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Chair: Ms. Lena Metlege Diab



Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights

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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone.

[*English*]

I'm going to go over some of the processes, and then I will seek the committee's consent on a small item of business before we start.

Welcome to meeting number 109 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

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

Before we begin, I want to remind members and other meeting participants in the room of the following preventative measures.

To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injury, all in-person participants are reminded to keep the earpieces that you all have in front of you away from the microphones at all times. For that purpose, there is a green, circular piece of paper on your desk. You are to place the earpiece face down on that when not in use and in your ear.

If you are not using the earpiece at all because you are totally bilingual in English and French, do not plug it into the system, and then you won't need to worry about it.

For those who know one of the two languages, please ensure you have received proper instructions on how to use the earpiece and how to select interpretation in the language that you understand. We have members on the committee who will be asking questions in English, and we have other members who will be asking in French.

[*Translation*]

In addition, some witnesses will speak in English and others in French. So you need to understand the questions and the answers. Thank you for your cooperation.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing you that all the sound checks have been done.

Before we begin our study and welcome our members, I have, for the committee itself, a bit of committee business.

The approval of the budget is required. The clerk has sent the budget to the committee members. I would request that it be moved and that it be approved. Can I get that, please? Does anyone have any problem with that?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you so much. It was agreed to unanimously.

We will now continue.

I want to remind members that we have two panels today. We will stop the first panel at 12:15 to allow for connection of the witnesses on the second panel, and we have a hard stop at 1:30 for the second panel.

It's my pleasure to welcome the witnesses on the first panel.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Joining us an individual is Nadia Hasan, assistant professor, women's and gender studies program, York University.

[*English*]

We have, from Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada, Mr. Asif Khan, national secretary, public relations.

[*Translation*]

We also have with us Amira Elghawaby, Canada's special representative on combatting Islamophobia.

[*English*]

Welcome.

Appearing virtually with us, from the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec, is Boufeldja Benabdallah, co-founder and spokesperson.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

We will start with five minutes each.

I will start with Madame Elghawaby, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Amira Elghawaby (Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia, Office of the Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia): Madam Chair, members of the committee, good day, *bonjour, salaam alaikum*.

Thank you for this invitation to join you today on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

Your study on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Canada, as well as what we can and should do about it, is not only necessary, but it is also urgent and has been for a long time.

[English]

The timing of this study is notable. Just last week I was in London, Ontario, for the third annual commemoration of the brutal terrorist attack that killed four members of the Afzaal family. On June 6, 2021, a man ran his pickup truck into the family while they were out for an evening walk. He killed a mother, a father, a grandmother and a sister, and left a nine-year-old boy orphaned.

This was a landmark case. It was the first in Canadian history that found that a violent act based on white nationalism had met the threshold of terrorism. It serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of Islamophobia and why the work being undertaken by this committee is so important.

The attack on the Afzaal family followed the equally devastating 2017 mass murder at a Quebec City mosque, when a man entered and opened fire, killing six worshippers and injuring 19 others.

As a result of these incidents, Canada holds the devastating and regrettable distinction of having the most targeted murders of Muslims of any G7 country. Quite simply, being Muslim in Canada is not as safe as it should be.

For the past eight months, things have only gotten worse. We are seeing a terrifying rise in Islamophobia everywhere, compounded by anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism.

In London, Ontario, of all places, just this past weekend, a Muslim family's home was deliberately set on fire in what police are now investigating as an Islamophobic, anti-Palestinian hate crime. I spoke with a family member last night who told me that had they been at home and had they rushed to open the door to see what was going on, a family member would have certainly been engulfed in the flames that spread across the front porch and door of the house. This is absolutely horrifying.

As this committee has already heard, the National Council of Canadian Muslims reported an over-1,000% increase in Islamophobic incidents since October 7.

The Naseeha Mental Health organization reported an alarming, 600% increase in helpline calls in the first five weeks after the war began.

Furthermore, based on our office's research, between October 7, 2023, and March 5, 2024, a variety of organizations collectively received over 1,000 incident reports related to Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism, with the large majority of cases being handled by NCCM and the Muslim Legal Support Centre, which have oper-

ational legal clinics. This number represents nearly seven cases received per day in this period. The cases ranged from discrimination to defamation, doxing, blacklisting, assault, vandalism, harassment and violations of civil liberties.

Online, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found a 422% increase in Islamophobic social media content within the first few weeks after October 7.

There have been hateful and horrific acts of vandalism in schools, community centres and places of worship. A few blocks from here, a mosque's windows were covered in feces.

There have been various cases of harassment and violent assault. Visibly Muslim women and girls have been targets, being spat on while waiting for public transit or on university campuses, or even more violently assaulted.

Disinformation, misinformation and violent rhetoric proliferate online, further fuelling tensions and emboldening bad actors.

It feels like near-constant fear, vigilance and worry for oneself, one's family and one's community. You don't even have to be Muslim to feel it, as Islamophobia is often conflated with anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian sentiment and impacts allies as well.

Madam Chair, I am deeply worried about all of this, and I am worried that things will only escalate. The dehumanization of Muslims that is transpiring in Canada is disturbing in its similarity to the post-9/11 era and the ensuing war on terror.

It saddens me that we are once again back to feeling othered and excluded, unable to freely exercise our rights and freedoms, our loyalty to Canada questioned and our efforts to contribute positively overlooked or dismissed.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I look forward to the questions from the committee.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Dr. Nadia Hasan for five minutes.

Dr. Nadia Hasan (Assistant Professor, School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, York University, As an Individual): Thank you so much for the invitation to speak at this committee.

My name is Dr. Nadia Hasan, and I'm an assistant professor at the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University in Toronto. My research and my work focus on Islamophobia and racism.

Just four days ago, we marked the three-year anniversary of the Islamophobic terror that was visited upon our London family, and just six days from today we will mark another shameful anniversary. It will have been five years since the passage of Bill 21 in Quebec, a law that has legitimized discrimination and Islamophobia, with unacceptable impacts on Muslim women's lives.

As we sit here between these two anniversaries, I invite you to take a moment to think about this very real and very violent context as we proceed today. I'm presenting to you today alongside a panel member who has led a whole community at the Quebec City mosque through the devastating grief of the 2017 Islamophobic massacre of their loved ones, and we do this in the context of an unprecedented rise in Islamophobia in this country.

You would be right to ask: What on earth is happening here? How is it possible that so many efforts have been made to study and understand Islamophobia in this country, yet here we are amidst a frenzy of Islamophobic and racist attacks, discrimination and profiling of Muslims and Palestinians in Canada?

You have already heard numerous stories of Islamophobic and racist incidents from the witnesses who have appeared before this committee thus far. You've heard about children being beaten up because their name sounds like Hamas. You've heard from student protesters who have been threatened with violence and vilified for exercising their right to protest. You've heard from the loved ones of those who have perished in fatal Islamophobic attacks.

The reality is that to go through every such incident, this committee would need to meet for weeks on end to hear them all.

In these last eight months, though, we have seen something distinct that needs to be noted. The rise in Islamophobia has dovetailed with the rise in anti-Palestinian racism, with many Muslims being targeted because they are Palestinian, are speaking out for Palestinians or are perceived as Palestinian.

Over the weekend, as my colleague Ms. Elghawaby mentioned, the home of a Muslim family in London who had an "Our London Family" sign and a "Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights" sign on their lawn was lit on fire.

We have also seen racist epithets like "terrorist" and "terrorist sympathizer" being thrown around with impunity, triggering not-so-distant memories of the swift clawback of rights, freedoms and safety that such terms unleashed on Muslim communities after 9/11. Seeing the ease with which such dangerously racist tropes become repopularized and weaponized, even against our children, it is as though they had never truly left our collective consciousness. These are also the tropes that come up in nearly every act of Islamophobic violence. This rhetoric is not benign.

At this moment, it is also important to remember that Islamophobia is not just fuelled by hateful rhetoric spewed by fringe groups. Islamophobia is also present in everyday life.

In October 2023, for example, the Markham Public Library decided to take down displays that were up for Islamic Heritage Month because being Muslim was too controversial at that moment. The fragility of DEI initiatives became undeniable, as they were proven to be inadequate to guard against the wholesale demoniza-

tion of Muslims and Palestinians in this moment. Islamophobia is systemic, and it is endemic.

Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism intersect in significant and important ways, but they are distinct and require distinct and coordinated approaches to combatting them. We have come a long way since 9/11 in recognizing Islamophobia, and I'm glad to see that we are continuing to deepen our understanding of evolving forms of Islamophobia through exercises such as this, but if the last few months have taught us anything, it is that the gains we have made in reclaiming our rights and freedoms were inadequate and are fragile.

We have a long way to go to truly dismantle Islamophobia, and I would like to add three recommendations to those you are already considering that reflect the needs of the current climate.

One is that we need political leadership to speak unequivocally in support of the protection of the rights and freedoms of Muslim and Palestinian communities and, by extension, of all Canadians.

• (1115)

Two, we need to dismantle systemic forms of Islamophobic discrimination and racial profiling of Muslims and Palestinians in government agencies and laws.

Three, we need to take urgent steps to engage Palestinian communities and understand anti-Palestinian racism.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Hasan.

We now go to Mr. Khan, please.

Mr. Asif Khan (National Secretary, Public Relations, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada): Thank you. In the name of God the gracious, the merciful, *assalam alaikum*. May peace and blessings be upon you. Thank you for providing an opportunity for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at to provide remarks for this session. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at is Canada's oldest organized Muslim community. We have centres in approximately 50 different cities across the country.

With the recent issues in Canada, several effects have been observed. The conflict in Gaza and the resulting casualties are having a significant impact on Muslim communities worldwide, including in Canada. The rise in tensions often leads to increased polarization and heightened emotions, which can manifest in various ways, including in an increase in hate crimes and Islamophobia. I will say that if western governments, including Canada, were to use their influence—which they have—to put an end to the hostilities in the Holy Lands, the heightened purpose of this conversation would mostly be resolved.

With the recent issues in Canada, several effects have been observed, which this body is fully aware of. Some of those observations are an increase in hate crimes, community vigilance, a mental health impact, political and social advocacy, interfaith solidarity and solidarity with Jewish Canadians. With regard to the mental health impact, I point out that the stress and trauma from witnessing violence in Gaza combined with experiencing or fearing Islamophobic incidents have affected the mental health of many Muslims in Canada in a way far greater than has ever been observed before. Also of note is the increase in political activism and advocacy among Canadian Muslims. Communities and organizations are calling for stronger protections against hate crimes, greater representation in political spheres and more robust actions to address and combat Islamophobia. In a powerful display of unity, numerous Jewish Canadians have fiercely opposed the actions of the Netanyahu administration in Gaza. They have joined protests, signed petitions and engaged in interfaith initiatives to support the Palestinian cause and combat Islamophobia. This solidarity has fostered a profound sense of unity and mutual understanding between Jewish and Muslim communities in Canada, highlighting the critical distinction between government actions and the belief of individuals.

With this introduction, it is quite apparent that anti-Muslim sentiment is on the rise. Today the remarks I provide are directly from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at and provide direction to policymakers on the themes that are required to guide policy. I have a few points to present.

First, at such tense times it is important that Canada stays united and does not fall into the trap of becoming divided, which is what terrorists and hateful people desire. Stay true to Canadian values and to upholding humanity and justice. In terms of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred, given that the far right has gained influence, it is important that the government and authorities take this threat seriously. We appreciate that, following past serious hate crimes and the vandalization of mosques, the Canadian government reacted with sympathy and strongly condemned these anti-Muslim attacks.

If fear of Islam is on the rise, then, as a Muslim community, we must also recognize that we have failed to convey the true and peaceful teachings of Islam to the extent necessary. Certainly, as Ahmadi Muslims, we consider it our duty to redouble our efforts to spread Islam's true teachings and to remove the misconceptions and fears that exist. Our mosques, centres and events are open for anyone to attend.

A few years ago in Connecticut, U.S.A., a person fired bullets into a mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. In response, instead of showing hatred to him, we invited him to our mosque, and over time he came to see that this hatred of Islam was entirely misplaced. He became an ally and supporter of Islam, so the best means to remove ignorance is through education and by reaching out with open arms. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community will always try to do this.

One of the biggest causes of anti-Muslim sentiment is the constant media coverage portraying immigrants and Muslims in a negative light, especially with recent coverage of issues in the Holy Lands. Disproportionate negative coverage or misaligned headlines

spread disinformation and cause people to become more fearful of Islam and Muslims over time. Thus, the media and politicians must act with more care and consideration. Their words carry weight and influence with others. They must act with responsibility and not focus just upon the negative stories around immigrants, Muslims and Islam for the sake of sales, clicks and votes. The media should be encouraged to publicize the multitude of good works done by Muslim communities, and government should play its role in trying to publicize and raise awareness of these issues. As an example, our community holds annual runs across the country to raise funds for local hospitals. We hold numerous blood drives and food drives in cities across Canada. We have a formidable sister charity in Humanity First that, among other things, has a food bank and a shelter bus for the homeless.

Also, a growing cause of anti-immigrant sentiment is economic frustration, which is leading people to blame immigrants and Muslims for the issues they see in society, so the government should ensure that it balances the rights of all citizens with the rights of immigrants, indigenous citizens and visible minorities, and guides the public that there are duties and responsibilities on both sides.

• (1120)

If frustrations are allowed to fester, there are bound to be reactions. The government has the responsibility to fulfill the rights of both citizens and immigrants.

Often, calls are made upon Muslims to integrate with society. However, it is important to recognize what true integration is. The caliph, His Holiness Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, has stated that integration requires a person to strive to his or her utmost to help their society and nation progress. It is not integration to demand that the minority reject their peacefully held religious views or adopt customs or traditions that are at odds with their faith. This message also needs to go out from leaders and the media. We should respect one another's differences, so long as we are all united in our efforts to serve the nation and strive for its betterment.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community has always encouraged that when discussing issues of—

The Chair: Mr. Khan, I'm going to stop you. We'll take it up in the questions.

We're going to begin the questioning, but I will stop when our fourth witness is able to dial in. He's talking with the tech.

In the meantime, I'm going to start the first round, and I will ask Mr. Van Popta to start for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here and spending time with us today on this very important topic.

Mr. Khan, I will start with you. Thank you for your testimony.

I think it's important that when we study anything, we properly define the terms. I want to talk about the term "Islamophobia". I have a quote from testimony you gave three years ago at the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. I'm just going to read a paragraph and then ask you to comment on it.

You said:

One thing I would like to mention is that the term "Islamophobia" actually doesn't really help or aid the topic. I know it's not a term that anyone here has created, and it's something that has been accepted by pretty well everybody, but the term "phobia" means to be afraid of something, and then it's to be afraid of Islam and to be afraid of Muslims. That is, in essence, a bit of the problem. Nonetheless, I know it's a topic for another time.

Sir, I'm going to give you the time right now to comment on that. Just for further context, I noticed in your opening remarks that you used the term "fear" a couple of times in association with Islam.

Mr. Asif Khan: If I had a magic wand, I'd remove this word, but I do not. It's a term that's been accepted and used by everyone, so it's a term I have to use, as well, to drive home the fact that this particular issue exists.

Do I wish it wasn't called Islamophobia? Yes, but again, I don't think I can do much about that right now.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Would you have a better term?

Mr. Asif Khan: No. I'm not necessarily a wordsmith, but it should be anything other than a word with "Islam" or "Muslim" thrown in. When we say "anti-Semitism", it's about being a Semite. There are others, including my family, who are Semites as well. Anti-Semitic is a term that doesn't necessarily reference hate toward the Jewish faith, and rightly so. It shouldn't be that.

This particular term brings that up, and unfortunately, it's just something we can't change right now. It's a term that's used everywhere, throughout media and journalism.

• (1125)

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you.

I'm going to turn to Ms. Elghawaby. This is actually a question I was going to put to our next witness, but he's not here. I think you're perfectly capable of answering it.

There have been two cases recently of attacks on Canadians just because they were Muslim and identified as such. One was the Quebec City mosque shooting, and the other was the terrorist attack in London, Ontario, three years ago. We marked that anniversary just a couple of days ago.

In both cases, the perpetrator was charged with and convicted of murder, but in the London case, the person was also charged with and convicted on terrorism charges. This did not happen in the Quebec City mosque case. I wonder why not.

What are your comments on that? How important is it to have added charges relating to terrorism, when it didn't add at all to the sentence the person will serve?

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Madam Chair, I would like to thank the member for his question.

First, I just want to provide the committee with a definition of "Islamophobia", just so we're all clear before I get to the answer.

Islamophobia is racism, stereotypes, prejudice, fear or acts of hostility directed towards individual Muslims or followers of Islam in general. In addition to individual acts of intolerance and racial profiling, Islamophobia can lead to viewing and treating Muslims as a greater security threat on an institutional, systemic and societal level.

This offers me a bit of a way into the answer here.

It's very clear that when the shooter in Quebec City entered the mosque, he had a very clear intention to kill as many Muslims as he could. Given that he had been consuming harmful, dangerous narratives about Muslims for some time, he was reacting to what he perceived as Canada being welcoming of Muslims. Based on these very dangerous ideas about the threat, as per the definition, that Muslims posed to him, his family and his community, he decided to act out.

That terrorized the community. It terrorized Quebec Muslims. It terrorized Muslims across Canada, as well as fellow Canadians, who were absolutely and rightfully shocked by what happened.

Similarly, in the London attack, the terrorist who went and rammed his truck into a family simply because they were Muslim and he had consumed dangerous narratives also terrorized.

It is very important that the justice system recognizes when there is an act that is terrorist, because it sends a very strong message that not only were they targeted as individuals, as Canadians and part of our society, but they were specifically targeted with an ideological motive in place. The ideological motive is indeed to send a message about the place of Muslims in this country and whether or not they belong. It was a message that was very painful for many, and we continue to carry it.

Thank you.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: I will cede my time. It's just a few seconds.

The Chair: Thank you for that question, and thank you very much for your response.

We will now go to member of Parliament Madam Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all the witnesses for your important testimony on this important issue.

My first question is for Madam Elghawaby.

It has been almost three years since our government convened the national summit on Islamophobia, which brought together community leaders and stakeholders and produced a series of important recommendations that the government has been following through on, including the creation of your office. Budget 2024 included \$7.3 million in funding over six years to support the work you are doing.

Could you please outline what you see as the next actions or steps beyond the national summit and your activities to address the alarming increase in Islamophobia, especially in the last few months?

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Madam Chair, I thank the member for her excellent question.

Since the national summit on Islamophobia, which was convened following the tragic terrorist attack in London, Ontario, the federal government has indeed followed up on various recommendations that were made at the summit. According to the anti-racism secretariat, 35% have been followed up on, and that has been communicated to communities.

Along with the creation of my office, what I have attempted to identify is the need to support the government on three key outcomes for Muslims in Canada. These are that Muslims in Canada can live lives in dignity and free of discrimination; that Muslims are free from exposure to hate, both on- and off-line; and that Muslims working in our federal public service do not face bias and discrimination. My role is to provide advice and guidance. It's to raise awareness and education.

In the past year, before the tragic events of October 7 and onwards, we had already committed to launching a guide on how law enforcement can address anti-Muslim hate crimes in our communities. It was launched in September of last year. It's the OSCE practical guide.

We also launched a digital tool kit for Islamic History Month, to highlight the incredible resilience of Muslim women and girls who have, sadly, faced gendered Islamophobia, as many know. It highlighted the efforts of Edmonton Muslim women to highlight the work they are doing to ensure that their communities remain safe.

We continue to provide this type of advice and work.

We also have been undertaking studies of how young people are faring in our country since October 7. Through this, we'll provide support to the government in understanding the crucial issue of belonging and the need for the federal government to ensure that all in communities—and in particular in Muslim communities that face discrimination and bias—our young people are assured that they do belong, that they have the mental health support they require, and that all of our institutions address the concerns that they continue to raise.

• (1130)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

My next question is for Dr. Hasan.

Could you please talk about your perspective, as a professor, with regard to the student protests against the war in Gaza at York University, the response of the administration, and how York has handled the larger issue of Islamophobia on campus, as well as in academia?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: I think student protests are such an amazing phenomenon in Canadian history when it comes to standing up for issues related to social justice. They're something that's such an enriching part of our democracy. Throughout Canadian history, we've

seen again and again the way that student protests can lead to real change in the right direction.

What we've seen at York.... Just very recently, there was a student encampment set up just for, I think, maybe 24 hours. It's all very new, because this happened last week, but the administration did forcibly remove the encampment with the involvement of the police. York's not the only one. We've seen many university administrations in many different jurisdictions in Canada taking the bizarre approach of criminalizing student protest, which I think is having a really chilling effect on students.

It's important to remember that these encampments have been largely peaceful protests, and that they're not a new phenomenon. Encampments as a form of protest have happened against poverty, homelessness, tuition hikes, war, etc. They're not something new, and I think we all need to ask some questions, important questions, about why these particular ones are being clamped down on and criminalized with such force on so many campuses around the country.

The student right to protest and the culture of dissent, protest, critique and critical thinking are at stake, in my opinion.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

In your testimony, you also touched upon Bill 21, so could you please explain how Bill 21 creates systemic discrimination?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: I'm actually.... Over the last three years I've been conducting a study on the impact of Bill 21, specifically on the experiences of Muslim women in their workplaces and in their experiences in searching for jobs. This is very much about Muslim women's livelihoods and their ability to actually work and live in Quebec.

What we found—and I can give you a preview of those findings—is really quite stunning. Muslim women are four times more likely to experience physical violence and aggression in their workplaces at the hands of their supervisors and at the hands of their colleagues and clients. These Muslim women are reporting this as an increase that they've seen since Bill 21 came into effect.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fortin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for being with us this morning.

I think all of your testimony is important and deserves much more time than the little time we are spending on it, unfortunately. I will have only six minutes, so please allow me to be a little strict on the time.

This is not our first meeting on Islamophobia, and we've also had meetings on anti-Semitism. I feel that you have similar situations on both sides. At least, you are telling us about similar cases of discrimination, which are appalling, harmful and must absolutely be combatted.

Ms. Elghawaby, could you explain to me, in 30 seconds to a minute, how you see the situation and why there are so many links between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia?

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Thank you for your question.

I would say that the current situation in Gaza and Israel has an impact on the Muslim and Jewish communities here. Although the conflict is not religious, but political, the impact on the communities is really heavy and difficult. In addition, there is a lot of emotion. However, it is really important to discuss it together in a truly respectful way so that we can work together. We also need to be free to express ourselves respectfully.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you.

You're saying that the conflict in Gaza has had a significant impact here. However, I noticed in the media that you did not respond quickly after the events of October 7, in your role as critic on the issue. I understand that an Islamic extremist group was blamed for these events, but can you explain to me, again in about 30 seconds, why it took you so long to respond to these events?

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Thank you very much for the question.

[English]

It's really important to understand that my role is a domestic role, so the guidance and advice I provide the federal government is on how policies impact Muslims here at home. As everyone can understand, after the shocking events of October 7, we needed time to review and see how it was going to impact our communities. Therefore, when—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: You're telling me that this conflict has had a significant impact on Jewish-Muslim relations in Canada. I am not an expert on this issue, but with all due respect, on the very day of the events, we could see that the situation would get worse, both in Canada and elsewhere in the world. Did you not think it was important to respond more quickly? Have you been pressured one way or the other?

[English]

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: It's so important, when we're dealing with issues that are going to cause great emotional distress to our communities, that we take our time. It is very important for elected officials in particular, as well as representatives, to ensure that their discourse is sensitive and takes into consideration the full impacts here domestically.

It is important to note that I was very clear in the statement to condemn all forms of violence against innocent civilians and to ensure that our communities were not going to face the types of civil liberties encroachments that we have seen previously, as well as efforts to suggest that somehow Muslims have to constantly condemn every time a terrorist group takes some kind of action. We've

moved beyond that. Muslims are no longer going to accept being treated as second-class citizens who have to prove their loyalty.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Ms. Elghawaby.

You're telling me, and I thank you for this, that you think Muslim groups should also speak out against violent acts. If I have understood correctly, violence, terrorism or hate fomented against anyone in Canada, be they Jewish, Muslim, Catholic or other, is not acceptable. I'm with you on that.

The Criminal Code currently contains a provision, section 319, that prohibits the promotion of hatred. Paragraph 319(3)(b) states that there will be a reasonable defence if an opinion is based on a religious text. The same exception applies to anti-Semitism or hatred. In your opinion, should these exceptions be removed? If not, should there continue to be a reasonable defence if a person is accused of promoting hatred and doing so based on a religious text?

• (1140)

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Earlier, I mentioned that it is the responsibility of members of Parliament to debate legislation and make decisions in the best interests of their constituents. I am a special representative on combatting Islamophobia, so my role is not to give opinions, but rather to communicate policies—

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: However, you are here to help the Muslim community integrate into Canada. We're talking to you—

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I have a point of order, Madam Chair. We've already—

The Chair: Okay. In any case, the time is up.

[English]

We will complete the first round with Mr. Garrison for six minutes, and then our fourth witness will be coming online. I will ask for a brief moment after Mr. Garrison's time to ensure that our fourth witness has his five minutes, and then we'll continue with the second round.

Mr. Garrison, go ahead for six minutes, please.

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

I have to start by saying I'm disturbed when, inadvertently or purposely, this committee ends up engaging in othering the Muslim community. I think we are seeing examples of that this morning, and I apologize to our witnesses. I thank them for being here today to give very important testimony.

I want to go back to Dr. Hasan.

I think you were just starting to talk about your work on the impact on Muslim women.

We live in a society that has quite often historically tried to police the dress of women and tried to blame women for things that happen to them because of dress choices they make. While I'm not trying to reduce the salience of what's happening with Muslim women now, I do think it's important to remember there's a long tradition of policing women and their dress in this country.

What do you see as different about this now from that traditional concern about the way women look and dress?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: I think now we've legalized our ability to discriminate against women who dress a certain way, and discriminate not in an insignificant way. These are their livelihoods we're talking about. These are their investments in their careers, which have just vanished because of a law that says they can't work in certain public sector jobs.

I think the impact of this has been felt far and wide by Muslim women in Quebec. My research shows that it has been so detrimental, not only to Muslim women's livelihoods but also to their mental health and their ability to feel like they belong or are safe and secure in Quebec. Muslim women report feeling like they're targeted and are in the crosshairs, kind of becoming political punching bags in Quebec. They're dreading what the Quebec government will do next to take away their rights. My studies have found that, as a result, over 73% of Muslim women in Quebec are considering leaving the province altogether.

This is not okay. This is not what we call social harmony. It completely flies in the face of the fact that the Quebec government is essentially trying to promote the bill as something that is enabling social harmony. It is not. The violence women are experiencing, the mental distress, the threats to their personal physical safety and security—this is at stake right now.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I know that your research is focused on Quebec, but do you see this having impacts outside the province of Quebec?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: Absolutely. Especially as we're talking about the current moment that we're in, we're seeing that many Islamophobic attacks are actually directed at Muslim women who wear a hijab. These attacks range from Muslim women having their hijab ripped off to being physically assaulted—punched in the head, punched in the stomach—and Muslim women being spat on, a wildly common phenomenon since last fall.

It's actually quite atrocious what Muslim women in particular are facing. Islamophobia is gendered in very, very significant and important ways that I think would be wise for this committee to remember as you think about what your next steps will be.

• (1145)

Mr. Randall Garrison: I'd like to ask Madam Elghawaby to weigh in on the same question.

In your work, how are you finding the question of gender affecting the ability to combat Islamophobia?

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: It's a very important question, absolutely.

As Dr. Hasan has noted, Muslim women who wear the head scarf, who are visible, are indeed targeted in various ways, whether

it's discrimination on the job or whether it's discrimination from holding various types of employment. Right across Canada this is a phenomenon. We actually see the underemployment of Muslim women within Canadian employment areas. Even though they have a very high level of education, it's not matching up to the types of employment they're able to get.

What we have realized is that Canada is losing an incredible opportunity to benefit from the incredible professional attainment that these women can have. The contributions they can make in our society are huge. When we think about the ways in which this study could provide advice, it indeed would be to be very mindful of the fact that all sorts of stereotypes exist around Muslim women, particularly those who choose to wear the head covering, the hijab.

What I have heard from women across the country, including in Quebec, is that, again, this law 21 is not only impacting women in particular professions, i.e., in teaching and in the legal profession. It also has an impact that sets up right through society. The moment you have what has been termed, to this committee, "second-class citizenship", where some people have fewer rights than others, immediately that gives licence or permission to those who may hold discriminatory views to treat these citizens differently from others.

This is an extremely problematic pathway that Canada is on. It harms not only our social cohesion but also our prosperity and our success.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you very much.

I think that's a really important perspective to have brought to these hearings. I thank both of you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Give us a minute, please, to allow the introduction of our fourth witness.

I'm suspending for a minute.

• (1145)

(Pause)

• (1150)

[Translation]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

From the Centre culturel islamique de Québec, we have Boufeldja Benabdallah, co-founder and spokesperson.

Mr. Benabdallah, I'll let you know when you have 30 seconds left. You now have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Boufeldja Benabdallah (Co-Founder and Spokesperson, Centre culturel islamique de Québec): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to this very important panel.

Islamophobia, from the past to the present, and especially in Quebec City, has evolved and is still evolving. It is always the same story, the conflation between Islam and what is happening elsewhere. To get right to the heart of the matter, I would say that the vast majority of Quebecers appreciate us being here.

However, whenever a serious international situation has occurred, part of society has constantly been asking us to explain why Muslims are like that and why Islam is like that. Even when I was a university student, we had to organize panels to explain certain situations. That gives the impression that we have to explain ourselves and redeem ourselves, as if we were partners in everything that happens outside the province or the country. But that is not true. We live in a country governed by the rule of law, a country that is free and a good place to live. We are not here to promote harmful situations for society.

I will get right to the point, as I know that five minutes is very little time for a comprehensive speech or presentation.

I co-founded the Centre culturel islamique de Québec in 2008. We needed a place of worship to pray, to educate our children, and to stay together, not to proselytize or to show that Islam is vindictive, on the contrary. Despite that, one segment of society—not the majority—started sending us hate messages, threatening messages, messages calling on the neighbourhood to ban the presence of this mosque, and saying that Muslims must leave and go home. These people even sprayed graffiti on our walls, swastikas. Imagine, we are being confused, once again, with the Jews. Since the Jews have suffered atrocities, we are also being threatened with atrocities if we do not leave. They even found a pig's head and feces at the door of the mosque. In addition, trash radio stations have been ranting about Muslims. Instead of talking about Muslims belonging and contributing to society, they are portraying us as agitators and people coming in with ideas from the outside. However, that is absolutely false. Those trash radio stations have not improved the situation with all these tracts and leaflets against Muslims. Then, as you know, some of our sisters, Muslim women, who wear hijabs and scarves—most of the women wear them—have been attacked in public places in inhumane ways. That has caused unfathomable disorder.

I am talking about that and bringing you back to the tragedy of the mosque, but it's a small step. All these insults and threats have never stopped. I received personal threats and the police had to install video cameras by my door to help me be less disturbed by these threatening people. Then the troubles continued inside the mosque. On January 29, 2017, we lost six parents, six fathers, who left six widows and 17 young children, and 45 people suffered psychological trauma, including one who is still in a wheelchair after being hit by six bullets, one of which is still in her neck.

You see, from the insults, from this active minority, from this hatred of the other, the Muslim, we have arrived at a tragedy that has not only disrupted the Muslim community, but also disrupted Quebec and Canadian society. Fortunately, our fellow citizens have comforted us. We will never forget that empathy. They have stood by us and supported us.

• (1155)

However, I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that, despite this positive majority, there is a vocal minority that speaks louder than everyone else. It is this minority that is hurting us. Now, when you take that leap to the development of legislation—

The Chair: Mr. Benabdallah, unfortunately I have to interrupt you. However, we will ask you questions and you will be able to continue by answering them. Thank you very much.

Mr. Boufeldja Benabdallah: That's fine, thank you.

The Chair: We will now begin our second round of questions.

[English]

I will ask MP Khanna to please begin his five minutes.

Mr. Arpan Khanna (Oxford, CPC): Thank you so much for that.

I want to thank the witnesses here today for sharing their perspectives and their testimony.

I live in Woodstock, which is not too far from London. Obviously, our hearts go out to the victims of the terrorist attack that happened there a few years ago. We also heard the news over the weekend of the fire that was started at a Muslim family's home. Obviously, we condemn that. I think all parties are united against that. Hopefully, whoever is responsible is punished to the full extent of the law and held responsible.

My question is for Mr. Asif Khan. I've attended many of your community events, like the Jamat-ul-Vida. I've been to *jalsas*. I've been to your Canada Day celebrations in Maple. There's a growing community in my riding as well.

Your charity does great work. Humanity First steps up, especially during times of need. As we see two million Canadians going to food banks, it has stepped up and shared that message of love for all, hatred for none. I think that's a beautiful message, and that's a Canadian message.

You also hold interfaith forums and open houses to raise awareness.

In your testimony, you mentioned knowledge over ignorance. I think when we educate the community, we're able to tackle some of these misconceptions that exist of the Muslim faith.

Can you update the committee on some of the initiatives you have taken as a jama'at? What kinds of tangible benefits have you seen first-hand with the work you're doing in proactively engaging Canadians?

Mr. Asif Khan: During my testimony, I mentioned that the Muslim community needs to step up. If there's a misunderstanding of Islam, it's also our responsibility as Muslims to make others aware of what our faith is, and the faith is about peace.

Interfaith events are something we've been doing for several years. We've probably held hundreds of them across the country, even in places like Nunavut. The idea is to focus on your commonalities, not on your differences. One of the questions that was floating around earlier stabs at differences, and that's incorrect. Let's focus on what we have in common together.

Also, speaking to the earlier question about the hijab and so forth, integration isn't doing what certain people might feel is required. Integration is making sure that individuals like me and other members of other communities are improving and raising up Canada. That's integration. To focus on things like the hijab and whatnot is incorrect.

I think interfaith programs bring us all together. They create commonalities. They don't create division.

Mr. Arpan Khanna: Thank you for that.

Have you seen them make a positive impact in the community? Have you seen people coming together? What has the response been to them?

Mr. Asif Khan: Definitely. Obviously, everybody likes to talk about their good works, what their community does, the good things their communities believe in and the values they have. This makes everybody feel together.

Whenever we do these interfaith programs in different cities, I think they allow for everyone to realize that, you know what, we're all part of the same human family.

• (1200)

Mr. Arpan Khanna: Thank you for that.

Recently, we've been seeing a lot of attacks on places of worship, regardless of faith. We saw it potentially with the church in Toronto. We've seen it with synagogues, mosques, gurdwaras and mandirs. We are seeing a rise.

Your headquarters are located in Maple. What's the sentiment of your congregation in your community? Is there an underlying fear of these attacks? I just want to get a reality check from you on what you're seeing and what you're hearing on the ground.

Mr. Asif Khan: Our national headquarters are in Vaughan, Ontario. Socio-economically, it's a bit different from other parts of the country, but we have places.... Our mosques are in different cities everywhere.

This issue that has been spoken about, of Islamophobia or this fear of, "Is somebody looking at me differently? Is somebody thinking about me differently?" exists. It's not fake. I'm 51 years old this year. I was born here. When I was young, there were certain slurs used that were maybe anti-immigrant but not anti-Muslim, and then they went away.

I talked about this movement of the right gathering some steam, what's happened down south and even what's happening over here. The hate that took 50 years to bury has risen to the surface, and you don't bury this stuff again in four years. It takes a while. We need to focus on this.

Mr. Arpan Khanna: Thank you for that.

The next part of the question will be for Ms. Elghawaby. Obviously, as you mentioned, and as we've heard from testimony, there's been a massive spike in hate towards the Muslim community and other faiths as well. The Liberal government has brought forward some changes. It's been three years—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Khanna. I'm trying to keep the time here. We'll come back to that question. If it doesn't get posed again, would you mind sending us something in writing?

I will now go for five minutes to MP Zuberi, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to give the witness from the Centre culturel islamique de Québec 30 seconds to finish what he had to say, but I don't think the connection is working. So I will continue with Ms. Hasan.

[*English*]

Ms. Hasan, you were speaking about the research you had done with respect to Bill 21 and the intersectionality with women. Do you have any other points you'd like to add in the next few seconds?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: Yes, there are so many points I can add. One of the things I wanted to say is that the study looked at women who were working within the public sector, but a lot of them were working outside of the public sector.

The impacts of Bill 21 are well beyond the technical scope of the law. I think one of the places we found it is actually in job-search experiences. Women applying for jobs in health care are being asked about their religious identity, which is categorically illegal, but they are very openly being asked about their religious identity. It was a very frequent experience. Over 40% of women reported that they were asked about their religious identity during a job interview, so we have a problem here of much broader impact.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: The impacts go well beyond the letter of the law.

Dr. Nadia Hasan: Yes, well beyond the letter of the law.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: You said that the letter of the law, in your opinion, is—

Dr. Nadia Hasan: That's within the public sector. Sorry, was that...?

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Do you opine that the letter of the law is discriminatory?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: Yes, the letter of the law is discriminatory in and of itself, but we're seeing discriminatory impacts also well beyond the law. To truly understand what the impact of Bill 21 has been on Muslim women in Quebec—

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: —which I believe is what the courts themselves said, the lower courts. Is that correct?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: That's right.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: In terms of your research on this, is it completed? If so, can you submit it to this committee for analysts to include in their report?

Dr. Nadia Hasan: Yes, I can.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Please, I'd ask you to highlight any particular points you'd like to bring to the attention of the analysts as you submit that to us at this committee.

Dr. Nadia Hasan: Yes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Ms. Elghawaby, I appreciate what you were saying earlier with respect to being considered in hot conversations, in particular as they relate to discrimination and as they relate to the Middle East. I appreciate fully how your role is wholly domestic, so I respect the fact that you were considered in how you leaned into a conversation.

Do you have anything you'd like to add? I know that you've gone on the record many times condemning any form of violence, in particular violence that has happened in the Middle East, violence conducted by the listed group Hamas. Is there anything you'd like to add about the thoughtfulness that is necessary when leaning into this particular conversation, the thoughtfulness in general of those who are pronouncing themselves on social media?

• (1205)

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: This is a moment of leadership for our country. It really is not up to one office or one level of government or one community. It really is a collective effort in which we model what it means to be Canadian, what it means to live in a country as pluralistic, as diverse and as peaceful as Canada. While the temptation to seek clicks online and to sort of win those types of competitions as to how many views your video obtains—

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I get your point, and we have less than a minute left.

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Sure.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I've seen, and many of those who are tuning in right now have seen, how past governments, previous to 2015, have maligned the Muslim community. In some cases, provincial governments use minorities as pinatas to score populist political points.

I think Mr. Garrison referred to under-handed commentary, even as we are having you testify. How important is it that opinion-makers from media to politics be constructive and measured in their comments?

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Our children are watching us right now. They're watching to see how we navigate this very difficult time for our country. It really is critical and crucial that every statement and every message is one that brings people together, that recognizes diversity and protects freedom of expression, speech and assembly, all while maintaining inclusive, safe communities where everyone can be who they are without fear.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to the next round, with two and a half minutes each for Mr. Fortin, followed by Mr. Garrison, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fortin, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

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

Ms. Elghawaby, I would like to come back to the discussion we were having earlier, when I said that you responded a little late after the events of October 7, some 10 days later. That was not a criticism, since you did respond. Earlier, you talked to us about Bill 21, which, in your opinion, is a bad piece of legislation, a bad decision. These two situations do not concern Canadian legislation.

I asked you a question about hatred, but perhaps I misspoke or you misunderstood me. I would like us to come back to this, as I would like to know your opinion on one thing. The Criminal Code currently prohibits the promotion of hatred, which I think is a good thing. On that point, Mr. Benabdallah told us that the hatred of the other led to events like those that occurred at the Quebec City mosque, and we are on the same wavelength in that regard. Mr. Khan told us that peace is the foundation of his religion, and I completely agree with him. I think it is in our interest to get to know each other better.

I feel that promoting hatred is a bad thing, regardless of religion or beliefs. As I was saying, it is currently prohibited to promote hatred. That said, there is something in the Criminal Code that I think is questionable. In fact, the code says that you can defend yourself in court against a charge of promoting hatred if you say that you relied on a religious text that you believe in and that you were trying to establish the merits of. That seems inconsistent to me, but it may not seem so to you. If you don't agree with me that we need to get rid of this exception, I'd like to know why. Why do you think that promotion of hatred and anti-Semitism should be allowed if they're based on a religious text?

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Madam Chair, on a point of order, I have a lot of respect for the member opposite, but his question has nothing to do with the topic of our study. Do you think there is a direct link between his question and our study?

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you for your point of order, Mr. Zuberi.

I've stopped the clock, Mr. Fortin. I think you had finished your question. Is that the case? Do you want an answer now or do you want to continue talking? I need to know that. If you had finished your question, you have 39 seconds left, and the point of order is moot.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: I'm not sure I understand your question, Madam Chair. That said, I had finished asking my question and I was waiting for an answer from Ms. Elghawaby.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: If you wish, I can respond to Mr. Zuberi, but—

The Chair: I would prefer not to spend too much time on this point of order, as we are about to wrap up.

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: In any event, we've been hearing testimony for a few days. I think the subject of hatred is at the heart of our debates. The witnesses are talking to us about it, and they are even talking to us about Quebec's secularism law. So it's hard for me to see how it can be said that I am straying from the subject at hand when I talk about hatred in Canada.

The Chair: Okay.

[*English*]

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Madam Chair, I withdraw my point of order.

[Translation]

The Chair: Colleagues, Mr. Fortin has 39 seconds left, and I would like to hear the witness's answer.

You can answer at any time, Ms. Elghawaby.

[English]

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Again, I think what's clear, and it's quite sad and unfortunate, is that Muslims are constantly asked to condemn hate. Of course, Muslims join fellow Canadians in condemning all forms of hate. The underlying premise of the question suggests that somehow Muslim communities or other religious minority communities are fomenting hate, and they are not—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Ms. Elghawaby, I have only a few seconds left. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I want to know what you think.

[English]

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: I think I can continue to finish—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Would you prefer not to answer?

[English]

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: I think I answered your question.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: You didn't answer; you just said you don't want Muslims to respond.

The Chair: We're out of time. So it is over.

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

Thank you anyway, Ms. Elghawaby.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Garrison, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have to say, once again, that as a gay man who's often been “othered” in our society, and as a gay man who's married to a person of colour who's often presumed to be Muslim because of his nationality, I have some personal experience with what we just see going on here. Questions are asked of Muslims that are not asked of anyone else. It's part of what I think all our witnesses have said. There's somehow an extra test of loyalty or commitment to diversity that we demand of Muslims who appear before us. I'm disturbed by that.

I'm really not sure what to ask, at this point, but I want to go back to Mr. Khan's point about unity and diversity and reaching out. There are many victims of hate in this country and many victims of othering. I would like to ask him to talk a bit more about his experience in trying to join hands against the hatred.

Mr. Asif Khan: I'm sorry. Do you want me to just kind of elaborate on it?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Yes—in terms of the success of joining hands against hatred among all communities.

Mr. Asif Khan: I do want to underscore, obviously, the need for this conversation. There is a growing issue of hate in the country against Muslims and others. The way to resolve it is through policy and by enacting certain words that we will say or the media will say, but this idea of unity and getting together and understanding each other's commonalities is the only way to simmer the issue. We can't keep going like this. This will just create further division, and other comments will come. People want to divide us. We are Canadians. All of us are Canadians. We're together in this, making this country better, regardless of what faith we belong to.

Again, focus on commonalities. Focus on what brings us together. That's part of the solution. There are obviously many other things that also need to be done.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With 30 seconds left, I will take the liberty of asking Madam Elghawaby a question.

What relationship is there between your office and the office of Deborah Lyons? Does the work overlap at all? Can you please comment on that and tell us what this government has done in the last couple of years?

I know it's a large question, but I'll give you two minutes, please.

• (1215)

Ms. Amira Elghawaby: Thank you so much, Madam Chair, for the question.

First, in terms of the relationship of my office with the Office of the Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism, Deborah Lyons and I are in regular contact. Both of us are extremely seized with and saddened by the rise in hate that is impacting our communities across the country. We are constantly wondering and questioning and looking for examples within our very own communities of where people are already coming together.

For instance, here in Ottawa a Muslim educator and a local rabbi, even before October 7 in the fall, are giving presentations in schools in order to demystify, and to address and combat stereotypes and narratives about, their communities. I think it's looking for those opportunities to highlight where people are working together. Even before this fall I had met with members of Jewish Family Services of Ottawa. They have a very diverse staff that includes many Muslim staff as well.

The examples that exist already in our communities are quite broad. In that vein, the federal government just this weekend introduced its anti-racism strategy for the next four years. This is a strategy that really builds on past strategies to address and combat hate and racism against any community in this country, with a lot of investments in community initiatives.

There is one thing that I would leave with this committee. Again, it's not up to government to fix this. It really is up to communities themselves, but we need to give them that support. We need to support leaders and community organizations that are already doing the work, and that need help to do it, with financial support and otherwise.

At the end of the day, Canadians understand that we need each other. We need each other to succeed. We need each other to support the vision of a country where everyone feels included. The federal government has invested quite heavily in these sorts of initiatives and will continue to do so, I hope.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You're at exactly two minutes.

With that, I want to thank the witnesses for appearing on our first panel. If there's anything that you believe you did not get a chance to respond to, please send it to us.

Thank you very much.

We will suspend while the next panel gets set up.

• (1215) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1220)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We're resuming the meeting.

[*English*]

Members, please take your seats. I am told that we are ready to start with our second panel.

Again, for the benefit of our new witnesses who are appearing virtually or in person, please ensure that you have selected the language of your choice, because we have members who will be asking questions in French and other members who will be asking questions in English.

[*Translation*]

You can answer in English or in French.

[*English*]

Make sure that you have those devices already set, and we will keep to our time.

Welcome to our meeting.

I want to welcome our witnesses for the second panel.

[*Translation*]

In person, we have Husein Panju, chair of the Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association, and Fauzia Mazhar, executive director of the Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener-Waterloo. By video con-

ference, we have Abdallah Yousri, executive director of the Nova Scotia Ummah Society, and as an individual, Julie Macfarlane, emerita distinguished professor of law.

[*English*]

Now we will start with five minutes each to the four witnesses for opening remarks.

Please try to pay attention if you're virtual or in person. When I raise the 30-second mark, that means you have only 30 seconds. When time is up, I will raise the "time is up" sign. We have a hard stop at 30 minutes past, so we have 55 minutes remaining.

I will start with Madam Fauzia Mazhar, please, for five minutes.

• (1225)

Ms. Fauzia Mazhar (Executive Director, Coalition of Muslim Women of KW): Good morning. *Assalam alaikum*. Greetings of peace.

I come to you from the Haldimand tract, land that was granted to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River and within the territory of the neutral Anishinabe and Haudenosaunee peoples.

I'm here on behalf of the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW—CMW—which provides opportunities for personal and professional growth for Muslim women and youth while addressing issues of gender-based violence, racism, discrimination, Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia through innovative programming and services, partnerships and collaboration, bridge-building and public education, and advocacy and outreach.

In April 2021 CMW launched its hate reporting, documentation and support services with seed funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage. This service, the first of its kind, was built upon a decade of CMW's work against hate, racism and Islamophobia in the Waterloo region. Now known as anti-hate services, or AHS, it provides various avenues to report and document hate and discrimination. It also provides an area of support services to the victims of hate and discrimination.

CMW releases yearly reports based on the data collected by AHS. We just released the third annual "Snapshot of Hate in Waterloo Region" report last week. The report, covering January 1 to December 31, 2023, shows a 26% increase in reported cases, with a total of 115 cases reported. Waterloo Regional Police Service, or WRPS, reported a total of 369 hate-motivated crimes in 2023, an increase of 94% from 2022; 46% of the total cases through AHS were reported between October and December 2023. When compared to the same time frame in 2022, an 83% increase in reported hate incidents and a 212% increase in Islamophobic, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian hate was noted. The AHS report documented 46 cases—which is 40%—that were motivated by Islamophobia, and 12 cases—which is 10%—that were motivated by anti-Palestinian hate.

WRPS reported a total of 67 hate-motivated crimes targeting religion; however, only two of the 67 cases are reported as directed towards Islamic identity. Forty-one per cent of the cases documented by AHS targeted individuals who self-identified as Arab, and another 26% targeted those who identified as South Asian. WRPS reported 190 race-based hate-motivated crimes, most often targeting Black individuals.

Key populations reflected in the AHS report include females and youth under the age of 24. A total of 74 cases—64%—were victimized females, and a further 38 cases—41%—were victimized youth under the age of 24. Furthermore, 69% of female and 71% of youth included Islamophobia as a reason for the incident. During an analysis of the data, a trend tying religious or cultural clothing directly to the victim's experience of hate emerged. Often, this clothing was mentioned directly in verbal hate harassment cases. Of the 115 victims, 55—48%—were wearing a hijab or a niqab, and in seven cases victims were wearing a kaffiyeh.

The AHS report fills a crucial gap in police-reported hate crimes, as you may have noticed. The trends emerging from the AHS report are important to note for this committee. Women and youth in Canadian Muslim communities are bearing the brunt of Islamophobia. They're more at risk of physical assault, verbal abuse, harassment in public spaces and educational environments, and bullying, intimidation and discrimination in workplaces and educational institutions. I hope that this esteemed committee will pay due attention to the experiences of Muslim women and youth as part of this study on Islamophobia.

• (1230)

It will also be important to look into the experiences of Canadian Arab and Palestinian communities to understand how Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism and anti-Palestinian racism intersect.

The report cited here is available at cmw-kw.org, under the publications tab, in English.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

We now go to Mr. Husein Panju, please, for up to five minutes.

Mr. Husein Panju (Chair, Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association): Madam Chair and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, hello, *bonjour* and *assalam alaikum*. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Husein Panju. I have the pleasure of serving as the national chair for the Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association, also known as the CMLA. Our organization is a not-for-profit corporation that's dedicated to promoting the objectives and advocating on behalf of self-identifying members of the Muslim legal community. The CMLA consists of five provincial chapters consisting of over 400 members across the country, including professionals from all areas of the legal profession and several sitting judges. We regularly appear in appellate court matters related to human rights, and we provide legal input in government consultations just like this.

Recently, the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights adopted several elements of our testimony in its landmark report, "Combatting Hate: Islamophobia and its impact on Muslims in Canada". This committee already heard very detailed testimony

about the history of Islamophobia, including the recent high-profile incidents in Quebec City and in London, Ontario. In my submissions, I'm going to highlight the alarming rise in Islamophobia since October 7, with a focus on its impacts on local communities.

In 2018 the CMLA launched a legal clinic, known as the Muslim Legal Support Centre, which prioritizes access to justice for Muslims in Ontario. Since the conflict began, this clinic has encountered a 400% rise in intake on issues ranging from employment discrimination to improper treatment in schools. The CMLA also heard numerous concerning examples from lawyers and law students across Canada who have faced harsh and unwarranted consequences in response to legitimate speech regarding this conflict. There is a widespread fear that, if lawyers or students express political views that differ from those of their colleagues, they will face discrimination in the employment context. Furthermore, on social media, some lawyers have openly called for the establishment of blacklists of lawyers and law students who participate in pro-Palestinian activities and demonstrations, and two weeks ago a retired judge issued a 200-page review that denounced one such backlash against law students who signed a pro-Palestinian petition, which required him to publicly call for civility and respectful dialogue within the legal community.

Unfortunately, there's also been a recent rise in governmental policies that contribute to Islamophobia. These include police officers using a disproportionate amount of force and tactics on pro-Palestinian demonstrators; a provincial legislature now prohibiting elected officials from wearing the kaffiyeh in the workplace, which evokes another provincial bill banning public sector workers from wearing the hijab; and our highest court recently uninviting racialized speaking delegates, vaguely citing the speaker's social media comments regarding the same conflict. Our communities are already over-policed and underserved, and these recent decisions further embolden Islamophobic incidents on the ground.

In closing, if the government wants to address Islamophobia, it needs to take accountability and focus on three main areas. First is rebuilding trust with communities. The lack of trust is found across governmental institutions and is especially pronounced under national security, criminal justice and law enforcement departments. Second is recognizing that policies shape perceptions. Islamophobia is learned behaviour, and when governments introduce actions, language and policies that target particular groups, that often provides a licence for other Canadians to discriminate against these same communities. Third is meaningfully engaging with the Muslim community and related groups, and this includes an understanding of the intersectional forms of discrimination that include sexism and anti-Palestinian racism. These are distinct concepts that have a compounding effect that is greater than the sum of their parts, and there's an inherent need to appreciate the lived experiences of our groups when developing and implementing policies that directly affect us. Together these principles can lead to a more cohesive environment, but also to fairer policies and more defensible laws that will stand the test of challenges in our appeal courts and in the court of public opinion.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to expand on any of these themes and any other issues that will be helpful for this committee.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your time.

We'll now go to Imam Abdallah Yousri, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Abdallah Yousri (Imam and Executive Director, Ummah Society): Good afternoon, honourable Madam Chair and honourable members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

My name is Abdullah Yousri. I'm the Imam and executive director of the Ummah Society. It's the largest Muslim charity in the Atlantic region.

As an imam, my role is unique. I am often the first stop for community members when hate crimes occur, and also the first stop for government officials in the same circumstances. I witnessed firsthand the impact of Islamophobia on individuals of our community. I have counselled children who are bullied in schools, women who are harassed for wearing hijabs and men who are profiled and discriminated against in workplaces and public spaces.

Since October 7, the situation has worsened significantly. I have observed a noticeable spike in Islamophobic attacks, physical assaults and verbal abuse and a disturbing rise in hate speech. There is fear everywhere in the community. There is also anger and frustration for lack of accountability towards the aggression taking place against members of the Muslim community here in Canada.

I feel the justice system has failed miserably to protect the constitutional rights of Muslim Canadians to express themselves and be themselves. In Canada, the country that celebrates all cultures, all of a sudden, the most iconic cultural item, the kaffiyeh, was banned, leaving many community members questioning their identity. More importantly, attempts to silence Canadian Muslims by threatening their livelihoods were the worst and most painful. Firing many Canadian Muslims and threatening many others in an attempt to silence them has been a shameful and horrible act that

shocked thousands in our community, including our imams and community leaders.

Honourable members, I have even counselled Muslim lawyers who are fearful to utter a word or even express their pain to their colleagues while they mourn the loss of immediate family members in Gaza. Allow me to share two stories from our local community in Halifax that illustrate the personal toll of these injustices.

Yara Jamal was the only Muslim Arab woman working in the media in all the Atlantic, with CTV News. She was fired from her job immediately over alleged comments she made. The same woman was a victim of continuous bullying, harassment and discrimination for over a year in the same workplace. Despite these incidents being documented and reported, her case was ultimately neglected. I leave you to imagine the impact of such incidents on all the women and youth in our community.

Nargis DeMolitor was the only Muslim woman working in politics in Halifax. She worked for the Minister of Immigration and the PC government. She was fired immediately, as well, in a very humiliating way, over alleged comments she did not even make.

Furthermore, many imams and Muslim chaplains, like Imam Aarij Anwer and many others, were also fired from their jobs in hospitals and universities, with no legal consequences.

I can sit here and tell many untold stories to the committee. However, I watched the previous sessions held last week, and I heard honourable members asking about solutions. Here are a few measures I believe can make a difference.

At the Ummah Society, we have started providing training to local police officers, first responders, government officials, etc., about Islam and Muslim cultures, about Islamophobia and about religious and cultural sensitivities. We have seen the impact of providing this training, which has been attended by many every year, and we have seen this impact in our city. Mandating such training for government officials and making it a requirement for receiving government funding, I believe, would make a huge difference.

In Halifax, we successfully advocated for the establishment of the first hate crime unit in the Atlantic. Before that, we did not have one in the whole of Atlantic Canada. However, it is struggling to operate because of a lack of funding from the municipality. Federal support in the form of funding the hate crime units across the country would have a huge impact on reporting, counting, analyzing and protecting all community members.

• (1240)

Thank you for the invitation and for this great work you are doing.

The Chair: Fabulous. Thank you very much. You're right on time.

For the last five minutes, please, we'll go to Madam Julie Macfarlane, professor.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane (Emerita Distinguished Professor of Law, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker and members of the committee.

My name is Julie Macfarlane and I am an emerita distinguished professor of law.

In my presentation today, I'm going to say a few words about some research that I conducted in 2010 to 2012 and the book that I wrote as a result, which was about Muslim marriage and divorce customs in North America as practised amongst North American Muslims, both here in Canada and in the U.S.—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Madam Macfarlane. Can you please put the boom between your mouth and—

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Oh. I'm so sorry. It fell down.

The Chair: I did stop your time, but I'll start it again. Please continue.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Thank you.

In my testimony, I'm going to say something about the work that I did in 2010 to 2012 and a bit beyond that in working with Muslim community members in Canada and in the U.S., and what I learned about Islamophobia as somebody coming very new and very ignorant to this area. I want to say a bit about events post October 7. Although I don't have empirical data, I do have some observations on that point. Finally, I have a couple of suggestions as to measures to build on my colleagues' points, which you've already heard.

When I began to study the role of Islamic laws and the ways in which North American Muslims conducted their marriages and divorces, I was doing so because all I had heard about this from the media was that it was a very bad and terrifying thing. In fact, I distinctly remember a student coming into my office one day at the university and saying to me, "I'd like to write a paper on sharia law." I asked, "Well, what do you know about sharia law?" They said, "Well, nothing, but I know it's really bad."

I think that was a summary, in some ways, for what I discovered over the subsequent years of my research: lots of lack of knowledge and information and lots of prejudice in a way that was truly astonishing to me. I am extremely grateful for the coaching I received from imams and members of the communities as I found my way through to do this research and to talk with people about a very sensitive subject, obviously, which is how they handle their family transitions, both marriage and divorce.

The first thing I learned was that sharia law is a term that's been made up by the western media. There is sharia, and there is Islamic law, and they are two different things. Sharia is the path that Muslims follow in order to live a good life. It's a totally personal experi-

ence. As one imam once told me, there is a sharia for every Muslim in Canada, which I thought really encapsulated this.

This was one of the first sort of staggering revelations that I had: That rather than being something that, as the media would have it, Muslims wanted to inflict on everybody—this horrible-sounding sharia law that seemed to involve lots of nasty punishments—sharia was in fact a deeply personal value system, which did vary from person to person, and Islamic law was the principles that had been built out of the Quranic texts and the Hadith by jurisprudence in the fourth century onwards. Of course, these were male jurists, so a lot of that jurisprudence is somewhat male-centric, which is a tendency of every single western system that was developed in the fourth century—and still some today.

I first of all realized that there was a lot of ignorance that created fear, and that in actual fact this idea that there was some kind of deep, seething resentment going along inside Muslim communities in Canada and the U.S., in which they desperately wanted other people to accept their system, was completely baseless. There was no basis for that. I asked people and talked to people constantly in hundreds of interviews about this, and I never heard a single person in that group say that they thought sharia should be imposed on non-Muslims. If you take that out of the picture, then you understand a great deal more about the fear and prejudice that have developed toward the Muslim community, and its lack of basis.

In terms of some measures that I think are super important as a result of that work, working with the imams is really important, because the imams are a very, very important source of influence, and they're also family problem-solvers in many communities. I think there need to be some clear standards around dealing with domestic violence, and, obviously, there's an issue of women's governance in mosques, but certainly it's important to work with the imams.

It's also important, I believe, to work with kids at school—

• (1245)

The Chair: Professor, thank you very much.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I will be faithful to keeping the time. We will now—

Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Madam Chair, I just noticed that Mr. Morrice from the Green Party is here. I was wondering if you would care to ask for unanimous consent.

The Chair: If you're asking me to ask, I'd be pleased to ask.

I guess Mr. Morrice is asking for unanimous consent to be allowed two and a half minutes to ask questions.

No?

I'm sorry. I'm hearing all kinds of noises on my left side of the table.

Thank you.

Now I go to six minutes per each of the four parties here. I will be faithful in trying to keep the time as best as I can. Because I will have to be strict on time, can we please stick to the subject at hand so that I don't have to entertain any points of order? We have a hard stop at 30 minutes past the hour.

I will start with MP Jivani, please.

Mr. Jamil Jivani (Durham, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the witnesses for being here and for their contributions to this conversation. I certainly think that we are due for an important conversation on religious freedom in our country, and this has been an important part of that discussion.

I want to start off by maybe trying to give a bit of my perspective as a person from the suburbs of Toronto. Since 2021, we've had over 100 Christian churches burned, vandalized or desecrated in Canada, and sometimes, when I see that, and I see the lack of media coverage of those attacks on religious freedom, and when I see that we cannot, even in the House of Commons, get every party to agree on condemning those attacks on religious freedom, I think to myself, like, "Yo, dawg, are we like in *The Truman Show* or something right now?"

It just seems so frustrating and puzzling as to how you get to this point. Often, I will hear from constituents who are concerned about it, and they'll express a sense of hopelessness, like, well, how do you get people to care about this?

Then I see other communities go through their own ordeals when it comes to attacks on their religious freedom. We have seen schools and synagogues get shot at in Montreal just over the weekend. We have seen the hate-motivated attack on a Muslim family in London. I think to myself, well, maybe there's an opportunity for us all to work together and draw attention to the various ways that faith communities in this country may experience discrimination or persecution.

Maybe there's an opportunity for us to build some bridges across different religious communities in hopes that the experiences that are happening throughout this country right now, where, in many ways, people feel afraid that they will lose their jobs by showing that they are a person of faith, or that they will lose something—their standing, perhaps, in their workplace or their school—for showing that they are a person of faith.... Perhaps by working together we actually wind up being able to protect believers of all different types.

Maybe I will pose my question on that to you, Mr. Panju. As you think about charting a path forward, where do you see the possibility of different faith communities being able to work together and support each other better?

• (1250)

Mr. Husein Panju: Thank you for that question, MP Jivani.

You're right. There is a sincere division right now in our society amongst various cultures and faiths, and we are optimistic that we can get to a point eventually where this unity is developed.

I understand that the purpose of these sessions is to speak about what governments can do. There are so many things that can be done. One thing I want to focus on is to speak about how government policies shape perceptions. I won't purport to be an expert in all forms of discrimination, but to the extent that I'm an expert in anything, it is Islamophobia.

I know that Canadians look to our leaders for direction. The research confirms that when there is hateful rhetoric from the top, whether it's the government in power or other politicians or any other people of influence, other individuals from the community take notice, and there's a corresponding impact at the ground level. When governments introduce actions and policies to target particular groups, as I mentioned, that provides a licence for other Canadians to discriminate against these same communities.

To the extent that Islamophobia is a recognized issue—and I think largely there's consensus, but I know there are some who disagree—I think there needs to be tangible action and engagement, not just money that's invested in different programs, but a meaningful appetite to hear the perspective of those who are impacted the most.

To the extent that governments can help to coordinate this, we think that would be a great starting point. So often right now, Islamophobia, for example, is being conflated with anti-Palestinian racism, and they're related but different concepts. Not everyone who is a Muslim is Palestinian, and not everyone who is a Palestinian is a Muslim: For many Canadians, that's not an apparent issue. The compounding impacts of anti-Palestinian racism and gendered Islamophobia are serious concepts, and we think the government needs to take an active role in recognizing this and also to play a role in educating our communities about the values and strengths that make Canadians who we are.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Mr. Panju, I have just a follow-up question before my time is up. There was a moment of hope, I thought, last summer, when I did start to see different religious communities working together.

The particular issue of concern for many believers was the matter of parental rights and the fact that at different levels of government we had politicians who were actively campaigning against the rights of mothers and fathers to play a leading role in their children's education. I wonder if you have any thoughts on that as a potential issue for collaboration.

Mr. Husein Panju: Yes. That's a great question. I'm familiar that...matters of education fall under the provincial purview, so I'll be mindful of this committee and the government's jurisdiction.

Muslims are not a monolith. There are different perspectives even within our communities. Questions like these are important, and to understand how communities feel about these, there need to be meaningful discussions within our communities to get these answers.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go for six minutes to member of Parliament Ehsassi, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Given that there wasn't consent for Mr. Morrice to ask a question, I will share my time with him.

Allow me to start off by thanking all of our witnesses. I found your testimony extremely helpful.

Now, if I can start off with Mr. Panju, first of all, thank you for leading the Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association. I've had the pleasure of receiving a few legal briefs, and the legal work was spot-on and very helpful. Thank you for that.

Now, in your testimony, you touched on the fact that since October 7 we've seen some discrimination in the workplace. This is something that many of us have read about in the papers as well. It truly is chilling that someone who is expressing concern about developments in the Middle East, or who is of the opinion that human rights are not being respected would be let go from their place of work. Given that it is a very significant issue, and it concerns me to no end, I was wondering if you could elaborate on that, please.

• (1255)

Mr. Husein Panju: Thanks for that important question.

As I mentioned in my introduction, there are serious concerns among members of our community about their employment prospects. Without repeating too much of what I said earlier, there are legitimate concerns that if employees, students or candidates make comments about the conflict, they will face repercussions.

This matter was perhaps best exemplified recently by an instance of student protesters who issued a petition calling for change and expressing their position on the conflict. Numerous students from the Lincoln Alexander School of Law signed a letter of support for Palestine and all forms of Palestinian resistance. There was extensive backlash from the legal community that targeted the students who signed this letter, many of whom were racialized individuals, including visibly Muslim women. Students were doxxed on various social media platforms. There were various organizations and commentators who urged that they be named, expelled, deported and labelled as terror apologists. Many students received disturbing and threatening emails, phone calls and messages that included threats of violence and death, as well as graphic videos and images. This is abhorrent.

Following this extensive backlash I was talking about, the university engaged retired chief justice J. Michael MacDonald to thoroughly review this letter. The justice found that the letter was not anti-Semitic; nor was it anti-Semitic to “criticize the actions and policies of the Israeli government towards Palestinians” or “apply concepts from international law, like colonialism, genocide, and occupation, in discussions of and statements about the government of Israel.” That's a direct quote from the chief justice's report.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Mr. Panju, you're talking about prospective work.

Mr. Husein Panju: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: These were individuals who were trying to get jobs at law firms, but they were blacklisted. I've also heard of instances where people who had jobs were let go because they expressed an opinion.

What do you know about that? I have very little time—probably 40 seconds.

Mr. Husein Panju: That's right. This has been happening on a widespread basis and was accentuated at the time of the conflict.

There's a need for proper discussion about what constitutes hate in our communities. If there are individuals expressing hateful comments and perspectives, there's a way to deal with those. Right now there's a lack of understanding and context about what words and actions really mean. All individuals are entitled to due process, fairness and civil rights. There's a need for the government to make this known to all employers, in order to make sure we live in a society that's reflective of the values we adhere to.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

I will share the remainder of my time with Mr. Morrice.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Am I allowed to add something?

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Thank you, Ali.

The Chair: Wait a second, please. I stopped the time. You have one minute and 54 seconds, but I stopped it.

Professor Macfarlane, I'm sorry. Is there a problem?

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: No, I just want to be able to say something.

The Chair: I'm afraid I am guided by the rules of the House. I cannot recognize a witness unless there's a question posed to the witness.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Is that even when what I have to say is relevant to the question that was just asked?

The Chair: Witnesses are able to send us anything else in writing. I must continue, because we have a hard stop.

Thank you.

You have a minute and 54 seconds left. Please go ahead.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ali.

Fauzia, it's wonderful to have you here. It seems so fitting, given that the third annual “Snapshot of Hate” report came out from the Coalition of Muslim Women just last week. As you shared in your testimony, there have been 115 total cases of hate and discrimination through the anti-hate services reporting, and a drastic increase since October 7.

I wonder if you want to say more about recommendations for this committee as they consider what the federal government could be doing in terms of additional measures to address Islamophobia.

Ms. Fauzia Mazhar: Thank you, MP Morrice. It's a pleasure to see you here as well.

To answer your question, CMW has released a number of recommendations at different times, for different levels of government.

One thing I think Mr. Panju was talking about earlier as well was an actual definition of hate—in our case, especially, an agreed-upon definition or description of Islamophobia, which is still missing. A lot of negative rhetoric comes towards Muslims and even allies who try to say “Islamophobia”. Some say that Islamophobia is nothing. It's something Muslims have invented—something like that. It's always pitted against freedom of speech and the idea that somehow, if we do anything to address Islamophobia, it's going to curtail that freedom of speech.

Having an agreed-upon definition of Islamophobia, gendered Islamophobia and other terms, where people agree and community is involved, would be a great starting point for the federal government.

• (1300)

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Fauzia.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that response. It's much appreciated.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fortin, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

I thank all the witnesses who are with us today.

I will get right to the heart of the matter.

Mr. Yousri, in your presentation, you said that you deplore the hate speech directed at the Muslim community in Canada. That clearly did not help relations among citizens in Canada. I understand your point of view. In your opinion, should hate speech be banned in Canada, or should it continue to have a place?

[*English*]

Mr. Abdallah Yousri: I understand that many sessions were held before about anti-Semitism, and I think that we're discussing now issues about Islamophobia. Definitely, all forms of hate should be addressed and should be banned, and we should all work together to combat all forms of hate against Muslims or other religions and cultures. This goes without saying.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

Hatred is currently controlled or stemmed by a provision of the Criminal Code, section 319, which prohibits the promotion of hatred and anti-Semitism, among other things. However, the code also contains an exception provision, according to which a person accused of promoting hatred would have a good defence if they indicated that they expressed an opinion on a religious subject or based their opinion on a religious text they believe in.

In your opinion, should this exception be removed from the Criminal Code or should it be kept, thereby allowing hatred to be promoted based on a religious text?

[*English*]

Mr. Abdallah Yousri: As I said in my first comment, we should work together, actively and through legislation, to combat all kinds of hate. Speaking about this particular law or amendment that you are proposing, I am not aware of its details. However, I would like to say that protecting the freedom of expression and the freedom of people of faith and all faith groups to practise their religion freely is a fundamental right, and we have seen so many attempts to take this freedom away through different proposals. Recently, there was one through the chaplaincy program, to remove people of Abrahamic faith from being chaplains in federal government prisons, as well as other types of legislation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Yousri. Since I only have two minutes left, I would like to hear from your fellow witnesses on the same issue.

Ms. Mazhar, in your opinion, should this exception be kept or should hate speech be prohibited, even if it is based on religious texts?

• (1305)

[*English*]

Ms. Fauzia Mazhar: It's a difficult question to answer as a layperson, and I will probably go towards thinking of competing rights under the human rights legislation, where people have the right to practise their religion freely on one hand, and then people, or citizens, have also the right to live their lives free of harassment, free of any kind of hate and discrimination and things like that. It's really very difficult to say, at this point, for me, whether we keep it or we let it go. I can see the benefits—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Okay. Thank you, Ms. Mazhar. I don't mean to be rude, but I have less than a minute left.

Mr. Panju, I'd like you to comment on the same question. I understand that you are a lawyer and chair of the Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association. I am not familiar with your résumé, and you may not be an expert on freedom of expression. However, in your opinion, should we keep this religious exception in the Criminal Code that allows hate to be promoted on the basis of a religious text or, on the contrary, should that hatred be prohibited?

[*English*]

Mr. Husein Panju: Thank you. I know I don't have very much time to answer this question—in fact, I see that I have 30 seconds—so I'm happy to give more details if this comes around another time.

Ultimately, it may be up to the courts to decide whether or not this bill is discriminatory. Fundamentally, our organization rejects the bill's underlying assumption that religions and religious communities are instigating and fomenting hate. I'm not sure what evidence this assumption is based on, but it sounds a lot like religious and Islamic tropes that have been going on for generations.

Our experience is the complete opposite. These communities instead serve to build inclusion and enable the ability to contribute to our society. The timing of this bill is concerning.

I'm happy to go into more detail when the question comes around again.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Garrison, you have six minutes, please.

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

I want to go back to you, Ms. Mazhar, and talk a bit more about the rise in violent hate crimes directed toward Muslim women that you have found in your community. You gave us a bit of detail about that.

Rather than ask you what the government should do at this point, I'll ask you what the community is doing in response to these crimes. How is the community supporting Muslim women?

Ms. Fauzia Mazhar: Through you, Madam Chair, I thank the member for his question.

I want to start by saying that this is not a problem that Muslim women created or are responsible for. We do not bear the responsibility to tackle this problem. However, as the Coalition of Muslim Women, we have thought from the beginning that this is our home. If there is a challenge in our home, if there is an issue in our home, we will not just sit back and let other people resolve this issue. That really gives us a lot of strength. We have been doing it.

In terms of how the government can support community-level initiatives, funding is very important, but as we have heard from different witnesses today, it's also the action. It's also the role modelling. It's also the language that the different levels of government use. Everything together will create the environment in which Muslim women will be able to live free of not just harassment but also real physical assault, as we have heard so many times today.

Thank you.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you, Ms. Mazhar. I didn't mean to imply that it was the responsibility of the Muslim community or Muslim women. It was simply to say that in the absence of action, I recognize that Muslim women are responding and providing supports to women.

I want to turn to Dr. Macfarlane, who had wanted to intervene earlier. I'd like to give her a chance to provide a response, if we haven't passed that moment. If we have, I have another question for Dr. Macfarlane.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Thank you very much, Mr. Garrison.

I have just a quick point on the rise in worrying employment conflict since October 7. One of the things I want the committee to be aware of, and in this way your work overlaps with the work of the heritage committee, is that in these instances, where people raise complaints about Islamophobia and prejudice and are terminated because of a remark they made or simply because they're complaining about hostility in the workplace, they are almost with-

out exception required to sign a non-disclosure agreement. You're not going to know about the number or extent of these instances, because they're hidden in an NDA.

• (1310)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you for that important information, Dr. Macfarlane.

In your opening statement, I believe you ran out of time. You were about to talk about working with young people and students in combatting Islamophobia. Please continue.

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: Thank you.

One thing this research taught me was how woefully ignorant I was and how many of us, I believe, have grown up not understanding anything about Muslim culture and about Islam as a religion. I think this is one of many things that we would do well to be preventative about if we want to avoid the kind of confusion and misunderstanding and therefore fear that gets generated in a very sophisticated way by a machine that's been driving that fear. That would be to give more education to young people, so that they understand something more about their Muslim classmates and why a girl in their class is wearing a hijab. It doesn't mean she is being oppressed at home. This may be an important choice for her.

The facility that is increasingly recognized for Muslim prayer in schools is expanded into giving some more information and knowledge to other kids as well, so that they might be able to grow up, unlike this generation, not believing that Muslims are the other and are to be feared.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thanks very much.

I want to go back to Imam Yousri and ask about resources available in the Atlantic region.

You talked about there being no hate crimes unit, except in Halifax. What is the general experience when people experience hate crimes, in terms of resources available to them?

Mr. Abdallah Yousri: Thank you, MP Garrison, for the question.

Actually, there was not a hate crime unit even in Halifax. We had been advocating for this to be established. It was established only two years ago, after the Afzaal family disaster in London, Ontario. Until then, the entire Atlantic Canada region did not have any hate crime unit.

Is my time up?

The Chair: Yes. I'm sorry about that. We may get a chance to come back to you.

Let me now go to the second round.

Very quickly, Mr. Moore, you have up to five minutes.

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for appearing today on this important study.

My first question for executive director Fauzia Mazhar is about what I think is one of the worst acts of violence and terror in Canada. That was the shooting at the mosque in Quebec City in January 2017.

In 2022, the Supreme Court of Canada heard an appeal from the Court of Appeal of Quebec concerning the sentence that the individual received. I don't use the individual's name, because a lot of the victims' families don't want to use the individual's name. This individual was given a sentence that meant he would not get out of jail and the victims' families would not have to attend parole hearings. Based on the Supreme Court decision in 2022, this individual, who took six innocent lives, will now be eligible for parole when he is barely in middle age.

We have heard at this committee the tremendous burden placed on victims and victims' families through the parole process, whereby every two years the families have to relive a tragedy. We've been calling on the government to respond in some way to that decision on behalf of victims and their families. I wonder if you have any thoughts on that. Should the government respond in some way to that decision, to ensure that we respect those whose lives were lost?

• (1315)

Ms. Fauzia Mazhar: If I talk from the perspective of the Canadian Muslim community in general, of course there was a lot of disappointment with this decision. It was perceived that Muslim lives are probably not as important as other lives lost. Comparisons were made with other cases, especially the case of the RCMP officers who were killed. There were lots of comparisons and things like that.

However, if you talk to me personally, I would say that hate just did not kill six people that day. Hate also killed a seventh person that day. Similarly, the person is alive, but the person's life is not the same for that person either. Hate does not impact just those who are victims. It also impacts the perpetrator so badly, especially when they're young, a 20-year-old who has killed four people and is put behind bars for the rest of their life. Maybe that's not the answer to hate.

The Waterloo region is renowned for its restorative justice roots, with the Mennonite community's presence there. The CMW, the Coalition of Muslim Women of K-W, worked with Community Justice Initiatives to start a mediation program for identity-based harm and violence called Sulha, which means peace in many Muslim cultural languages.

Personally, I understand the pain of the family. Imagine that 10-year-old or 9-year-old boy. Now he's an adult, and every two years he has to present his case. How traumatic is that going to be for him and other family members? Is there a way to find a middle place? Is there a way where the family doesn't have to go through the challenge of coming back?

This is my personal opinion, but from an organizational perspective, are there ways to rehabilitate? Are there ways to bring restorative justice and mediation, not necessarily in the murder case, as they will have to complete the sentence and things like that—

Hon. Rob Moore: Thank you.

The chair is telling me I have 30 seconds left. Those five minutes go—

The Chair: You have 17 seconds.

Hon. Rob Moore: I have a question for you, Mr. Panju.

You mentioned the pressure to conform that minority groups can feel within the public sector and other organizations. I think you—

The Chair: I apologize, Mr. Moore.

Hon. Rob Moore: Oh, boy. There we go.

I'm sorry.

The Chair: We will now go, for up to five minutes, to MP Zuberi.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here.

Fauzia, it's good to see you in person again. I was happy to visit your community a few months ago. You're doing fantastic work.

I was in London, Ontario a few days ago to mark the third anniversary of the Afzaal family's passing.

I also remember how, on the night of January 29, 2017, I got a call from friends in Montreal, saying they needed somebody to handle English media in Montreal for a vigil that was being done because of the terror attack that happened in Quebec City. I remember at the time that I was not shocked, to be frank and honest, that such a thing had happened in our country and in my beautiful province of Quebec. I was not shocked, because of the conversations happening at the time.

I think this particular study on Islamophobia exemplifies the need to confront discrimination. I'm still amazed at how we can obfuscate the issue. When we're studying this issue, we don't genuinely study it, sometimes. That is disheartening, to be frank.

I am encouraged when I hear, for example, Ms. Macfarlane. She brings me back to the day following January 29—January 30, when there was a vigil in Montreal. It was bitter cold—minus 20. We said, “No politicians on the stage. No politicians. They get enough time to speak.” We had only organizers and activists on the stage. I was one of them. I remember looking out at the crowd in the bitter cold of Montreal and seeing many people from across Quebec society, most of whom did not have any skin in the game whatsoever and who were there in solidarity, saying, “No. Not in our name. This is not our province. This is not who we are.”

I remember how, for the next seven to 10 days, in each and every publication in Montreal and across the province, there were important human stories about who Muslims in Quebec are. They vulgarized who Muslims in Quebec are—meaning they made it plain, instead of putting forth discriminatory things that are unclear and whatnot.

Ms. Macfarlane, in about 45 seconds, can you share your path with us? I think it's very interesting.

Then I want to go to Mr. Husein Panju afterwards.

Please go ahead, Ms. Macfarlane.

• (1320)

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: I was responding as a researcher and an academic to banner headlines, which, if I had taken them at face value, would have told me that Muslims were biting the heads off chickens in mosques in Ontario. There was a particular firestorm in Ontario that started this off. It's very important that people understand they have so much to learn here, and not to fear. What I tried to do in my book, in the end, was to say, "Muslims are like all of us. They have their family traditions. They have their issues."

I also want to add that, in terms of dialoguing—which has been talked about a lot today—one thing I learned is that many of these folks aren't observant Muslims. It has to be possible to include people who wouldn't describe themselves as observant but for whom the cultural precepts are important. They are just as discriminated against as anybody else in these dialogues.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

Mr. Panju, you mentioned doxxing of students. Do you have any recommendations for us as a committee to give to other bodies around that, in particular the Law Society of Ontario or the Human Rights Commission? You can also submit this response in writing. Also, I'm interested in research around this particular point.

Mr. Husein Panju: Thank you.

On that point, we would encourage all parties of power to direct employees to abandon all blacklists regarding political expression and to ensure that employees are treated fairly. There should be prohibitive disciplinary measures against students or staff who engage in these sorts of activities as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If there's anything more, please do submit it in writing.

For the last two and a half minutes, we have Monsieur Fortin.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Macfarlane, I haven't had a chance to ask you any questions yet.

In your opinion, should we not put an end once and for all to discrimination, violence against the Muslim and Jewish communities, and all other forms of discrimination based on race, skin colour, gender or any other form? Have we not reached the point where we must ban all expressions of hatred from the public space? In short, shouldn't the promotion of hatred in Canada be prohibited, regardless of the reason given, including a religious text or an editorial?

[*English*]

Dr. Julie Macfarlane: I think it's extremely important that we remain very vigilant about hate speech. I am a big supporter of the need to have hate speech principles to protect people, but I also think one of the things we do in our legal system is exclude any kind of reasoning—it's very interesting—that might be based on a religious text. If you see a Muslim woman trying, for example, to enforce her maher, the agreement she's made under Islamic law for

an amount of money to be paid in the event of divorce, the courts won't accept any arguments that are based on references to religious texts. That seems to me to be completely ridiculous. I don't understand why we would not include references to religious texts as part of what we want to protect with respect to hate speech.

• (1325)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Thank you, Ms. Macfarlane.

I'm done, Madam Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

For the next two and a half minutes we have Mr. Garrison.

Go ahead, please.

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

One topic that has not come up today is the role of the social media giants in furthering disinformation and hatred.

I'll start with Ms. Mazhar.

I wonder whether there have been any positive experiences from trying to work with the social media companies to stop the distribution of disinformation and hate.

Ms. Fauzia Mazhar: Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

For us, as a regional organization with very little capacity, few staff and all that, it's beyond our capacity to actually hold these big giants to any kind of account. We have seen a tremendous increase in the reporting of online hate, and it's coming from all parts of Canada. You wouldn't believe it—it's coming from Burnaby and Surrey and everywhere else. People want us to intervene. We are trying to learn how we can intervene in these cases. They've been sending us information, this year especially.

At this time, I don't have an answer. We don't have the capacity, but of course we look to the government to do things there. There is some accountability by these big giants.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you.

It's the same question for you, Mr. Panju. What about trying to hold them accountable for promoting hatred?

Mr. Husein Panju: We're familiar with Bill C-63, which is currently before the House. It's a complex issue. I think there needs to be some more dialogue with our groups on a more directed basis. You're right: Equity-seeking groups like ours are often the victims and the targets of hate speech, but there also needs to be some more consultation to ensure that any such measures do not overly censor legitimate, non-hateful speech from equity-seeking groups as well.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

As the chair, I would like to thank the witnesses in all our panels, and particularly the ones before me here. This completes this particular study.

As an Atlantic Canadian and a Nova Scotian, I want to thank you, Imam Yousri, for shedding some light on Atlantic Canada, because I feel that a lot of times it's a bit overlooked by the bigger centres. Thank you for talking about the training you are conduct-

ing with police officers and everyone else, and, of course, the many interfaith activities you've been organizing over many years, which I personally have attended. We all know these interconnections are so important.

Colleagues, it's 1:28 p.m.

Mr. Abdallah Yousri: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much for attending today. As I said, this completes this particular study.

In due course, you will receive, from the clerk, the activities for Thursday.

Have a good day, and we'll see everybody on Thursday.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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