has notched some critical wins. These include sanctions relief from the U.S., Canada and other western countries; the removal of terrorist designations previously imposed by the UN Security Council; and the forging of a broad, diverse network of constructive diplomatic relations, including key support from western countries in the gulf, while reducing tensions with Russia and China.

These successes have helped stabilize the transitional government, even as it struggles with limited bandwidth and insufficient diversity—a point I'll address further in a moment—but there have also been deeply painful failures, particularly during the first eight months of the transition. More than 1,300 people, mostly Alawites, were killed in March 2025 when government forces, responding to insurgent attacks, committed massacres against civilians—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I believe the sound has been cut off a few times now. We have to think about the health and safety of the interpreters. Unfortunately, we may have to reassess—

[*English*]

The Chair: We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

Mr. Bonsey, just to resolve these technical challenges, we will suspend for a few minutes to allow the technicians to fix the problem, because we're having lags with respect to your presentation.

• (1535) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1540)

The Chair: Everything is clear now. You have about a minute to go, so you can conclude your remarks.

Thank you.

Noah Bonsey: While the discipline and behaviour of government forces have improved in subsequent months, it will take more than that to rebuild trust with many Syrians, particularly in minority communities.

Meanwhile, Syrian's humanitarian needs remain immense, and the international bandwidth for addressing them is diminishing. The UN estimates that more than 15 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian support, and the current regional war has exacerbated the challenge. Gulf states that Syria was relying upon to support and invest will now need to prioritize their own resilience. Looking ahead, finding ways to compensate for that expected shortfall must be an immediate priority for Damascus and its supporters in the international community.

In conclusion, I'll briefly note a couple of additional points that I'm happy to address further in discussion.

First, the Syrian government took a bold step by participating in U.S.-mediated talks with Israel, which have stalled amid Israel's re-

fusal to commit to withdrawing from the Syrian territory it has occupied since the fall of the Assad regime. In order to reduce the risk of escalation and to open a pathway to reintegrating Sweida within the Syrian state, it is important that Damascus remain committed to this track and that the U.S. continue to press Israel to engage constructively.

Second, the integration agreement between Damascus and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces ended weeks of clashes, averted what could have been an ugly fight in Kurdish areas and charted a pathway for inclusive local governance in the country's northeast. Both parties showed wisdom in reaching it and goodwill in implementing it thus far. If they continue that, it will serve as a major step forward for the country as a whole.

Finally, nationwide, it is also crucial that Syria move quickly to improve the inclusiveness of government structures at all levels, from local security forces to the cabinet. The government's performance and credibility will improve if it better incorporates Syria's rich diversity.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

I now invite Mr. Hisyar Ozsoy to make an opening statement of up to five minutes. Thank you.

Hisyar Ozsoy (Former Deputy Chair and Member of Parliament, People's Democratic Party of Turkey): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for having me today. I will start where the previous speaker ended: on the question of minorities.

We think the approach of Canada and the broader international community to Syria should be guided by a clear lesson from recent developments. Unfortunately, we have observed that over the last year, whenever international legitimacy has been granted to the current leadership in Damascus, it has been used not to build inclusive governance but to centralize power and repress communities.

The United States and some European partners, together with Turkey, Qatar and the Saudis, are pursuing short-term stability through centralization, supporting a strong centre in Damascus in the hope of restoring order. In practice, however, centralization has produced a lot of repression. Kurdish regions remain under pressure. Alawite civilians have faced mass violence without accountability. Druze communities have suffered grave abuses, and the new Syrian authorities have already killed thousands of their own citizens, just as al-Assad was doing before. This centralization approach may reduce fragmentation in the short term, but it is also sowing the seeds of future conflict.

The agreement between the Kurds and Damascus signed on January 30 illustrates these risks. The agreement lacks international guarantees, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and binding protections for autonomy and political inclusion. At the same time, U.S. policy has moved toward closer alignment with Ahmed al-Sharaa, encouraging integration into a centralized system without sufficient safeguards. This has deepened the perception that pluralist actors are being sidelined in Syria.

We think Canada should adopt a different premise, which is that the inclusion of minorities is not only a matter of principle but also a structural requirement for sustainable stability. Kurds, Druze, Alawites, Christians and secular Arabs—and particularly women—are not simply communities to be protected; they are essential political actors who can serve as a counterweight within the system. Their meaningful inclusion can check authoritarian centralism, limit the dominance of any single ideological force—in this case, Islamism—and restrain Islamist and fundamentalist tendencies. Without such balance, power will concentrate and repression will follow.

This is why decentralization is essential. A decentralized system would provide real autonomy and protection for vulnerable communities, reduce zero-sum struggles over control of Damascus, institutionalize power-sharing across regions and communities and create checks against authoritarian domination. Decentralization is not fragmentation. It is not separatism. It is a framework that allows diversity to function as a stabilizing force.

We believe and strongly suggest that international legitimacy, reconstruction support and normalization with Syria must be conditional. They should depend on democratic governance, decentralization of power, inclusion of minorities and secular actors, and accountability for abuses. Without these conditions, external support for the new regime in Syria will only reinforce the very dynamics that destabilize Syria.

Canada is well placed to help rebalance western policy. Working with European partners, particularly the U.K. and France, Canada can promote a more sustainable approach, one that recognizes that stability comes not from concentrating power but from distributing it in a way that creates balance and restraint.

In that context, we recommend that both Canada and the broader international community should condition all of their engagement with Syria on democratic and decentralized governance; advocate for international guarantees and monitoring mechanisms, especially for the implementation of the agreement with the Kurds; reject unconditional legitimacy for Damascus; support inclusive negotiations involving all major communities; and promote decentralization as the core constitutional framework for stability.

Let me conclude by re-emphasizing that granting legitimacy to the new regime in Syria without conditions enables centralization and repression and ultimately fuels instability.

• (1545)

Stability in Syria, to repeat, will not come from concentrating power in Damascus. It will come from building a system in which diverse communities act as a counterweight, keeping authoritarian

and fundamentalist tendencies in check. I urge Canadian policymakers to help make that balance possible.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

I now invite Ms. Muzna Dureid to make her opening statement of up to five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Muzna Dureid (Co-Founder, The Syrian Women's Political Movement): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for inviting me to testify today.

[*English*]

My name is Muzna Dureid. I'm a Syrian Canadian woman, a mother and a former refugee. I grew up in al-Qadam, in Damascus, a neighbourhood that was systematically wiped out by the Assad regime and its allies. My family endured five years of siege, bombardment, mass killing, forced detention and displacement.

I arrived in Canada in 2016 as an asylum seeker, young, alone and without a plan, seeking only safety and the chance to reunite with my family. I rebuilt my life in Canada from scratch while continuing to advocate for Syria through civil society work focused on women's rights, displacement and humanitarian response. I'm grateful for what Canada offered me.

Today, I appear before you to speak about what Canada can offer Syria.

Assad's fall gave millions of Syrians something they had not felt in over a decade: hope. Syria now stands at a deeply fragile crossroads. More than three million refugees and displaced persons have returned home. Tens of thousands walked free, but hundreds of thousands remain missing.

A transitional government was set to lead the country, which was devastated by war, repression and institutional collapse, yet Syria's transition remains profoundly vulnerable. The northeast is not stable. Israeli bombardment and unlawful external interventions continue. There's still no legislative body. Sectarian massacres were committed in Sweida and on the coast by undisciplined pro-government groups. Armed groups continue to resist integration into a unified state, and more than 80% of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line.

This is the reality Canada must engage with, not the Syria of yesterday's headlines.

I'm here because I choose to support Syria's transition not out of political agreement with its new authorities but because this sensitive moment requires collaboration across different actors. Supporting a transition is not the same as endorsing it. Canada should move toward direct, principled political engagement with Syria's new authorities in coordination with allies and with a clear expectation.

Other Five Eyes partners and G7 countries have already moved by opening embassies, establishing direct co-operation and trade, and shaping the political space. Canada should not remain absent while that space is being formed by others. Diplomatic engagement is not naivety. It's not endorsement. It's a recognition of reality and a decision to use presence to influence outcomes.

Canada has in the past engaged political actors who emerged from armed backgrounds. History teaches us that transitions are messy and that yesterday's armed actor can, under the right conditions, become part of tomorrow's political settlement.

There are four priorities for Canadian action.

First, Canada should support an inclusive political transition. Women, minorities, civil society representatives and Syrians from across the country must have a meaningful role in shaping the constitution, new institutions and national reconciliation.

Second, Canada should support accountability and transitional justice. Syria cannot build a durable future on recycled impunity. That means supporting the national transitional justice commission and related actors working to establish credible accountability and a clear break from the abuses of the past.

Third, Canada should invest in state-building and civilian recovery, not only humanitarian relief. Functioning institutions, education, local services and security sector reform are what will determine whether this transition holds.

Fourth, Canada should draw on the expertise of Syrian Canadians. Canada is home to one of the most capable Syrian diasporas in the world, including individuals with deep expertise in policy, law, technology and humanitarian response. This is an underutilized asset. Strengthened diplomatic and consular relations would create mutual benefits for both countries. I note that four current Syrian cabinet ministers and an ambassador to the UN hold Canadian citizenship and direct ties to Canada.

In conclusion, Syria's transition must be inclusive, accountable, rights-based and led by Syrians themselves. If successful, it could serve as a testament to the power of international co-operation and a beacon of hope for those emerging from destruction.

● (1550)

The question before this committee is not whether Syria's transition is perfect. It's not. Engagement is not a gift we give when a transition succeeds. It is one of the tools that helps a transition succeed.

The real question is whether this fragile opening is worth engaging, strengthening and helping to shape before it collapses—and I believe it is.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation.

[*English*]

I now turn to questions from members, beginning with MP Ziad Aboultaif.

You have six minutes.

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

Ms. Dureid, Mr. Ozsoy and Mr. Bonsey, welcome to the committee and thanks for participating today.

Mr. Ozsoy, in March 2025, Syria enacted constitutional guarantees protecting minorities and the freedom of all Syrians, yet in thousands of reported cases, minorities, including Alawites, Druze, Kurds and Christians, have faced humiliation, displacement, murder and injury in addition to the kidnapping and raping of women and girls.

To what degree has Syria been effective in abiding by constitutional guarantees and defending the freedom of Syrian minorities?

Hisyar Ozsoy: Thank you.

Now we are in a transitional process. Honestly, we can't actually talk about the rule of law. The president is issuing some decrees from time to time, and they are passing as laws. The constitutional process is probably going to take five to seven years—we don't know.

What we have seen so far on the ground is that those kinds of guarantees have not provided the minorities with safety for their lives. Everybody is scared.

The idea is that everybody, both the communities in Syria and the international community, really has to work together. I totally agree with Muzna Dureid, the previous speaker. We all need to collaborate on this. It's a very difficult transition.

At the same time, we have not been able to see the government there, which is receiving some kind of international legitimacy and support, help include those historically persecuted communities in the process of governance. Unfortunately, the experience on the ground for the Alawites, Druze and Kurds has not been good, I should say. The words are there. Statements sometimes come from Damascus, which should be appreciated and encouraged, about the rights of minorities of women. In reality, unfortunately, there have been severe consequences for all of these communities.

They want to negotiate a fair deal with Damascus. To my understanding, nobody's opposed to the international community working with Mr. Sharaa in Damascus now. How is it going to work? Is it going to be a centralized and Islamist government repressing all of the communities, the secular forces and the women?

In that context, I would like to just repeat that, yes, Syria's transition should be supported in any way possible, but at the same time, that support should be clearly conditional to make sure that an inclusive and democratic structure emerges in Syria.

• (1555)

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you. That leads me to a second question.

A United Nations commission of inquiry reported in August 2025 that massacres and war crimes took place across Syria in March 2025. The report found that some of the perpetrators were pro-government fighters.

To what extent do you believe the interim Syrian government was involved?

Hisyar Ozsoy: We really don't have a lot of facts on the ground, because it's so difficult for the journalists and other people to go and really do fact-finding missions. Definitely, some of them were encouraged by the government and, I should say, the tribes in particular. We know many of them were sympathetic to the government. Some Turkish proxies were also quite active, particularly in the coastal areas where the Alawite people were massacred. We know that.

It is also true that Mr. Sharaa is not in full control of all of those militias and armed groups. At the same time, he is the president of the country, and he needs to find a way to stop those kinds of massacres. It is—

Ziad Aboultaif: We're talking about the United Nations commission's report, and that's serious. They took the time, they went on the ground and they met with vulnerable people, displaced people. People were killed. The towns were burned. Women were taken and were raped...and girls. This is very a credible and serious report, isn't it?

Hisyar Ozsoy: Yes, definitely, that is true. I think what they depicted there is very limited. I mean, most recently, when the attacks on the two neighbourhoods in Aleppo happened, we saw how women were killed and thrown from the balconies. None of that came to the attention of the international community. It's not just.... All kinds of atrocities, honestly, are happening there.

Whether the government in Damascus cannot or maybe is not willing to...somehow that government is also seeking to repress those communities in the process of centralizing power. It is not just some crazy people trying to kill each other. It is a process of the centralization of power and the destruction of those communities who actually don't feel safe vis-à-vis the new regime.

Ziad Aboultaif: As a quick question, what methods are available to hold the government responsible or accountable for the actions?

Hisyar Ozsoy: I mean, when it comes to the international community.... That's what I tried to stress in my speech. Syria is a country that is totally devastated. Its people were killed—over 500,000 people by the most conservative estimates—and tens of millions of people left the country. There's no economy, no security and no safety. It is in ruins.

Of course, the Syrian government and people cannot repair the damage just by themselves, so any kind of international support is needed. Legitimacy, reconstruction funds and normalization, I total-

ly agree with these, but all of this should happen in a conditional way. Make sure that the regime in Syria is not going to be another repressive, authoritarian, centralized regime.

The previous one was secular, and this one may be Islamist, but the nature of power is important. Is it going to be a decentralized democratic government, including all kinds of communities, not just ethnic and sectarian communities but women and secular forces in society—or not? If the current president of the country and the people around him are not willing to have a democratic government, then of course the international community should have reservations. That is why I say any engagement should be strictly conditional.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We next go to MP Vandenberg. You have six minutes.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses.

Each of you really spoke about the theme that the democratic transition that's happening in Syria really needs to respect diversity, respect rights and build an inclusive democracy. I would like to delve a bit into that.

I'll start with you, Ms. Dureid, but I'd also like to hear from Mr. Ozsoy later about the Kurdish communities in particular. Ms. Dureid, you have done a lot of work around women, peace and security. We know and we've seen globally that when women are not just beneficiaries of aid but are actually at the table, participating, and have a real role in the governance process, the peace and the stability last longer. I wonder whether you could tell us what you think Canada can do, given that we now have our third national action plan on women, peace and security, and Canada has a lot of expertise in this area.

Is this where Canada might have a niche, where we could provide support to the women in Syria in this regard?

Muzna Dureid: Thank you for this important question.

Actually Canada was supporting the Syrian women's political movement, which is like the one I'm part of, over the last seven years, which helped us to achieve a lot. The only woman minister in the cabinet now, Hind Kabawat, is co-founder of our movement. The fruit of all of the investment that Canada did in the past now is visible for everyone. What's needed now is to continue to support civil society and initiatives that support women's participation and also to put pressure on both the society and the government to increase women's participation, but also to engage with the government in terms of advising and supporting the government, for example, to remove all of the reservations on the CEDAW convention and to support the national action plan on peace and security. It's also to learn from other Arab countries, most likely Jordan, that have achieved a lot on this file.

There's a lot for Canada to do, but if you don't engage with the government, you can't also pressure a government to do something specific, specifically when it comes to women's participation, because historically in Syria we have women who have been marginalized by the law and by the society. Now it's time to see women in government, leading the change of the law in Syria and changing the social norms as well.

Anita Vandebeld: Thank you very much. There's some very good advice there.

I'd like to turn to Mr. Ozsoy.

You talked about the opportunity in decentralization and some of the danger in too much centralization. We know that there are, as you mentioned, many minority groups. The Kurdish community in particular is divided because it exists in so many countries. We see examples where Kurds have self-governance and autonomy. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what it would look like to ensure that we have that kind of inclusive governance, decentralization, and we don't bake into future structures some of the fault lines that you talked about that would then cause it to fracture.

• (1605)

Hisyar Ozsoy: Thank you for this great question. There are two things. One, yes, the Kurds live in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. In Iraq, they have a federal structure that's recognized internationally and also by the constitution, of course, of Iraq.

In Syria, the Kurds demand some degree of autonomy. This is not, as I said in my speech, separatism. It is to make sure that they have structures of self-governance within Syria, within a decentralized Syria, and they are trying to make their contributions while the regime in Damascus is trying to undermine any kind of decentralization. That is the central problem, central question. The same goes with the Druze or the Alevis.

I want to also say one more thing about the question of women. I think that is going to be the very character of the emerging regime in Syria. You see, the whole western world was mesmerized by gorgeous—I am being a little bit sarcastic here—Kurdish women who were fighting ISIS. They helped greatly to defeat ISIS. They were fighters, actually. I mean, the YPG. Even fashion magazines put them on their cover pages and were showing that. Now ISIS is defeated, Assad is gone and those Kurdish women who fought against ISIS want to be integrated into the new Syrian army. They are being told that there is no place for women in the army, and they should go back to their homes or their kitchens. Do you see how it works here?

This is the case of the Kurdish women who are trying to integrate—not to separate but to integrate—in an autonomous way, as themselves, as the people who fought against ISIS. The Kurds, the women and other minorities, unfortunately, are perceived by the central government as threats and not as interlocutors to talk to and work together to rebuild the country. The fall of Assad is a golden opportunity for all peoples of Syria. They can come together, work together and build something, but if those people in Damascus want to impose a strong centralized agenda on everybody else, we suspect new conflicts will emerge in the future. In that particular context, I think special attention should be paid to the situation of Kurdish women and Kurdish fighters.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hisyar Ozsoy: Now they are doing diplomacy to get support so they can negotiate with the central government.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe. You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you, Mr. Ozsoy. Your last comment was very interesting.

You said things are particularly dangerous because power has coalesced around the presidency. Some local political actors, Kurds and Druze, are currently in danger. Women's rights are another big issue.

Figuring out how to support a regime in transition, like Syria's, is always tricky. There's a chance such support could legitimize a power that continues to repress Kurds, Druze and women.

Is there anything the regime absolutely must not do if it wants to hold on to support from countries that want to help Syria through this transition? If so, what would that be?

[*English*]

Hisyar Ozsoy: Here is the situation. We don't really have a mission or a mechanism with reports that are binding on the international community, unfortunately. What we need are two things. The first is monitoring mechanisms on the ground. What is really happening on the ground? We need to periodically gather facts about what is happening on the ground. If these developments are against international law—nowadays, actually, many people don't even comply with international law. Still, there's the issue of democratic governance, the issue of autonomy and the issue of women's rights.

When I said in my speech that any kind of support and legitimacy should only be granted based on conditionality, those conditions should be specified clearly. For example, when the U.S. Congress was trying to balance the U.S. administration, they came up with a discussion, a good debate, and actually set some conditions. If the Syrian president, the new regime, does this and that, we will continue our support, but there is no blank cheque; you can't just get our support and then go and kill some minorities in Syria.

In that sense, we need institutional monitoring mechanisms and periodic reports, and if the government is not scoring well, then there should be negotiations. There should be constant pressure on the government. To be honest, in terms of ideological and political orientation, the current president is pragmatic because he needs international legitimacy and support. However, in terms of his ideological and political orientation, to be honest, we don't trust him and we think he should do more to gain the trust of and legitimacy from the international community.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Dureid, what can you tell us about women's participation in Syria's transition at this point?

Muzna Dureid: Unfortunately, women's participation is very low. We need to push for more Syrian women to get involved in politics. We need to pressure the government to ensure that women have a seat at the table. We need women of diverse backgrounds to ensure political and ethnic diversity. I think women's participation is a priority for Syria now.

We know that women aren't participating much. They're isolated. Canada has experience and is in a position to talk to the government and other partners. We have to make sure that women are active and have a seat at the political table so they can participate in the constitution, in parliament and everywhere.

Six women won parliamentary elections. We're still waiting for the president's third list to find out what the percentage of women in Parliament will be.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Bonsey, can you tell us whether the current crisis in the Middle East between Israel, Iran and the United States is having an impact on the transition in Syria?

[*English*]

The Chair: Please give a brief response.

Noah Bonsey: Of course. The short answer is yes. Obviously, Syria is less impacted than places that have been drawn into the war directly. However, as I mentioned briefly in my remarks, obviously, the humanitarian needs are so high that more disruption, displacement and disorder in the region mean donors will be stretched thin. Crucially, Damascus has gambled on gulf support. The needs are immense. They have bet on having direct gulf support for the government, including the paying of state salaries, as well as investment in the broader economy.

We can all imagine that, in Riyadh, Doha and the Emirates, priorities are going to change as a result of this regional war. They'll be needing to spend more on their own defence and other domestic priorities. That will leave a huge gap that others are going to need to fill. Canada, obviously, has a major potential positive role to play here.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start the next round of questions, beginning with MP Lianne Rood.

You have five minutes.

Lianne Rood (Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here today. My first question is for Mr. Ozsoy.

Canada claims to fight terrorism, yet we are engaging with a government that emerged from an Islamist armed movement while sidelining the very forces that helped defeat ISIS. How is that justifiable to Canadians?

Hisyar Ozsoy: We are asking the same question about how a person who was listed as a terrorist two years ago is being welcomed in every major capital in the world—in Europe, the U.S. and Washington, D.C. We see that there is some pragmatism here. President Trump—whom I don't want to quote at all—said that this was the guy they could find.

That country really wants to rebuild. It's not just about the regime. It's about the people. We are talking about tens of millions of people who are trying to rebuild their country. In that sense, it is about engagement. Assad, al-Sharaa or some other person could be there, but somebody will be leading this transition. Some democratic-minded, secular and pro-women person would be ideal, but given the geography.... It is an unfortunate situation.

What the international community can do now, from the inside and outside, is to make sure that although the Islamist regime has authoritarian tendencies, there are checks and balances working to somehow put it on the right track. We know it is a very difficult situation, but if it is left to its own conditions, I suspect we would have a very dysfunctional and repressive political regime in Syria. Therefore, the engagement of the international community is necessary not for al-Sharaa but for the peoples of Syria—that whole multiplicity. Everybody is trying to come out of that war.

However, that support should be very carefully organized and conditional on some fundamental principles.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bonsey, Canada has moved towards engagement with the Syrian authority linked to Ahmed al-Sharaa and removed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from its terrorist list.

Can you speak to what due diligence was conducted to determine that this leadership no longer poses an extremist threat, and is Canadian policy like this legitimizing former jihadist networks?

Noah Bonsey: Thank you for the question.

Others in the room can better speak to the specifics of Canadian policy, so I'll leave that aside.

The background of the current leadership in Damascus is well known and not in dispute. What we can say, based not on their words but on their actions over the years, is that they have evolved, very concretely, quite a long way along the ideological spectrum. They are still Islamists. I don't think they would dispute that. However, they have become much more pragmatic and also less totalitarian over time. They have shown that they respond to positive and negative incentives.

I don't think anyone would expect countries around the world to be trusting what's in the heart of any other actor on the international scene, let alone a former jihadist group. Nobody's going to trust what's in their hearts. We're going to judge based on actions. What al-Sharaa and those around him have shown is that they respond to positive and negative incentives, so I—

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much. I'm sorry. I'm going to move on. I just have a minute left here.

Mr. Ozsoy, Turkey, a NATO ally, has conducted repeated military operations in northern Syria, targeting Kurdish cities and Kurdish forces, including the SDF. Turkey's actions are seen as undermining regional stability and counterterrorism efforts. What consequences should be imposed in response?

Hisyar Ozsoy: I would say that Turkey has been violating international law.

I was a member of Parliament for eight years. I now have to live in Germany in exile. I can't go back to my country. The democratic record and human rights record of Turkey are very well known. Unfortunately, Europe, the U.S. and everybody else have turned a blind eye to the deterioration of human rights and democracy in Turkey.

Engagement is a must in Syria and in Turkey, but as we say, all engagement should be strictly based upon conditionality. If Turkey agrees to some democratic standards, that's good. If not, there should be consequences for it.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we go to MP Steven Guilbeault.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for five minutes.

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

[*English*]

I would like to thank all our witnesses for being with us and sharing their experience and knowledge. Thank you very much.

Mr. Bonsey, I would like to pick up on the question from my colleague from the Bloc Québécois earlier. You had a brief amount of time to respond to what you feel are the broader implications of the regional conflict under transition. I'm offering you time to elaborate on the short answer you gave earlier.

Noah Bonsey: Thanks for that.

I really want to start with “humanitarian plus development”, because the material needs of Syria's population are just so massive. I mentioned earlier that there are 15 million people in need, according to UN estimates. That's the overwhelming majority of the country. That's almost everyone who lives there. Needs are immense.

Obviously, you're all familiar with the overall global constraining of international aid over the years, especially in light of changes by the Trump administration. When you add to that how thinly everyone will be stretched in light of the regional war, especially what's happening in neighbouring Lebanon.... Nearly 200,000 people have crossed from Lebanon to Syria during the current war. On top of that we all expect there will be a decline in gulf funding for the reasons I mentioned. Again, that was a big part of the bet in Damascus. You're simply left with massive needs that could stunt the entire recovery.

I think what we're all agreeing with here on the panel is that Syria needs engagement. Syria needs material support. Some of that support should be humanitarian and unconditional. People need to live.

Some of that support will be more development. Of course, Canada and other states will want to see certain things in response. How tangible or how conditional.... You will have political expectations for that support. I think that's understandable, but the scale needs to be massive in order for Syrians to be able to recover, for people to stay in their homes, to return to their homes and to build a new life for themselves.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you for that.

I have another question for you. How can Canada and like-minded countries balance our commitment to accountability for atrocities with the need to support progress towards social and political stability?

Noah Bonsey: Thanks. That's another great question.

There's no easy way to answer this because obviously you have tension here between crucial goals shared by all Syrians and.... In terms of this civil war, the dictatorship that led the country into the civil war, we're talking about egregious crimes of industrial scale—torture and collective punishment—committed by the regime, and egregious acts by other actors, including in the opposition, with of course, ISIS at the top of the list. The trauma, the scale and the intensity of what Syrians are looking to overcome demand a process for transitional justice. At the same time, moving on, keeping the country together and helping the country overcome its polarization and division requires making sure that the social fabric is maintained.

You see Damascus caught between these things. I know its supporters and critics in the international community are also caught. In other words, there's a tension between justice and people wanting to move on and pursue reconciliation. There's no easy answer.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Ms. Dureid, thank you for being with us and for your testimony.

In your remarks, you suggested that Canada should open an embassy. This isn't necessarily something the people we've heard from agree on.

In your opinion, what are the criteria that would justify doing that?

• (1625)

Muzna Dureid: Thank you for the question.

First, opening an embassy would signal Canada's intention to collaborate more with Syria and to be more active on the ground. It would also support Syrian civil society. Demand from Canadian and Syrian citizens would also have to be considered. The goal would be to make their lives easier because there's always war somewhere in the region, whether in Syria or in countries neighbouring Syria.

Syria is now more stable than it used to be. With war going on between the United States and Iran, Syria is more stable. There are lots of evacuations, and embassy staff in Syria have been transferred to Lebanon and Jordan. Syria is now being treated as a humanitarian evacuation partner for foreign citizens and embassy staff in other countries. The criteria are related to demand from citizens and the political will to co-operate with Syria.

The answer to both of your questions is yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you're next. You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Bonsey, you talked about how the Trump administration made drastic cuts to the USAID humanitarian aid program. There's

a crisis in the Middle East. Humanitarian aid from the Gulf countries to Syria is dwindling.

Unfortunately, European countries have followed suit and made severe cuts to humanitarian aid. Even Japan has slashed aid funding almost entirely. Canada is currently lagging behind on humanitarian aid. It cut \$2.5 billion in the last budget while boosting national defence spending to \$34 billion.

We just learned that there will be an economic update on April 28 in Ottawa. You have an opportunity right now to explain to the current government in Ottawa, which now has a majority, why humanitarian aid and international development are important, particularly for Syria.

Would you like to comment on that?

[*English*]

Noah Bonsey: Thank you for that.

We all saw, in negative terms, how destabilizing the Syrian war became through millions of Syrians fleeing the war, radicalization and all of the negative ways that unfolded. Syria now has an opportunity to be, basically, the reverse of that. It is, as others have mentioned, an island of stability in a region at war right now. It has a chance to become a success story. Its leadership does need to be engaged conditionally, as others are saying, but constructively, the country needs material support.

In a world where so much seems to be getting worse, Syria is a place that is actually getting better, relative to how horrible things have been over the last 15 years and beyond. It is worthy of your investment, even in a time of ever more constrained resources.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Dureid, I'll ask you the same question.

Muzna Dureid: I'm sorry, I didn't hear the question.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Canada will be delivering an economic update on April 28. You have the opportunity to send the Carney government a message about the importance of humanitarian aid and international development, including for Syria, so that it can restore funding to the envelope it recently cut by more than \$2.5 billion.

Would you like to comment on that?

Muzna Dureid: The humanitarian needs are immense. There's no guarantee the democratic transition will succeed without humanitarian aid for civilians, because there were problems to begin with.

Canada has invested a lot in humanitarian action to support civil society in Syria. It should continue doing so to support the transition because the situation is quite fragile. Some 1.5 million people are in internal camps, and refugees are returning to Syria. Right now, the war is putting a lot of pressure on gas prices and people's basic needs, so I think the government should continue to help Syria.

• (1630)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dureid.

Next, we have MP Michael Chong.

You have five minutes.

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

I have a question about Russia.

Russia has two bases in Syria: an air base and a naval base. The current government has suspended the 49-year lease, as we understand it. The implications of that are not clear.

Could all of you tell us what your analyses or assessments are of the future of these Russian naval and air bases in Syria?

Noah Bonsey: It's a great question. For this, we should really go back very briefly to what happened during the HTS-led rebel offensive that overthrew the country, because that tells us why Russia is still there.

During that offensive, as it was gaining ground, HTS, which is now the current leadership of Syria, reached out to the Russians and negotiated to keep the Russians from backing the regime to the very last moment. About halfway through their offensive, the Russians basically cut the regime loose, and that was the result of diplomatic engagement between the two. It's my understanding that there was no particular promise about the future other than the principle that the fall of the Assad regime did not mean that Russia would be kicked out immediately thereafter and discussions would follow.

Obviously, Syria's most important relationships right now are with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United States and with western countries, generally, including Canada. Russia is very far down the list. They do not have a friendly relationship with Russia at this stage, but they are trying to prevent the resumption of tensions. Russia backed the Assad regime to the hilt throughout the war. There's a lot of bad blood between Damascus and Moscow now, but they're trying to maintain a—let's say—normal relationship.

I think the future of those bases will be under constant negotiation between Damascus and Moscow. There will never be trust, but they will also try to avoid making unnecessary problems for each other. They'll look for shared interests where they exist, but I don't imagine they'll ever be allies.

Muzna Dureid: From my side, I think what Syria did—and we saw this last week when Mr. Zelenskyy visited Syria—was like a sign of trust and partnership between Syria and Ukraine to overcome all of the Russian atrocities and violations against both countries. Syria is trying to neutralize itself from Iran and from Russia.

The current war between Iran and the U.S. is a great example of how Syria is now neutral and is preventing support for Hezbollah from Iran. It was the passage and the bridge between Iran and Hezbollah in the past.

Another point here is that there is also a legal implication to what Assad concluded with Russia in the past. The fate of these bases

has not only a political view but also a legal view, because Russia had a contractor from the Assad regime for 40 years on one of the military bases, specifically the naval base.

It's a complicated question, but so far, the signs that we have in terms of collaboration with Ukraine and with neutralizing Syria from previous perpetrators, I would say, are good signs for the future.

• (1635)

Hisyar Ozsoy: I can just add that although there were some military delegations from Syria to Moscow, we know that the regime will definitely want to somehow diversify foreign policy. I mean, you can't simply just rely on one centre of power. I think that is one thing.

At the same time, Russia does have veto power at the United Nations. When it comes to Syria, it's very important. We are still working within the framework of the resolution of 2015. I think Russia does have some leverage there, and they will definitely want to keep those bases there, given that the eastern Mediterranean is going to be a very important geopolitical location energy-wise and security-wise. For now, I think it is being postponed, that kind of relationship, but once this regional war is over, I think we will see new developments. I don't think Sharaa can somehow simply neutralize Syria from Russia.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Last, we go to MP Kristina Tesser Derksen.

You have five minutes.

Kristina Tesser Derksen (Milton East—Halton Hills South, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to everyone for indulging me while I ask a question today as a guest here at the foreign affairs committee.

I was an undergraduate student studying political science when the Arab Spring broke out. I remember following it closely, and we've followed it closely since, as well as the tremendous loss of life and the destruction of infrastructure.

I want to ask Mr. Bonsey about the status of international financial institutions or private investors that might be working on rebuilding infrastructure in Syria, particularly with the concern surrounding opportunists who sometimes pop up when the regulatory environment might be a little unstable, and particularly concerns about corruption and contracts and that sort of thing. Is this something that your group monitors?

Noah Bonsey: It's far from my personal expertise, but I would say a couple of things here. One, obviously the removal of most sanctions, as well as the UN terrorist designations and Canadian, U.S. and other terrorist designations, has opened the playing field economically to an extent but not completely. You still have all kinds of obstacles, including that the U.S. still designates Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, which dates back decades into the Assad regime but remains on the books. We're still talking about a constrained environment.

We should also note, as was mentioned earlier, that rule of law is still very limited. We're in the middle of a transition and a transformation from one regime to a new order. In that environment, I agree that there's plenty of room for, let's say, lack of transparency. This is something that you see Syrian civil society really playing a key role on.

I'll just briefly say on this and on so many other issues that you have a robust role played by a very rich array of Syrian civil society groups who push back on government corruption and push back on all kinds of mistakes and disagreements. This is a reason for hope, I think, moving forward.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Just to follow up quickly, how would you measure progress? There's financial inputs and outputs, but are there other measurable, deliverable types of indicators that you would use to see if infrastructure development is progressing the way it should?

Noah Bonsey: You'll see I'm tentative here because I'm not an economist. I think what a lot of Syrians are looking for are very concrete things like the number of hours of electricity, how much that is going up and where, and so on and so forth. I mean, we're talking about a level of destruction to critical infrastructure that is utterly immense, and the recovery will be measured in years, obviously.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Thanks you very much. Those are my questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes this round of questions.

Thank you so much to all our guests for your appearance before the committee. We will now briefly suspend in order to prepare for the next panel.

• (1635) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

I would now like to introduce our witnesses for the second hour.

From Islamic Relief Canada, we have Tufail Khan, chief executive officer, joining us by video conference. From the Syrian Cana-

dian Congress, we have Dr. Ayman Al-Yassini, president and founder, who is here in person. From the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations Canada, we have Dr. Anas Al-Kassem, doctor and vice-president.

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

I now invite Mr. Khan to make an opening statement of not more than five minutes. Thank you.

Tufail Hussain Khan (Chief Executive Officer, Islamic Relief Canada): Mr. Chair, honourable members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.

My name is Tufail Hussain Khan, and I am the CEO of Islamic Relief Canada. I've been a humanitarian for the past 21 years, and I'm here today to share what we have witnessed on the ground and what we have learned from more than a decade of service in Syria.

Islamic Relief Canada is Canada's third-largest humanitarian and development organization, working in over 40 countries, including some in some of the most complex and fragile contexts. From the outset, I would like to highlight that our mandate is a humanitarian one. We adopt a position of neutrality in the countries where we operate, including Syria. My comments today will be about our mandate and experience, which includes providing life-saving relief and support for development in all affected communities.

We've been present in Syria since 2012, operating from six locations with approximately 130 staff. We serve people based on need, regardless of gender, background or identity. Our teams support communities across religious and ethnic lines. Since the beginning of the conflict, we have reached over one million a year through our water projects and 400,000 a year through our health care interventions. We have distributed over five million food packs a year.

Over the years, staff have faced serious risks to their own lives, exposure to active conflict and incidents such as detention or kidnapping for ransom. We lost two members—one of them in an air strike in 2015. Despite these challenges, our teams continue to deliver aid with the highest degree of care. We currently support over 80 health care facilities, reaching more than 400,000 patients annually while also providing food, water, psychosocial support, livelihoods training and orphan care.

As the political landscape has shifted, sanctions have been lifted and there is progress in Syria. However, the humanitarian situation remains extremely challenging. There is more stability and overall more security, and we have access in order to conduct our work. The situation, though, remains an emergency.

According to UNICEF, 16.5 million people in Syria require humanitarian assistance. While over 800,000 refugees returned last year, return does not mean recovery. Families are coming back to destroyed homes, damaged schools and weakened health systems. We see the crisis evolving rather than ending. Food insecurity remains widespread. Women and children continue to face the most severe consequences of displacement and instability.

From our experience, emergency relief and long-term recovery must happen simultaneously. To achieve this, we engage with local authorities in different ways. First, we engage for project approvals and, where relevant, for the selection of infrastructure to be rehabilitated. Second, we help develop capacity in areas where relief needs to become structural. For instance, in clinics where Islamic Relief was heavily involved, we train local doctors and health agencies to take this on.

We're increasing our focus on infrastructure and essential services, such as health care, water access and community systems, which will benefit hundreds of thousands in the coming years. In 2025, we implemented a project in Aleppo and Idlib supporting over 130,000 women and girls. This included essential medicine and reproductive health care. The project was initially co-funded by GAC, with up to 1.25 million pounds. It was renewed into 2026 with an additional \$1 million Canadian in funding for coordinated humanitarian and development efforts.

To do this, as a member of the humanitarian coalition and as an ongoing partner of the Government of Canada and GAC, I have a few recommendations.

Sustained support is critical. First, Syria continues to require long-term humanitarian and development assistance at scale.

Second, recovery must be community-centred and inclusive, ensuring access to essential services such as health care, food, water, education and livelihoods.

Third, we need Canada to continue supporting, protecting and facilitating humanitarian access.

Canada has an important role to play, not only as a donor but as a principled and trusted partner. On this path, Islamic Relief Canada will always stand ready to help.

• (1645)

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

I now invite Dr. Al-Yassini to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Ayman Al-Yassini (President-Founder, Syrian Canadian Congress): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members, I'm honoured to be with you today to address the issue of the future of Syria in the context of the recent developments over the past year and a half.

I'm with the Syrian Canadian Congress, a community organization that came into existence slightly over a year ago with the purpose of promoting community engagement, human rights, democratic governance and building bridges between Canada and Syria.

The Syrian Canadian diaspora is not recent in the Canadian mosaic. It goes back to the early 20th century, but since 2015, we've seen the expansion and the growth of that community. It has become an active and viable community.

In my address today, I would like to briefly cover a number of areas: one, the historical background; two, domestic and regional challenges; three, areas of fragility; and four, policy recommendations.

The Syrian situation today is one of inherited authoritarian rule, authoritarian domination and control, and an almost failed state. Beginning in 2011, the government's response to popular protests led to widespread destruction, the collapse of the economy, mass displacement and deep structural challenges that complicate the political transition and national reconciliation.

The areas of fragility include slow economic growth, inflation, unemployment and currency devaluation. There is limited governance capacity. Years of authoritarianism led to nothing but the total collapse of good governance. There is also the incomplete and incompetent security sector to forge a common security framework for the country—although some progress has been made in recent months.

As well, there are the minority communities. The Assad regime succeeded in establishing itself and gaining favourable reaction from foreign governments on the grounds that it was the protector of minority communities. That was a major falsehood. Instead of talking about the protection of minority communities, we need to address the issue of protecting the entire community through good governance and democratic values.

The Syrian government of today has made some serious progress in the areas of security, the coordination of the public service and the delivery of some services, but these are limited improvements and need co-operation and collaboration with international providers and partners.

Canada has a role to play in this process. In brief, I would like to make the following policy recommendations.

First, designate a Damascus-based ambassador and embassy to work on the development of the private sector, trade and consular services in the country. The current ambassador in Beirut, who is covering Syria as well, is doing an excellent job within the mandate that is assigned to him and his embassy staff. We need to go one step further and work on the establishment of a Damascus-based embassy.

Second, facilitate private sector engagement by encouraging Canadian businesses to conduct trade and to participate in the reconstruction of Syria.

Third, civil society is an important variable in Syrian society and needs to be supported and assisted.

Fourth, public administration in Syria is in total collapse. Canada has a lot to offer in providing assistance.

• (1650)

Finally, rely on and utilize the Syrian Canadian diaspora in providing services and assisting in the reconstruction of Syria.

Mr. Chair and honourable members, Syria stands at a critical moment. The choices are limited. The choice we make today is either to return to the past of destruction, social conflict and regional instability, or to move forward, judge the government's performance based on deliverables and build a better society. Canada has a long track record in the Middle East, going back to the 1950s. We need to capitalize on that long track record.

Thank you.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you for your statement.

I now invite Dr. Al-Kassem to make an opening statement.

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem (Doctor and Vice-President, Union of Medical Relief Organizations-Canada): Thank you, honourable committee chair, distinguished members of the committee, dear colleagues and witnesses.

My name, by the way, is Dr. Anas Al-Kassem. I appear before you as a chairman of the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, and as a VP of the Canadian office, but also as a Canadian and Syrian surgeon who has personally conducted more than 20 medical missions into Syria during the 14 years of war, the worst man-made disaster, per the UN, since World War II. Even Gaza is not worse than Syria in terms of the numbers, by the way. It's horrible. I've been to Gaza, but Syria has been the worst since World War II.

During these missions, I worked in field hospitals along the borders of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and later inside Syria, in Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa and rural Damascus. The only city I wasn't was able to get into because it was so dangerous for me, personally, was Damascus, my city.

We helped establish hospitals. At Bab Al-Hawa Hospital, one of them at the Turkish border, there were more than 1,500 surgeries being performed on a monthly basis during the war. We also created primary health care centres and the first mental health hospital in northern Syria. I had the honour of initiating the trauma registry in Syria during the war. There were over 200,000 injury cases, with their demographics confirming that 50% of the victims were women and children.

In these field hospitals, I personally treated with a lot of Canadian doctors. I had the honour to go with them to Syria. We treated thousands of patients, but the majority of them were Sunni. The truth is that the Sunni majority paid the heaviest price under the As-

sad regime, enduring decades of targeted slaughter, bombings and mass detention. Many of these men, women and children—I still remember some of them—died in my hands. I saw first-hand how Assad, Iran and Russia deliberately targeted hospitals, maybe for the first time in modern history, making medical care almost impossible in many areas.

Now, with the regime gone, the priority is ensuring that the minorities feel safe and included, because lasting stability requires healing all wounds, not repeating the cycle of exclusion. While there have been occasional tensions and setbacks, expected in any post-conflict transition, the overall trend—as we heard from many colleagues and witnesses before—has been towards stabilization and inclusive governance.

In January 2026, President al-Sharaa issued presidential decree number 13, restoring full citizenship to Kurds who were stripped of it in 1962, declaring Nowruz a national holiday for the first time in Syrian history, and also launching reconciliation committees for both Alawite and Druze communities.

The new government has been incredibly open to hearing from advocates and humanitarian organizations like ours. I was invited to meet President al-Sharaa in New York during the UN General Assembly in September last year. I also met the Minister for Social Affairs, our friend, a fellow Syrian Canadian, Honourable Mrs. Hind Kabawat. We talked about how our organizations can empower women in health care, expand women's care services and provide psychosocial supports to thousands of vulnerable women and children in Syria. These talks are not just symbolic. The new government is ready to listen and work. Our discussions are resulting in tangible changes.

Dear chair and committee members, as humanitarians, we must shift our focus from short-term aid to long-term development in Syria. Syria cannot build through food aid and mobile clinics alone. We must invest in health care, infrastructure, education, nursing programs, medical training and women's empowerment in health care leadership. This year I also met the Minister of Health, the Honourable al-Ali, to discuss how our organization can support strengthening the fragile Syrian health care system. This is only possible because of the funds that we are able to receive from countries like Germany—through the GIZ—the EU and recently from the GAC in Canada, as we received generous funds for the health care system and humanitarian aid.

• (1700)

This is where Canada can lead and is uniquely positioned to do so. Canada is a pioneer in medical education. I graduated from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada here in Ottawa in 2006. The royal college has been a global leader in competency-based medical education through the innovative CanMEDS framework and the competence by design initiative. This model has served as an inspiration for many countries in the Middle East and elsewhere. We can now transfer this valuable expertise to support the doctors and nurses who suffered for years under the previous Syrian regime.

The next decade will determine whether Syria remains dependent on humanitarian assistance or begins a genuine recovery. Investing in health care and education today will build stability, strengthen communities and support inclusive governance for all Syrians.

I thank the committee and the Government of Canada for their leadership and continued engagement at this historic moment for Syria.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

I now open the floor for questions, beginning with MP Kronis.

You have six minutes.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you very much for your hospitality in letting me join you today.

Dr. Al-Kassem, when was your last trip to Syria?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: After what we call the liberation of Syria, I visited Syria four times. The last time was in February, just more than a month ago.

Tamara Kronis: You've been there quite a lot. I'm quite taken by the fact that a mental hospital has been opened in the north. When you think about the kind of PTSD that comes out of war and the conditions that Syrians have been living under, and that Syrian Canadians have also lived under and the worry that people have about their relatives back home, can you tell us a bit more about that and the innovative things it's doing to treat PTSD from the circumstances that people have lived through?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Thank you very much for the question.

We have been focusing in our organization on primary health care and psychosocial support and mental health. More than two million children in Syria are suffering from severe mental health illnesses according to the UN. We took this initiative because we found that in northern Syria there had been no single hospital for admissions. Therefore, we go to people's tents and try to support the children and vulnerable populations with psychosocial supports. A lot of them need admissions and ongoing medications and care in the hospital.

We started this hospital about four years ago, and we have admitted thousands of children. A lot of them are out of the hospital now and back in their villages and cities in Syria.

Tamara Kronis: It's always amazing how resilient children are, even in war, but how widespread is PTSD among civilians?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: It is huge. You'll be surprised, honourable member, that I was a victim of PTSD, both after coming back from Gaza and from Syria, and I needed psychosocial support in Canada.

If a physician goes to Syria for a week or two, or a Canadian nurse or a foreigner, they might need some treatment. Imagine children and women. I remember that I was in a hospital there, and it was safe and everything was fine, but the children were constantly hearing bombs and could not sleep. It is widespread, and I think it's way underestimated. Canada has pioneered expertise in mental health, and I think we can deploy a lot of help—not only funding but also a lot of expertise from our great mental health specialists in Canada—to treat thousands of vulnerable people in Syria.

Tamara Kronis: What kinds of treatments are available in the hospital that you've described in northern Syria, the mental hospital you started?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: We started providing them with medications. During the war, it was only counselling. We did not have a lot of the drugs that were badly needed for depression, anxiety, PTSD and so forth. Now we have the ability to provide electric shocks in some cases for deep depression and anxiety, and all of these kinds of methods to treat deep depression. We have educated and trained nurses in mental health and psychosocial support.

In Syria, unfortunately, there is a big lack, dating even from before the war, in a psychiatry as a specialty. That was an issue. We were lucky to have a lot of Canadian psychiatrists volunteering online through telemedicine to treat thousands of patients that way through this hospital.

• (1705)

Tamara Kronis: You commented near the end of your remarks about how important the next decade will be, within the Syrian context, to see whether Syria will truly be able to separate itself from the proxy wars that have really destroyed it, the wars waged by the likes of Iran and Russia, and the alternative.

What are the consequences in your mind of not treating the PTSD that is so pervasive in post-war areas like Syria?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: This is a very important question. For lot of workers, including my colleagues, nurses and doctors in Syria, to be functioning and to go back to the health care sector and be quite effective, we need to treat them.

We always underestimated the health care workers who are impacted by PTSD. Every time I go there, I figure out that we need to focus on the workers first, before focusing on the patients. I think a national program focusing on all health care workers—talking in this case about my specialty—would be very valuable in bringing them back to work and to be more effective. Otherwise, we're going to be missing a lot of health care workers in Syria.

Tamara Kronis: You also made reference in your remarks to this work really being meaningful, in that you're getting to work with mostly women and children and really seeing the impact of the Assad regime and its violations of international humanitarian law. Is there any joint work being done with the demographics that you're working with, to be able to also help pull evidence together and assist international investigators in doing the work that needs to be done there?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: We have been working with some groups, such as Muzna's group in Syria—one of the witnesses earlier—a lot of the women's organizations and health care organizations and human rights organizations in Syria and internationally to heal all of these wounds. There has been some success, but I think it needs a lot of funds and work going forward.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you for the work you do.

The Chair: We next go to MP Vandenberg for six minutes.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much, and I appreciate all of the witnesses.

I want to talk a little bit about the number of people who are returning, which was just touched on very briefly. As we've seen in other places, when you see large numbers of people returning, it can put pressure not just on the food and infrastructure but also on social relations. I wonder if you could tell us a little about both the pressures that are coming from the returns and the opportunities they result in.

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Is that for me or Mr. Al-Yassini?

Anita Vandenberg: I will give each of you a little bit of time to answer that, maybe starting online with Mr. Khan, and then we'll go to the room.

Tufail Hussain Khan: We've seen serious challenges because people are returning to destroyed villages and cities, roads, hospitals, clinics and water projects. Unfortunately, the people who are returning are dependent on aid agencies like Islamic Relief and the burden is ever increasing.

We now have a long-term development plan, which is to rebuild everything I've just mentioned: roads, clinics, hospitals and schools. It's a very large and ambitious plan. The challenge we face, of course, is that there is a dearth of funding available for long-term development plans. Syria is no longer in the headlines and over 90% of our income comes from the community, the most generous faith-based community in Canada, the Muslim community.

However, they're not hearing anything about Syria anymore, so we're struggling to raise funds for these very important long-term development projects. We need the Canadian government to continue supporting those efforts, because right now, without the support of GAC and the Canadian government, we would struggle to deliv-

er these very important projects, which help not just returning refugees but also the wider population inside Syria.

• (1710)

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: I can add to this as well.

We have probably about 1.5 million refugees internally displaced in Syria, despite the end of the war. I have been to the Turkish border and I have seen thousands of tents. The people have been living there for 10 or 13 years. I imagine a lot of them were born there. The child doesn't know anything apart from a tent.

When I asked some of the people and leaders in these kinds of camps, they told me that they needed three things. They need to rebuild their houses and the villages. They need trusted health care. They need education. Nobody's going to go back to their villages to build a house if there is no health care and no education.

That's an excellent question. If we can help by building the education and health care in these villages and towns—not just building their towns, bridges and so forth—then a lot of them will come back to their villages.

Ayman Al-Yassini: This is the situation as it is now: We have an increase in poverty in Syria. There is a rise in the cost of living. There are many challenges to government services. The government is incapable of providing electricity and some basic services to the society at large.

In addition to that, we have the influx of internally displaced refugees trying to return to their places of birth or where they came from. That is adding tremendous pressure on government services and the economy as a whole. Plus, there are the returnees from Turkey and Europe. Fortunately, there are discussions going on between the Syrian government and the European community—Germany in particular—to coordinate the return of Syrian refugees.

There is a need to mention that some of the European countries—Germany, for example—seem to perceive the situation of Syrian refugees as a problem that they need to address by encouraging Syrian refugees to return. However, the issue is not that simple. The return of Syrian refugees from Germany to Syria needs to be voluntary. It needs to be coordinated with the Syrian government and matched with building a reasonable infrastructure to absorb the returnees.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I would say that in Canada we're benefiting tremendously from the contributions of Syrian refugees.

I'd like to quickly go back to Mr. Khan.

We think about women in these kinds of crisis situations as victims and beneficiaries of aid. What have you seen in terms of women as active participants in the solutions and the rebuilding?

Tufail Hussain Khan: One project that I've already mentioned is the GAC project, through which we are supporting 130,000 women and children. Key to designing that program was the involvement of women in Syria.

It's a very important principle for us to ensure that beneficiaries are involved in the design of any program. They have been very much active participants in the designing of many of our programs. Many of our programs are centred on the needs of the most vulnerable in society. We have needs criteria wherever we work. At the top of those needs criteria are female-headed households, for example. We will always ensure that they are involved.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We next go to MP Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have six minutes.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Al-Yassini, you represent the Syrian Canadian community in Canada.

Can you tell us how hopeful and confident the Syrian diaspora in Canada is in the democratic transition process in Syria right now?

[*English*]

Ayman Al-Yassini: The Syrian diaspora in Canada is a reflection of Syrian society at large. There are divergent views among the communities. Some of these views are driven by ethnic or religious affiliation, and there are other factors such as political affiliation of these individuals or their families.

On the whole, the Syrian community in Canada is encouraged by the change. They see and they realize that the Assad regime was an abusive totalitarian government. The victims of the Assad regime included minorities. This is in contrast to the perception—or the misperception—that the Assad regime had protected minorities.

The Syrian community is encouraged. They would like to see changes, but they are somewhat impatient with the rate of change that is taking place. It is a difficult task for any government—and I'm not justifying one policy or another—particularly a government that came into existence as a result of opposition and military activities, to become a civilian government ruling a complex society.

On the level of the presidency—and this is my reading of the situation—the cabinet has good intentions, but the mentality of authoritarianism and sectarianism seem to have filtered down throughout society, and that is being reflected on the level of government decisions. For example, in the government of Damascus, some decisions were taken recently that antagonized the Christian community and other communities, such as the government mishandling of the protests in Latakia. That is another challenge.

In brief, there's a need to take it issue by issue and to look at the situation as it evolves. The Syrian community as a whole, or the

vast majority, I believe, are supportive of the changes, but they would like to see more happening.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for your detailed answer. That was great.

I want to ask Mr. Khan and Mr. Al-Kassem a couple of quick questions.

We talked about international aid and about how most western countries are cutting their budgets.

Do you think that current international aid budgets are sufficient? I mean not just Canada's, but also those of European countries and rich countries?

Are we doing a good job of meeting the needs of the Syrian people, Mr. Khan?

Mr. Al-Kassem, perhaps you could answer the question from a medical or public health perspective.

You can go first, Mr. Khan.

[*English*]

Tufail Hussain Khan: Frankly speaking, the reduction in ODA from countries across the world, especially USAID, which was by far the largest contributor of aid to the international development and humanitarian system, has been nothing short of devastating. We're seeing the effects on the ground in Syria, where 16.5 million people are dependent on humanitarian organizations like Islamic Relief. This is beyond organizations like Islamic Relief, who depend very much on voluntary income from the Muslim community.

As I mentioned earlier, over 90% of our income comes from the community. This level of need needs governmental and multinational support. It needs huge amounts of support for us to make the immediate and lasting change that is needed for the people of Syria. Otherwise, it seems like we're just applying plasters to this very difficult situation.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Al-Kassem, what are your thoughts on that?

[*English*]

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Thank you very much, honourable member, for this question.

I agree that the pulling out of USAID has been a big blow. In addition to that, recently we have seen in our organization that a lot of funds have been directed toward Gaza and Yemen, and there's a lot of conflict going on in that area. We still receive funds from Canada and from European partners, but there have been more challenges to help other conflicts. Sudan is an example as well, and that impacted Syria big time. We are quite concerned about the shortage of funding for the humanitarian and development initiatives.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Ziad Aboultaif. You have five minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thanks, Chair. Thanks to the witnesses for appearing before the committee today, and welcome.

Mr. Al-Yassini, you are the president and founder of the Syrian Canadian Congress. You spoke about the ethnic and religious groups among the Syrian community in Canada. Do you believe that your congress represents all these communities?

Ayman Al-Yassini: Probably not, no. I think it would be quite foolish to think that any group represents the entire Syrian community or the diaspora. The Syrian community, like other ethnic cultural communities in Canada, is diverse. They have different interpretations of the past and the present, let alone the future.

Do we represent the Syrian community as a whole? No. However, we do represent values—the values of good governance, a commitment to human rights and an inclusive society—and we also believe that Canada has a lot to share with Syria.

Ziad Aboultaif: You spoke about very important Canadian values—human rights, democracy, inclusiveness. Also, Dr. Al-Kassem spoke about safe communities, safe minorities in Canada and inclusiveness. Do you believe that these ethnic and religious communities are safe in Syria now?

Ayman Al-Yassini: These communities—and when I say “these communities”, I'm talking about cultural, ethnic and religious communities—are under pressure internally and externally. Internally, they are under pressure because of the legacy of authoritarianism. As a matter of fact, I will go even one step further and say that since Syria's independence, communalism has always been at the forefront in the relationships among communities.

They are under pressure on the regional front as well. Israel is not assisting this situation in any way. The Israeli attempts to galvanize the Druze community to secede from Syria is unfortunate. It is damaging Syria's potential for recovery and is also having an impact on regional stability.

Are they safe? No. Can we make them safe and safer? The answer is yes. That is a place for Canada to play a role.

Ziad Aboultaif: International reports talk about government forces being involved in killing and attacking different minority groups in Syria in the last year or so. What would you tell the current government about that? If you are preaching for human rights, for democracy, for protection of these minorities, what would you tell the government about government forces being involved in killing its own citizens?

Ayman Al-Yassini: I take exception to the comment that the government's forces are killing its citizens, which gives the impres-

sion that this is a deliberate government policy. I do not believe that this is a deliberate government policy. On the contrary, when the events took place in the Latakia region, the Syrian government sent intermediaries and tried to address the issue. Also, of course, in the Sweida region, there were attempts to reach reconciliation.

What we need to do is deal somehow with public safety and the security of communities through the optics of human rights, as you've rightly alluded to. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and other international think tanks, agencies and monitoring groups do talk about the civil strife. These incidents are well documented, but I would develop and strengthen civil society and the inclusive community, and we need to educate and inform all—

● (1725)

Ziad Aboultaif: In Edmonton Manning, I have constituents from the Syrian communities—from the Kurds, from the Alawites, from the Druze, from them all. I met with them. They show me stories. I was listening to the killing of their people. I've seen pictures, videos, that are terrible, about how their families are being killed, tortured and displaced, and how women were raped in Syria.

What can you tell the government about that?

The Chair: Give a very brief response, please.

Ayman Al-Yassini: Put all the resources in place to prevent these killings, adopt an aggressive policy and work on the other issues at the same time, such as transitional justice, economic development and regional co-operation.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally, we go to MP Steven Guilbeault.

You have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I am going to give my last minute to my colleague, Ms. Vandenberg.

[*English*]

Mr. Khan, in your introduction you said that Canada had an important role to play in humanitarian assistance. Can you elaborate more specifically on what that role could be for Canada, please?

Tufail Hussain Khan: Canada has done great work to recalibrate its sanctions framework, taking a more targeted approach. We need to ensure that these changes have been communicated to the financial organizations and to people within our supply chain. This will help organizations like Islamic Relief work with agility and will allow us to get aid through to those most in need more quickly.

We've already mentioned that funding is needed. When we're looking at the numbers, we consider the destruction. I think Dr. Al-Kassem mentioned that the destruction in Syria is greater in terms of numbers, in terms of area, than in Gaza. We've never seen anything like Gaza. When you consider the huge need, we need governments to come forward and support and fund our long-term rehabilitation and sustainable development programs.

Canada has always been a respected humanitarian leader. It's going to take a country like Canada to show leadership on a global scale to inspire others to come forward and support the needs on the ground in Syria.

Those are the things that come to mind.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Can you help us understand or perhaps guide us in terms of support for early recovery and resilience, while maintaining a clear distinction from reconstruction efforts?

Tufail Hussain Khan: Health care is, of course, important to me. Dr. Al-Kassem has mentioned mental health support, which is urgently needed. Livelihood programs that allow people to come back and start some semblance of a livelihood and be able to stand on their own feet with dignity are important. So is shelter. Many people are still living in tents because hundreds of thousands of homes have been destroyed. These are the real, urgent, immediate needs that we need to address to help the Syrians stand on their own feet with dignity.

One thing I will say about the Syrians is that they are a very proud people, and they don't want to live on handouts. They want to be able to get out of this difficulty with dignity. Considering the huge need, they're not going to be able to do that without international assistance.

• (1730)

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Mr. Al-Kassem, how can we strengthen Canada's coordination efforts with like-minded countries in terms of humanitarian help, more specifically in the medical sector, to ensure efficiency and maximize benefit and perhaps ensure that there are no gaps?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: We have some established health care organizations that have expertise in working in war zones and work-

ing post-conflict as well. In reaching out to these organizations, not necessarily to work with the government directly, we want to benefit the people of Syria.

As Mr. Aboultaif has said, there have been some issues with handling an uprising here or there, such as in Sweida. We have to admit that, but at the same time, we need to target the people of Syria, the vulnerable women, the children of Syria. We have the ability to reach out to these credible organizations and work through them until we feel very comfortable working directly with the new Syrian government.

Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Chair, I think there's a little bit of time left.

The Chair: Yes.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

There's been some discussion amongst members, so I do hope there's unanimous consent to have Minister Anand come to talk about the estimates. I believe there is a motion in both official languages that's being distributed. I will just read the motion now.

I move that the committee agree to a one-meeting study of the main estimates and invite the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the deputy minister of foreign affairs and relevant officials from Global Affairs Canada.

The Chair: Thank you for presenting the motion.

Do colleagues support the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you to our guests for their appearance and statements and for answering all of the questions.

Our next meeting will be this Thursday.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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