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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1545)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 51 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Before we begin, I would like to ask all members and other participants in the room to consult the cards on the table for the guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents. Please keep in mind the preventive measures in place to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters, of whom we are very fond. Please use only an approved black earpiece. The old grey earpieces should no longer be used. Always keep your earpiece away from all microphones, and when you are not using your earpiece, place it face down on the middle of the sticker located on the table for that purpose. Thank you all for your co-operation. Our valiant interpreters really appreciate it.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to go over a few rules for members and witnesses. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk of the subcommittee and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated speaking order.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice of floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately.

I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

In accordance with our routine motion concerning sound tests, I wish to inform the subcommittee that all witnesses have completed the required tests in advance of the meeting.

The study before us today is the current human rights situation in Iran.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Tuesday, April 30, the subcommittee is beginning its study of Georgia's draft legislation on foreign agents.

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide a trigger warning. We will be discussing experiences related to violence

and assault, which may be triggering to people with similar experiences. If you feel distressed or if you need help, please advise the clerk.

To accommodate the witnesses, we will be flexible about the five-minute period for opening remarks and the time allotted to witnesses to answer members' questions.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses, who are all appearing as individuals: Nazanin Afshin-Jam, human rights advocate; Arash Sobhani, musician and producer; Hanieh Ziaei, political scientist and iranologist, Raoul-Dandurand Chair, Université du Québec à Montréal; Nazanin Boniadi, human rights advocate and actress; and finally, Atena Daemi, human rights advocate. Four of our witnesses are appearing by video conference. Only Ms. Daemi is in person in the room.

Each witness will present for approximately five minutes, followed by a round of questions.

Nazanin Afshin-Jam, I now invite you to make your opening statement.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam (Human Rights Advocate, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

[*English*]

Thank you to the chair and the committee.

I appeared before this same committee 17 years ago. Tragically, the human rights atrocities in Iran remain the same, as do my recommendations.

The war on women continues. Girls are beaten, dragged screaming into police vans and raped for not wearing a hijab. There is a surge in the executions of peaceful protesters. There is a crisis in Turkey, where bona fide Iranian refugees, like Shilan Mirzaee, are sent notices of deportation back to Iran, despite lethal outcomes.

Preparing for this talk, I came to the conclusion that I could not possibly scratch the surface in a five-minute talk of the abuses of human rights by the Islamic Republic. Therefore, I would like to ask permission to table the 20-page synopsis of the recent UN fact-finding mission's 500-page report. It covers the time frame of September 2022, after the death of Mahsa Amini, also known as Jina, at the hands of the regime's morality police, which sparked the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising in which more than 600 peaceful protesters were killed.

Excuse me. I can hear the simultaneous Persian translation.

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): We'll suspend for a few seconds, please.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: What should I do here? I can hear in my earpiece the simultaneous translation.

The Chair: Wait a few seconds, please. We're trying to address the issue.

Can we have unanimous consent to continue, or do we have to stop because the bells are ringing?

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Chair, let's vote from here. If it's okay with everyone, I'd say to just continue through the votes.

The Chair: Yes. We have a few seconds until we solve this problem.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Danielle Widmer): I think it's all been corrected. We can resume the meeting shortly.

• (1550)

The Chair: Continue, Madam, please. You may continue with your speech.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: All right.

As I was saying, this fact-finding mission report.... No, I still hear the Persian at full volume.

The Clerk: We're going to check the interpretation channels again. Give us a moment, please. Thank you.

• (1550)

(Pause)

• (1555)

The Chair: We can resume. Please continue.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: Thank you.

As I was saying, the UN's fact-finding mission report covers the timeframe of September 2022, after the death of Mahsa Jina Amini at the hands of the regime's morality police, which sparked the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprisings in which more than 600 peaceful protesters were killed, 71 of whom were children. Twenty thousand were imprisoned. There was intentional blinding, targeted shooting, torture, rape and death sentences of peaceful protesters on top of the existing systematic discrimination against women and the persecution of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, among other abuses.

I organized a delegation of experts and survivors of these abuses who gave testimony at the UN, and I would be happy to organize a similar panel for your subcommittee if you were interested.

The most important part of the FFMI report was the conclusion that the abuses of human rights by the regime amounted to crimes against humanity—in other words, an international crime, grounds for the International Criminal Court and grounds for UN member states with universal jurisdiction, like Canada, to try the perpetrators of these crimes in a tribunal. The report recommends opening structural investigations for these crimes against humanity.

Journalist Negar Mojtahedi, who is with Global News, did an investigative piece revealing that 700 such regime affiliates are in Canada, nine of whom have been called to be deported, but instead of deportation they could be on trial, setting the precedent for accountability, as in the case of Hamid Nouri in Sweden.

With each of these regime affiliates comes a trail of dirty laundered money and evidence of foreign interference, including threats to Iranian Canadians and political interference. My organization, the Iranian Justice Collective, was here on the Hill a couple of weeks ago providing policy recommendations on foreign interference, on the PS752 file, on upping the number of Iranian refugees, on actions to get the IRGC onto the terrorist list and on the expansion of sanctions we call Toomaj sanctions. I will table this as well, if permitted, and I would be happy to elaborate.

Shortly after the trip to Ottawa, my colleague received a call at her family's home in Iran from a regime official who threatened that she would end up like the women she was trying to defend if she continued with her activism.

Let me pause and really stress that concentrating on Iranian human rights issues is not an altruistic pursuit; it is in the national self-interest of Canada and the Canadian public. Former Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Zarif said in his book that while he was in office, there was no bigger pressure on the regime than human rights pressure. That is why we hope you support our campaign to end gender apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan, as Canada did to end racial apartheid in South Africa.

This regime has no legitimacy. Eighty per cent of the population want an end to the regime, and in recent parliamentary elections in the capital, Tehran, there was only an 8% voter turnout.

I say this as a proud Canadian who was born in Iran, for the benefit of both people and for lasting change, not just to have stability in the Middle East by cutting off the main sponsor of terrorism for Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis and not just to halt the export of military equipment from Iran to Russia to use against Ukraine, but also for the safety of our Canadian public here on Canadian soil. We cannot risk not having a strong Iran policy. We are not safe.

A government's main objective is to ensure the security of its people. I recommend that Canada join its G7 allies to host a conference or to convene a task force to draft a strong Iran policy with human rights at its core, in which there are real costs, economically or diplomatically, for non-compliance. For our safety and that of our children, we need a comprehensive strategic plan to weaken the regime and empower freedom-loving Iranians.

Thank you very much. I look forward to answering any questions.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you for your nice speech.

Now I would like to invite Madam Atena Daemi, human rights advocate.

You have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please—

I'm sorry, but we have to switch. I would like to invite Mr. Arash Sobhani, musician and producer, who is appearing by video conference.

You have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Arash Sobhani (Musician and Producer, As an Individual): Hi. I am Arash Sobhani. Thank you.

Honourable members of Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

The Iranian struggle stands apart from any other. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has waged a relentless war, not against a political party, a specific ideology or a rival, but against a way of life.

If we distill culture to its essence, it is the very fabric of our day-to-day existence. The Islamic Republic seeks to dismantle and obliterate this way of life, resulting in nearly eight million Iranians fleeing their homeland, millions losing their lives, thousands being imprisoned and hundreds disappearing. This assault on our way of life begins by targeting the intellectuals, artists and cultural figures—the very pillars of the society.

The way of life under attack is a modern one that is rooted in human rights, human dignity and liberal democratic values. This modern way of life is the culmination of centuries of global struggle by individuals and people throughout history around the world. It has now manifest in western countries, placing a profound responsibility on decision-makers in the west. They must not only uphold human rights and liberal values within their own societies, but also safeguard the hard-won gains of countless individuals who endured torture, persecution and imprisonment globally throughout history. Their sacrifices have granted us the freedom of expression we enjoy today in parts of the world. Therefore, I believe the responsibility of western politicians extends beyond mere sympathy and condemnation; it necessitates taking meaningful actions to preserve freedom of speech and human rights globally.

Now let's delve into some of the human rights violations that specifically target intellectuals and artists in Iran.

One example was the cultural revolution purge. After the Islamic Republic's cultural revolution, there was an unprecedented purge of

university professors and students. Around 20,000 teachers deemed too westernized were dismissed. Ironically, many of the operatives of this purge now work in western universities as experts.

Another example is the imprisonment of writers and intellectuals. In 2021, at least 277 writers and public intellectuals in Iran were unjustly imprisoned or detained. Many faced repeated detentions over multiple years, indicating the continued repressions that they face.

There were the chain murders. Between 1988 and 1998, over 80 writers, translators, poets, political activists and ordinary citizens were killed in what became known as the chain murders.

We see the detainment of filmmakers and musicians. Over 100 Iranian filmmakers, actors and musicians have been detained, banned from working or face travel bans for supporting the 2022 protests. This has only happened in the last two years. It's 100 intellectuals, filmmakers and artists.

Kiumars Pourahmad and Dariush Mehrjui—two celebrated Iranian directors—were found dead under suspicious circumstances after becoming vocal critics of the regime.

In individual cases, Toomaj Salehi, the famous Iranian rapper, has faced torture, including the injection of unknown substances and sleep deprivation, and is currently under a death sentence. Saman Yasin has endured torture, including mock executions. Vafadar and Daniel Moghadam, two rappers, have been detained at an unknown location. Shervin Hajipour was arrested because of his artistic expressions. Artists like Rasoulof and Panahi, who are famed Iranian filmmakers, face severe restrictions that prevent them from working and being productive. Rasoulof recently had to flee Iran by foot, as he was banned from travelling and banned from work.

The IRGC remains the main enforcer of these measures, creating various cultural organizations and dominating the entertainment and publishing sectors. Imposing sanctions on any cultural arm of the IRGC or any organizations remotely connected or funded by the IRGC can be considered to be a step in defending the rights of the artists.

In conclusion, it's imperative for the international community, including the Canadian Parliament, to take a decisive stand against such violations and work to hold the Iranian regime accountable. Let's not just condemn these atrocities, but take concrete actions to support the rights and freedom of artists and intellectuals in Iran.

Our collective commitment to human rights and freedom of expression must transcend borders and serve as a beacon of hope for those who continue to resist oppression and strive for a more just and equitable society.

Thank you.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll suspend for voting, please.

• (1605) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1610)

The Chair: I would like to invite Ms. Atena Daemi to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Please go ahead, Ms. Daemi.

Ms. Atena Daemi (Human Rights Advocate, As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Persian*]

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: A point of order, Mr. Chair, there's no French interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Daemi. We have to suspend for a few moments, please.

An hon. member: If it's not ready, can we hear from other witnesses?

The Chair: Yes.

I'm sorry. We'll come back to you. We are going to hear from other witnesses.

Ms. Atena Daemi: Okay.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I would now like to invite Dr. Hanieh Ziaei, political scientist and iranologist and the Raoul-Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, to take the floor.

[*English*]

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei (Political Scientist and Iranologist, Raoul-Dandurand Chair, UQAM, As an Individual): I heard my name. Is it my turn?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: A point of order, Mr. Chair, could we suspend the meeting for a few minutes to discuss with the interpreters?

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. We'll suspend for two seconds, please.

• (1610) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1615)

The Chair: The meeting is resumed.

Ms. Daemi, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, hon. members of the subcommittee, compatriots and other witnesses here today.

I come before you today to testify about the alarming situation—

[*English*]

The Chair: Excuse me. It's not your turn. Now we're asking for Ms. Daemi. Then we'll go back to you. I'm sorry about that.

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: I apologize.

The Chair: Ms. Daemi, go ahead, please. You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Atena Daemi: Thank you.

[*Witness spoke in Persian*]

A voice: I'm sorry. We're not getting anything.

The Chair: Please restart from the top.

Ms. Atena Daemi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

I am Atena Daemi. Between 2014 and 2022, I was in the hospital for six years as a political prisoner in Iran.

It was because of my activities in human rights and opposition. I was sent to other prisons, and my family was in trouble due to the situation. For 54 days I was on a hunger strike, and I realized later that I developed MS. In early May, I travelled to Ottawa with the flight number PS752 families association to meet with members of Parliament, including some of you, to advocate specific actions supporting Iranian human rights activities.

Just seven months after my release, Jina Amini was killed, and I became targeted by the Revolutionary Guard for a number of months, almost eight months. My sister and I ultimately embarked on a 10-hour journey to Iraq and Kurdistan. We had the opportunity to be accepted by Canada, and for months we have been living in Newfoundland.

The human rights situation in Iran is deeply troubling. Political and civil activists face lengthy imprisonment simply for expressing their opinions and beliefs. The injustices I experienced during my own imprisonment are still prevalent among political prisoners and their families. I joined other activists in petitioning the United Nations to acknowledge the gender apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan.

The regime also discriminates against religions, ethnicities, Baha'is and LGBTQ. There have been more than 100 people executed in 2024. There are no free books or media. There are so many children in the streets working. There are billions of dollars, critical to the Iranian economy, that the Revolutionary Guard receives, and it is used.... Mostly the money was to go to countries, including countries such as Canada.

The people of Iran reject this dictatorship of the Islamic Republic, advocating instead for the realization of women's rights and the right to life and freedom, as emphasized in the renowned slogan. However, as I mentioned earlier, in 2022 alone, extensive investigation by the United Nations facility found that hundreds of protesters had been killed, with reports of deliberate shootings.

The Revolutionary Guard, as you all are aware, caused the flight....

• (1620)

The IRGC has cost so many people in Kurdistan. They killed three people and are getting involved in the policies of Turkey and Kurdistan. There is almost no way that you can have any justice system in Iran.

They can cause more trouble for many countries. If you don't do much in Canada regarding the Flight PS752 case.... Failure to address it in 2018 and recent reaffirmation by designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization....

Additionally, I wish to highlight the trouble that exists. In Kurdistan, there are many Iranians who left the country and have gone to Turkey or Iraq, hoping to find a way to live in a safe place. In Iran, unfortunately, there is war with people every day.

Instead of providing refuge to agents of the regime who view Canada as a sanctuary, I urge Canada....

I am a victim of this judicial system of the Islamic Republic regime, having spent my formative years in prison based on a judiciary ruling. I urge you to include the revolutionary court judges of Iran. You have maybe heard about Toumaj Salehi. He protested peacefully against executions, so they have caused trouble for him.

The people of Iran possess the courage to fight for their rights. They do not expect foreign military intervention or interference in determining their fate; however, democratic nations like Canada can support Iran.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you for your good address.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome Dr. Hanieh Ziaei, political scientist, iranologist and Raoul-Dandurand Chair at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Ms. Ziaei, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: Mr. Chair, hon. members of the committee, I'm here today to testify about the alarming human rights situation in Iran. I'm here as a political scientist and researcher.

Things are really tough for researchers. Unfortunately, we can't do any work on the ground in Iran. Some of my colleagues have been approached by the Iranian government and have been the target of intimidation and threats. As you know, the Iranian parliament, the Majles, has made it clear that we aren't welcome in Iran to conduct research on the ground.

Today I will address several key points: attacks on freedom of expression and association; state censorship, which has been discussed; the death penalty; and representative cases of repression in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

First, freedom of expression is being severely curtailed. Citizens are free to express their opinions, but they aren't free to do so without fear of reprisals. As Iranian activist Kaveh Kermanshahi said, people in Iran have freedom of expression, but they don't have free-

dom after expression. Magazine and magazine offices have been closed [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. Zanan magazine is one example. It was one of very few forums where women could express themselves, and Iranian authorities have silenced it [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Next, I'd like to talk about the censorship of artistic and cultural creation, which others have discussed. Art and culture in Iran is strictly controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Any cultural production must obtain authorization [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], which is often arbitrary. Political and religious topics and depictions of female sensuality are under close scrutiny. For example, the Maison du cinéma was closed in January 2012 on the grounds that it constituted a threat to national security and Islamic morals. Those two arguments are often used [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Now, let's talk about the ubiquitous death penalty, the supreme punishment. As you know, Iran ranks second in the world, after China, for number of executions. The death penalty is used for a variety of crimes, including non-violent crimes, such as espionage [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Ziaei, but I have to stop you, because we can't hear you very well. Just bear with us for a second, please.

• (1625)

(Pause)

• (1630)

The Chair: Unfortunately, Ms. Ziaei, there's nothing we can do on our end to improve the connection. I think the problem is on your end. That's what our experts here are saying. Please continue, and we'll do our best to understand you.

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: Okay.

I would like to tell you about Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human rights lawyer whose case is particularly poignant. In 2019, she was sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for her human rights work against discriminatory laws forcing women to wear the hijab. In 2012, she received the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Repression in Iran knows no bounds. Toomaj Salehi, a protest rapper, is a striking example of that. He was sentenced to death in April 2024 for "corruption on earth". Toomaj was arrested, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] then released on bail, only to be arrested again in 2022, tortured and imprisoned in isolation. His lyrics condemned social injustices—

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Ziaei—

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: The death of Mahsa Zhina Amini in September 2022 after she was arrested by the morality police sparked a massive protest movement called Woman, Life, Freedom, which has been brutally repressed. In addition to the arrests—

The Chair: Ms. Ziaei, I'm sorry, but I have to stop you, because the interpretation isn't working and no one can understand you.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

What matters most to me is the safety of our interpreters, which is something we've heard a lot about recently. I don't think the quality of the connection is good enough right now to ensure the health and safety of the interpreters. I'd therefore like the clerk to ask the interpreters if they're able to do their job. If they are, great, but I'd be surprised. We also have to think about the people who are watching our meeting online.

Today's study is super important, but unfortunately technology is not on our side. We were the ones who invited Ms. Ziaei, and I really want to hear what she has to say, but I also want people to be able to hear her comments in English. A lot of people are watching our proceedings today because our study matters to a lot of people.

That's why I want to make sure that everything is being done properly. Otherwise, we'll have to postpone this appearance. I don't want us to miss any of the testimony, but things seem very complicated today, and we haven't even gotten to questions and answers yet. We have to make sure everything is done properly.

The Chair: How about if I asked Ms. Ziaei to start again? It's because it really wasn't clear.

[*English*]

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Do I have the floor?

I wonder if we could ask her to send a written submission of her....

That's a no. Okay.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Okay.

Carry on, madam.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, we really need to understand what the professor is saying, because we're about to move on to questions and answers. Most of my questions will be for her.

I understand where you're coming from. I'm not saying that she should stop her presentation, but I do want her to be able to continue it in a way that allows for interpretation. If you're telling me that interpretation can't happen, that's a problem.

Can we suspend for two seconds while we get this sorted out?

The Chair: I'm going to ask her to continue anyway.

Go ahead, Professor.

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: Okay. I'll try to finish quickly. My speaking notes were actually emailed to you, so this is all in that two-page document if members want to see it.

As I was saying, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement resulted in a series of arrests. We all know about the brutal crackdown. The regime now uses state-of-the-art technology and devices such as surveillance cameras for facial and licence plate recognition. Here again, women are the target, women who do not wear a hijab, which is mandatory in Iran.

State repression is multi-faceted: It is physical, mental and psychological. Protesters are often violently dispersed using sophisticated technology such as tasers. These protesters are imprisoned in the Evin Prison, where political opponents, journalists, artists and activists are systematically persecuted, as we heard.

We mustn't forget about the gas attacks against schoolgirls in March 2023, further proof that the state's violence knows no bounds. We know of about 300 attacks on more than 5,000 young girls in 25 Iranian provinces. These attacks triggered panic attacks in both parents and students. In addition, many students complained of severe symptoms, which led to a wave of hospitalizations.

I'll stop there, because I'd like to leave more time for questions and answers. It's clear that the Iranian people are currently being subjected to a regime that governs by fear, corruption and oppression. Human rights violations are systemic and institutionalized. In contrast, we see the courage of these women, men, activists, artists and ordinary citizens who continue to inspire the world today, and we salute them.

I will close with a quote from Bertolt Brecht, who said, "He who fights can lose, he who doesn't fight has already lost." I think that quote captures the spirit of many Iranians.

Thank you for your attention. I apologize again for the technical issues. I look forward to your questions.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ziaei.

I now invite Nazanin Boniadi, human rights advocate and actress, to give her presentation.

[*English*]

You have the floor for five minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nazanin Boniadi (Human Rights Advocate and Actress, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for your attention on the deplorable human rights situation in my homeland, Iran.

In the last two years, Iran has faced an unprecedented political upheaval, quelled only after hundreds of protesters were killed, tens of thousands arrested and at least eight executed. These “Woman Life Freedom” protests were yet another reminder that the Islamic Republic is incapable of reform. Instead, it stays in power using a three-pronged survival strategy: repress, deflect and divide.

Repression is at the core of this strategy. The catalogue of abuses by the regime in Iran and around the world is well documented. The Islamic Republic holds the appalling record of having the highest per capita execution rate in the world and ranks 177th out of 180 countries on the world press freedom index.

As we've already heard, domestic repression includes censorship, blinding, rape, torture and arbitrary detention. Ethnic, religious and sexual minorities face systematic persecution and discrimination.

It's a gender apartheid state that is waging a war on women and girls; despite the country's economic desperation, its parliament has allocated \$2.9 billion to a government institution responsible for intensified hijab enforcement.

As we already heard from Mr. Sobhani, my fellow artists are also heavily targeted, including dissident rap artist Toomaj Salehi, who faces execution. After recently fleeing the country under treacherous conditions to avoid imprisonment, as Ms. Daemi also testified having to do, renowned filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof issued a defiant message to the regime: “If geographical Iran suffers beneath the boots of your...tyranny, cultural Iran is alive in the [collective] mind of millions of Iranians who were forced to leave Iran” because of oppression and barbarity.

That barbarity, sadly, extends beyond Iran's borders. Human rights abuses are among the regime's primary exports, including assassination plots, abductions and the hostage-taking of dual and foreign nationals. It arms and finances violent militias throughout the Middle East, has enabled Russia's war against Ukraine and abets the world's most disreputable regimes, from Damascus to Caracas.

To avoid accountability for its abuses, the regime has mastered the practice of deflection. Canadians are painfully aware of the Islamic Republic's attempts to smother the truth and evade accountability following the IRGC's downing of Flight PS752, which killed 176 people.

Despite official denials and stonewalling, the UN fact-finding mission on Iran concluded that the Islamic Republic was responsible for the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022, and for crimes against humanity in the ensuing protests. One of those crimes was the murder of 16-year-old protester Nika Shakarami, who authorities claimed had killed herself. Leaked documents revealed she was sexually assaulted and killed by three men in the security forces.

The regime attempts to neuter UN bodies and lobby democratic governments to advance its hateful ideology.

Finally, the Islamic Republic consolidates power to foment divisions. To prevent any unified opposition, it relentlessly sows discord and promotes fear and mistrust among Iranian groups and dissidents worldwide. Their notorious cyber-army smears the regime's opponents to ensure no group or individual becomes powerful

enough to challenge the status quo. The Islamic Republic's strategic partnership with other anti-American dictatorships aims to divide western alliances. It exploits political differences, anti-imperialist views and historical grievances to weaken global unity, maintaining enough support or neutrality to prevent a coordinated response to its actions. They attempt to exploit your democratic processes, institutions and media, covertly influencing your decisions, events and elections to suit their malign agenda and whitewash their crimes.

The antidotes to repression, deflection and division are resolve, accountability and unity.

What can Canada do? I'd like to offer three brief prescriptions.

First, to echo my fellow witnesses, Canada should immediately implement the motion to brand the IRGC a terrorist organization and expel Islamic Republic agents. In fact, rather than simply deporting them, I echo Ms. Afshin-Jam in encouraging you to exercise universal jurisdiction to prosecute those who have perpetrated atrocity crimes. You can also open structural investigations into systematic human rights abuses by the regime, which don't require the physical presence of perpetrators.

● (1640)

Second, you can support Iranian civil society by establishing a dedicated immigration stream to annually provide refuge to at least 200 Iranians fleeing the regime's persecution—people like Shilan Mirzaee, who faces deportation from Turkey back to Iran.

Finally, under Canada's feminist foreign policy, I urge you to support the inclusion of gender apartheid in the crimes against humanity draft treaty to hold accountable perpetrators of severe systemic gender-based segregation and discrimination.

We cannot change the character of the Islamic Republic, but we must resolve to counter it. While autocracies are often united in their domestic and global objectives, democracies are often not, which is why I urge a unified international response to increase the political cost to the Islamic Republic of its oppression and aggression and tip the balance of power in favour of Iranian freedom seekers.

In closing, I want to take a moment to address my fellow pro-democracy Iranians across the world: As long as this regime is united and we are divided, they will remain in power. However, in the words of our beloved Toomaj, “If you and I become we, we’re unlimited.”

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Boniadi. It's profoundly touching testimony. Thank you.

I thank all of you.

We will move to questions and answers.

I invite Mr. Genuis to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

There are so many great witnesses. I think I'll start with questions to Ms. Boniadi and ask other witnesses questions in other rounds or later in this one.

First of all, thank you for emphasizing your support for listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization. Parliament has passed motions, one unanimously just a couple of weeks ago, and then another one six years ago that passed with a majority. Unfortunately, they have not been implemented by the executive branch here, and we continue to reiterate calls for the IRGC to be listed as a terrorist organization.

Could you share more with us about specifically why this step is important? What impact would this have in terms of human rights in Iran and accountability for perpetrators of abuses? If there are any insights you can share from other countries that have taken action against the IRGC and the impact that those actions have had, we'd appreciate hearing it.

• (1645)

Ms. Nazanin Boniadi: Thank you very much for the question.

If you look at, for example, Europe, you see they're moving forward with support for designating the IRGC. I think where there is a thriving and vibrant Iranian diaspora in places like Canada, where there's a democracy, the will of the people should be reflected in your policies. If you look at a Pew Research poll that was done in 2020, for example, you'll see that it showed that three-quarters or more of people in 14 advanced economies had a negative view on human rights in Iran. That was only exacerbated, I'm sure, by the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests that resonated with people across the world, especially in democracies.

You'll see in the European Union, for example, that the European Commission president and members of the European Parliament are really pushing for this. If you look at places like the U.S., where there's already a designation that exists, you see that people are safer than in, say, the United Kingdom or Europe, where transnational repression really exists. We have the example of Iranian journalist Pouria Zeraati being stabbed outside his home in London, which is looking more and more like a contracted job by the Islamic Republic. If we want to keep people safe, we have to list the IRGC. The argument that dialogue, for example, is important is really something that we should move past. Forty-five years of dialogue has not kept people safe, and people are still being targeted.

I encourage you to please list the IRGC and listen to your vibrant and flourishing diaspora. I know that Canada has been a leader in many ways. You were the first to call the 1988 massacre of thousands of Iranians what it was—a crime against humanity. I think you should lead in this and not wait for others to do it first.

Thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you very much.

I want to follow up as well, but I'd first say that your point that drawing information from the United States—highlighting how people are safer as a result of this terrorist listing, that it makes a concrete difference in terms of combatting transnational repression and keeping members of the diaspora communities safe—is very important testimony. In a way it's obvious, but it's very important that you've put that on the record.

I want to probe the point you made about adding a recognition of gender apartheid in the crimes against humanity treaty. This is something that I'm very supportive of. We hosted an event this morning focusing on Afghanistan and gender apartheid there, so I know we're hearing these calls from the Iranian community as well as from activists seeing the situation in Afghanistan.

Could you share a little bit about the mechanics of that treaty process and what the Canadian government could do to help advance that recognition of gender apartheid?

Ms. Nazanin Boniadi: I believe written testimony is being submitted, or has been submitted, by the strategic litigation project of the Atlantic Council. I urge all members to take a look at that. It details exactly how it's done.

I just want to reiterate, as Ms. Afshin-Jam also said, that when we define gender or when we add gender to the definition of apartheid, and it's not just race, we have the opportunity to then hold perpetrators to account. We can't do that right now. Countries like Iran and Afghanistan really do have not just the discrimination against women that exists in many places; this is severe, systemic segregation and discrimination that we're talking about. Once we have it in international law, we can then hold perpetrators to account. It's really as simple as that.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Ms. Afshin-Jam, having mentioned the gender apartheid issue as well, could you add your thoughts on that?

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: Absolutely. We now have 10 states supporting the consideration of gender apartheid in the draft crimes against humanity treaty. We would love to see Canada do the same. It's just Canada using the term—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? The time is over, but I'll give you a few seconds to finish up.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: Okay.

I was just saying that we hope that Canada and parliamentarians start using the term “gender apartheid”, so that it becomes recognized, and support this campaign to end gender apartheid. With the leadership of Brian Mulroney at the time, Canada was behind convincing leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to get on board and champion the cause for ending racial apartheid in South Africa. We are hoping that Canada will also take the lead, because it really is about political will. If our parliamentarians want to see an end to gender apartheid in Iran, and if you collaborate with your European allies and Australian allies, we can make this happen. It's not just a symbolic gesture.

I think you want me to end it there.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: There will be just one more question from me tonight—

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: I'd be happy to speak to you more about it afterwards.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you very much.

The Chair: [*Inaudible—Editor*] one minute exactly.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Allow me to start off by thanking all the witnesses for being with us today. They have certainly provided us with a lot of powerful testimonies.

Let me start by highlighting what Mr. Sobhani said, which is that Iran essentially stands apart from other countries.

As you know, currently the latest Nobel laureate languishes in jail. We also know that the country's most pre-eminent lawyer, Ms. Nasrin Sotoudeh, is serving a sentence. The country's most popular musician, Toomaj Salehi, has been sentenced to death. The same goes for the country's most prominent director. I recognize full well how dire and how appalling the human rights situation is in Iran.

Let me start with you, Ms. Daemi. We heard over the course of the past several days that the President of Iran has died, but we saw scenes of celebration not only within Iran but also in the diaspora community throughout Europe and North America. How do you explain that? Why is it that the President of Iran was such a detested individual?

Ms. Atena Daemi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like to tell you what has happened recently.

The President of Iran was killed in an accident. As you know, he was one of the judges in the past who created so much trouble for Iranians by basically putting them to death. More than 1,000 people who were against the Islamic Republic unfortunately lost their lives

due to the decision that was made by a group. One of the members of that group was the previous president of Iran.

In the past 45 years, he was the main character who was involved in damaging Iran, resulting in the trouble created for different Iranians. It is interesting to know that many people celebrated this accident in Iran due to the damage done to the society of Iran by him and others similar to him. In Iran, many people are happy because of that.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

It's important to highlight that the latest polls from Iran suggest that 80% of Iranians would like to see nothing more than an end to this regime.

I would like to go to Mr. Sobhani. Mr. Sobhani, obviously Iranians are very much concerned about the death sentence for Mr. Toomaj Salehi. Would you mind explaining to us why Mr. Salehi, or Toomaj, as he's referred to, is so popular in Iran?

Mr. Arash Sobhani: Thank you, Mr. Ehsassi.

Toomaj Salehi was one of the first Iranian artists who came out in support of the Iranian people when they took to the street. His lyrics, his background as a metal shop worker, and his upbringing where he came from made him very popular, because he came from a segment of society where he felt the pain and he knew what was going on in Iran. He was not some celebrity who was pampered or promoted through Iranian media, the regime's media, or any of that. He was really the voice of the people.

That's why people loved him so much, and that's why he was dangerous. The Iranian regime has created this amazing system of creating parallel establishments to the artists, to the intellectuals, to whatever you want—even the opposition. It creates something similar, and it has control over that. That's how it manages the celebrities and the messages that go to the people.

They couldn't do that with Toomaj. With this new wave of uprisings, many celebrities who earlier were not so vocal about the atrocities of the regime have also come out. There are so many football players in prison right now.

Actually, I was going to say this. The IOC, the International Olympic Committee, has a refugee team that's going to the Olympics in Paris. There are 32 members, and 14 of them are Iranians. This shows how many Iranians had to flee in the last two years because of the pressure they were facing. There are 14 Iranians in a refugee team that represents the whole world. This is very important.

I would like to add one more thing. I know my time is limited, but I was just going to the public safety—

• (1655)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: It's time. We're going to have to go to the next member, but we'll come back to this question.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your understanding.

[Translation]

I now to invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for five minutes.

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

I don't have long, so I'll try to ask my questions quickly.

Ms. Ziaei, some say that the death of the president, who was playing more of a symbolic political role, will change absolutely nothing in Iranian politics. As an iranologist, do you agree with that, or do you think it will have a bigger impact?

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: Following the death of the Iranian president, we will need to monitor the way the elections are organized. As you know, the Iranian constitution provides that in the event of the death of the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the vice-president becomes the acting president for up to 50 days. In this case, Mohammad Mokhber will fill that position.

The real question here is how they are going to run the election and who they will select as candidates for the public to vote on. As you know, the so-called election is a sham because the candidates are selected in advance. Low voter turnout is currently on the rise, further proof of how anachronistic the Islamic Republic of Iran is and how illegitimate, as has been pointed out.

Another thing to consider is that Mr. Raisi was using the presidency as a springboard to the supreme leader's seat. He was very close to the current supreme leader and was among the potential candidates to succeed him. Today, no one has unanimous support as the supreme leader's successor. The political class in Iran is very divided and chaotic, and its members have their differences. There will undoubtedly be a power struggle within the Iranian political class. That is what we will have to monitor following the late president's death.

It should also be noted that the Iranians were not immediately able to find the president after the accident. Keep in mind that Iran mobilized 73 rescue teams for several hours, but it was ultimately a Turkish drone that provided images of the president's location. That paints a pretty unflattering picture of the entire response to the incident. We know that the Iranian government is doing a very poor job of managing a lot of things, and this incident provides another example of truly poor management and poor internal planning. Iran called on Turkey and Russia for help with the search, which obviously speaks volumes and lays bare a lot of shortcomings within the Iranian state.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As an MP here on Parliament Hill, in Ottawa, I deal with human rights, but also with immigration.

A lot of groups lobby the MPs who handle these kinds of issues. Given the various groups that approach us, we're realizing that opposition to the Iranian regime is quite fragmented. Some support the MEK, some support the son of the shah and some support the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Is that not a risk going forward?

I know it's not an easy question, but if you look at it from the outside, there are obviously a lot of human rights violations. We're talking about gender apartheid, but it is clear that there may not be

a single opposition, or at least a united opposition, to the regime. Am I mistaken? Is that just a western view of the matter?

• (1700)

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: You're right, Iranians are very divided politically. There are different groups, different leanings, but that's legitimate given the number of Iranians and the size of the Iranian diaspora. Not everyone agrees.

What is interesting to mention about the Iranian diaspora, whether in Europe or North America, is that there are commonalities. Today, the common thread is obviously that the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is being thoroughly questioned. You're hearing it in what we say. We're citing the same examples. We're making the same observations and analyses about the Iranian diaspora, so our comments have a lot in common. I also think it's perfectly normal for there to be different political leanings and stripes, which are a product of the history of Iran. However, the diaspora should perhaps focus more on what it has in common rather than on political issues that can be divisive.

It's a very complex situation, and I don't have a simple answer to that type of question.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm sorry. It may have been a difficult question.

I know my time is up. I will send you written questions through the clerk, and I would appreciate it if you would send me written answers so that we can forward them to the analysts for the drafting of the report.

Thank you.

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: I'd be happy to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Professor Ziaei.

[English]

Now I invite Mr. Gord Johns to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for their really important advocacy, their courage to be here today and their important testimony.

I'll start with Ms. Daemi.

You've been a strong advocate for Iranian political prisoners and against the death penalty. You've also been imprisoned for your advocacy and your work, and you underwent severe medical neglect. Our party certainly opposes the death penalty. We're grateful for your advocacy and we're grateful that you've made it safely here to Canada.

I know you've also been an advocate for children's rights. I want to ask you a bit more about that, especially since we don't often hear about the needs of children in Iran.

I met with the Front Line Defenders—the Irish NGO that helped assist you on your journey—when I was in Dublin. They shared information with me about children. There was a seven-year-old, Helen Ahmadi, who was shot dead by the Iranian regime's repressive forces on her way home from school. Nine-year-old Kian Pirfalak was shot in the chest. A 16-year-old, Sarina Esmailzadeh, was beaten to death with a baton.

Can you tell us more about this and what we as parliamentarians can be advocating, especially to defend children?

Ms. Atena Daemi: [*Witness spoke in Persian, interpreted as follows:*]

I appreciate your question. Thank you.

In regard to how we can help Iranians in Iran in this situation, as I mentioned at the beginning, there are a few issues we have to consider in order to help Iranians.

One of them, the most important one, is about the Revolutionary Guard, which is causing lots of problems in Iran. Therefore, we have to find a way so that they belong to where they should belong, which is terrorism. The other one is people, such as the previous president of Iran, who was participating in many of these problems, the economic reasons and other reasons for the children who are in the streets in Iran right now.

The Islamic Republic is supposed to be able to answer to the international society for what they are doing in Iran. What is happening in Iran is not acceptable, and we have to try to make them answer to all of these questions.

I would like to emphasize a few issues. As you know, you mentioned Pirfalak. There were children such as Pirfalak and Karami, and there were others as well....

I think when we don't we don't have a democratic system, many people who are in power cause additional trouble.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Daemi.

Now I would like to invite Madam Vandebeld to take the floor for four minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will split my time with Ms. Damoff and try to keep it to two minutes.

My question is for Ms. Boniadi. I want to follow up on something you said about a war on women and girls in Iran. We saw the entire world mobilize after Mahsa Jina Amini was murdered. I think this testimony today goes very far in showing that the world is still watching.

However, I'd like to go further on what you said, particularly about the horrific case of a sexual assault by the security forces. Could you comment on the extent to which rape is being used as a weapon not only against women's advocates and human rights de-

fenders but also against political prisoners who are in prison right now? Could you comment on that?

Ms. Nazanin Boniadi: Thank you for this important question.

I stole the words from Amnesty International, which said the Islamic Republic “is waging a war on women.”

It recently put out a report and documents that show that the security forces and the regime have used various oppressive, malign mechanisms not only to segregate and discriminate against women but also to repress women and persecute women. That includes sexual violence. That includes beatings and floggings. It includes heavy surveillance, to the degree that it's not only cameras but people spying on women who enter businesses, for example, without a hijab. A business is shut down if the business owner allows a woman to come in without a hijab, and the woman herself can have her bank account frozen, her car confiscated and her cell phone taken away or frozen.

It really affects every aspect of a woman's life and a girl's life. Girls have been gassed in school. The list goes on and on. They are using every oppressive, repressive tool they have to ensure that they control women, their choices and the freedom for them to choose what to wear.

The compulsory hijab is just an outward symbol of women's oppression in Iran, which has really existed for 45 years, yet women are still defiantly taking to the streets without the compulsory hijab. That says a lot about their courage.

• (1710)

The Chair: Ms. Damoff is next.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you.

Ms. Afshin-Jam, you mentioned that you wanted to send us a summary of a UN report, or I believe it was by the UN. I would be happy to see that.

I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about how efforts like that at the United Nations and other multilateral organizations help to raise awareness of Iran and the need for accountability.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: Thank you for your question.

Definitely, this particular one is extremely important. A special session was called on Iran after the whole world saw the atrocities taking place when Mahsa Jina Amini died. They held this special session and called for a report. After a year, they came out with the first part of a report. Now they've extended the mission for a second year, so we'll have an even more comprehensive report by next year.

It's significant because the utmost, highest human rights body on the planet, the UN Human Rights Council, has compiled this documentation into a 500-page report. The most important part, as I have already said, is that it concluded that these amount to crimes against humanity.

What we recommended while we were at the United Nations was for the Human Rights Council to elevate this report and refer it to the Security Council, hoping that it will then be referred to the International Criminal Court. In that element, we're hoping that at some point, those responsible for crimes against humanity will be prosecuted at an international tribunal. Short of that, just the recognition that this regime is one of the most abusive on the planet toward human rights and that there has to be a cost enacted for these human rights abuses....

Mr. Gord Johns asked about children. The Islamic Republic of Iran—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? We are out of time.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: Yes.

When it comes to child executions, there are over 160 children on death row, and I think the way a country treats its most vulnerable is a testament to the entire.... Just in that example alone, we need to enact a cost, and that means thinking twice about shaking the hands of these regime officials or giving your condolences for the—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Afshin-Jam.

Professor Ziaei, I see you want to say something. Please be quick, because we're running out of time.

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: I would just like to add to the debate that vocabulary is an issue that arises among all Iran observers. I suggest that the subcommittee look into that, since you're asking questions along those lines. The idea would be to focus on terms such as “femicide” and “infanticide”. Others have used the word “genocide”, but what is the primary definition of “genocide”? It says here “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

We've been hearing accounts for some time that the repression is very targeted. Schoolgirls and the schools they attend have been targeted. They're being attacked in places that are important to them. Students and universities are being attacked. A whole slew of the victims have been minors. We are talking about children here. I therefore ask the subcommittee to urge Canada to stand out from the countries that sometimes shy away from terms that may sound daunting, but that are part of the social reality. We mentioned—

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Ziaei.

Mr. Sobhani, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Be quick, please.

Mr. Arash Sobhani: There was a question about how putting IRGC on a terrorist list can help.

I was going through the Public Safety Canada website, and there are lists of all these organizations that are listed as terrorists. If you go through that list, you see that a good portion of them, although not most of them, get training and money from the IRGC. If you put those guys on the list, why not go after the main guys?

Another thing—

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you. I am sorry.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor for four minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Sobhani, the point you just made is so important. Canada already lists so many of the subsidiaries as terrorist organizations. Why haven't we listed the mother ship as a terrorist organization?

I think that Ms. Boniadi's calls to action in her opening statement—the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization, the use of universal jurisdiction by Canada, and Canadian government support for a gender apartheid designation—are three very strong and important calls to action. I do want to reiterate my support for all three of those. I see a lot of heads nodding.

I want to add as well that a bill I have a bill before Parliament, Bill C-350, includes IRGC listing, but it would also allow victims of torture and extrajudicial killing to sue the Iranian regime in Canadian courts.

I want to ask.... Maybe this is a more difficult question, but I think it's important to get some feedback.

What we desire is to defend the human rights of the Iranian people and protect Canada from this regime. We also want to see an end to this regime and the emergence of a free, democratic Iran that responds to the aspirations of everyone here. That would seem to require the presentation of a coherent political alternative to the current regime. We know that there are many people talking about this, but there's also a lot of division among different kinds of proposals for that political alternative.

I would welcome comments from anyone who wants to weigh in on the chances of presenting a unified political alternative to the current regime and what role that would play in the freedom struggle.

I see Ms. Boniadi and then Ms. Afshin-Jam. I probably have about two minutes between the two of you.

Ms. Nazanin Boniadi: I'll be succinct.

Collectively, many of us here have been parts of an effort to unify the opposition, but let's remember, as I said in my remarks, that the Islamic Republic's cyber-army and the Islamic Republic are invested in breaking us apart, which is why I talked about the importance of a cohesive international policy on Iran, as well as for the opposition—those who want democracy for Iran—to set aside any differences and focus on a free Iran.

When people come in to lobby you and when they talk to you about a free Iran, I would encourage Canadian lawmakers to concentrate on how inclusive they are. If they are only advocating for a specific ideology, for a specific outcome, then they are not representative of.... Iran is not a monolith, as you know. Yes, the vast majority, I would say, want democracy, but that looks very different to different people.

Therefore, if a group that is lobbying you is saying, "It's our way or the highway, and we're not going to include various other voices," I would encourage you to take that into account and to see other people and include other voices.

Voices must unite for democracy, period.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: You have one minute, Ms. Afshin-Jam.

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: I'd like to echo what Ms. Boniadi was talking about.

Yes, it appears that we're quite divided, but I think parliamentarians often hear the loud voices of certain extremists. I want you to be hopeful that there is the silent majority. There are the middle people who are united, who want freedom, democracy and human rights in Iran. Actually, all of us, extreme or not, want an end to the regime. The only choice will be at the ballot box in a free and democratic Iran, for the Iranian people to decide.

So that you're aware, I am facilitating a network of 90 Iranian diaspora groups. We work very well together on campaigns and projects and we're unified in our aim to see this democratic system. If you need a unified voice, we can deliver them to you in Parliament.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for four minutes.

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

Ms. Boniadi and Ms. Afshin-Jam, I was really glad to hear each of your last replies, which answered a question I was going to ask. That's exactly the kind of thing we want to know, since we want to help but we don't want to cause harm. All of us here are human rights defenders. The worst thing we could do would be to cause harm. You're the experts. Thank you, and you'll probably hear from me very soon.

Professor Ziaei, we saw what happened recently at the Cannes festival. Director Mohammad Rasoulof fled Iran so that he could go to Cannes and get his message out. To what extent does the lack of freedom of expression in Iran impact artists, journalists and community members who advocate for change or try to effect change?

• (1720)

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: The impact is huge. There are two schools of thought. Some say that censorship can stimulate creativity, because it forces people to find a way of circumventing it.

As we know, this is state censorship that clamps down in particular on the distribution of artistic creations. What is most egregious in the case of Iran, and what can have medium and long-term repercussions, is the self-censorship of artists, journalists, thinkers and intellectuals. As soon as censorship becomes completely internalized and people censor themselves unconsciously, it can do enormous damage, because it obviously impedes creative thinking.

Faced with considerable constraints, censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression and thought, Iranians stand out through their creative use of humour, parody and satire to circumvent all these obstacles. Iranian cinema uses an entire system of encoding and decoding that really sets it apart. That artistic creativity should

be commended, since it is partly a reaction to the many constraints imposed on the creation and distribution of works of art.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We touched on the subject a little earlier, but when someone like Mr. Rasoulof and many others are politically active on the international scene, outside the country, how dangerous is it for their safety and the safety of their loved ones who are still in Iran? Is there a real danger to these people's safety?

Ms. Hanieh Ziaei: Yes, absolutely. A lot of intimidation and threats have been reported. One of the ways the Islamic Republic of Iran operates is to get to you individually, but also those around you.

When these many artists are arrested, they are given a pen and paper and asked for names. Take the case of the cartoonist and illustrator Mana Neyestani. One of the first things he was asked to do when he was arrested was to give the names of other cartoonists and illustrators. That's one way of gathering that type of information.

Who does what? Who says what? Obviously, that will not only affect artists, their colleagues and the people around them, but it will also put a lot of pressure on their families. Today, the families of all these exiled people—like Golshifteh Farahani and many others—are under enormous pressure within the country itself, and that's what the Islamic Republic of Iran is going to play on.

The state uses psychological torture against people in exile by telling them that it knows where their mother and father live or which school a family member goes to. It exerts a lot of pressure on people, going after them in their private lives. Obviously, this is all about intimidation, and it is intended to silence people who, in their personal accounts and in their work, reflect the social reality that the regime is trying to hide.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Witnesses, I want to thank all of you. We ran out of time, but you were amazing. Thank you for taking part in our study.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Johns, go ahead, please. You have the floor for four minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Ziaei started touching on this. Mr. Sobhani, you talked about how we've seen so many Iranian cultural leaders, artists, musicians and actors speak out about the human rights of Iranian people. My colleague, NDP MP Bonita Zarrillo, recently put out a statement in support of hip hop artist Toomaj Salehi, who has been sentenced to death for his art. We know musicians and artists are at high risk of being targeted by the Iranian regime.

Could you tell us a bit more about what it means to Iranians, both within Iran and in the diaspora, to see aspirations and hopes for human, civil and political rights and their hopes for freedom represented in music and art? How can we, as Canadians and parliamentarians, better support their work?

• (1725)

Mr. Arash Sobhani: Thank you for the important question.

As I mentioned before, the Islamic Republic is systematically trying to get rid of the artists, cultural influencers and intellectuals. What they're trying to do is eliminate part of our memory of what Iran was and of our culture. They're trying to fabricate a history and push the middle class out. What they have done.... Eight million people had to leave. Those who stay in Iran, if they want to have any artistic expression, are under a tremendous amount of pressure.

There's nothing that's going to be documented in, say, 50 or 60 years regarding what's going on right now in Iran, because no artist is allowed to record what's happening or what they're seeing, yet that is the work of the artist. The artist's job is to see what's going on with society, record it and express what society feels about the current situation. That will be non-existent in 50 years, because nobody is allowed to express themselves freely. This is a huge thing. Iran is going through a transformation that will eliminate its middle class, artists and free-thinking intellectuals.

One hugely important thing that Canadians and the free world should do is support these voices at different levels as much as they can. The media should give them more coverage and the politicians should start talking about them more, using key words and their names. Western artists have done it. Sting, Coldplay and Peter Gabriel have all signed a statement about Toomaj Salehi. The west did this before, for the Soviet bloc writers and intellectuals, and it was the same in South Africa, so there are examples. I think that's what needs to be done.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

Ms. Afshin-Jam, you talked about gender apartheid. This is the first women-led counter-revolution in modern history.

The NDP has a study coming up at our sister committee—the foreign affairs committee—on Iran and the importance of listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization. Beyond listing the IRGC and

beyond sanctions, what do you recommend we, as parliamentarians, focus on to support the civil and human rights of Iranians?

Also, we don't have diplomatic ties right now with Iran. We're part of a community of like-minded states that believe strongly in advocating for democracy, freedom and human rights. What do you want us to focus our work on, and what isn't helpful, in your view?

Ms. Nazanin Afshin-Jam: First of all, I'm going to combine your Toomaj question with this one.

There's a Toomaj act that has been drafted in the United States, and our organization, the Iranian Justice Collective, has created a Canadian version of this Toomaj act, asking for an expansion of Canada's sanctions to include revolutionary courts, including their prosecutors, judges and staff. Some of these figures are already included in Canada's sanctions, but we're asking to include a more comprehensive list of authorities and officials.

Also, beyond listing the IRGC on the terrorist list, we encourage the Magnitsky act to be enacted so that we deny entry to regime officials and we have a better system to vet who comes and who goes out.

Also, for those who are threatened here on Canadian soil, we also ask for a mechanism for where Canadians can go. Are they supposed to get in touch directly with a CSIS member? Is there a phone number?

Also, one of our questions from the community is about a \$76-million allocation by the government to support our cause, the “Woman, Life, Freedom” cause, and yet we don't know where that's being allocated. Definitely we could use that funding to support our civil rights activists and NGOs here in Canada to come up with a proper Iran policy to give you exactly what you're asking for.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Afshin-Jam.

On behalf of all members of the committee, I would like to thank all the witnesses for their presence, for their testimony and for answering questions and clarifying a lot of things for this committee. It is highly appreciated, and we wish you the best.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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