

The Situation in Syria
Briefing before the Standing Committee on
Foreign Affairs and International Development
House of Commons, Parliament of Canada

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am honored to be here today on behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI). We thank the committee for its kind invitation to speak about the situation in Syria and what IRI is doing amid the dire circumstances facing the Syrian people. This is the first time IRI has testified before the committee and as the Institute's president, I am grateful that you have given us an opportunity to share our insights today.

Situation in Syria

Mr. Chairman, tragedy is really the only word that adequately describes the situation in Syria today. With a bitter sectarian war now in its third year, jihadist fighters in the ascendancy and no end to the killing in sight, the conditions could not be worse.

According to the United Nations (UN), [9.3 million Syrians](#), or [44 percent](#) of the population need assistance. Six and a half million Syrians are internally displaced. Nearly 2.5 million refugees are dispersed throughout the Middle East, where many live in tented camps, abandoned or disused buildings or in other makeshift conditions. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights latest estimate is that more than [140,000 people](#) have died in the conflict.

Sadly, the international community has proven ineffective at addressing the Syria crisis. It is no wonder that Syrians have little faith in the UN-led Geneva negotiations as they have failed to reduce the level of violence, let alone produce a political solution to the conflict. Regrettably, on the current course, the most likely scenario is that the horrific violence continues with damning and unpredictable long-term consequences.

As the civil war has become steadily more sectarian, it has polarized the conflict inside Syria and is having a destabilizing effect outside Syria's borders notably in Lebanon and Iraq. Equally troubling is the new generation of jihadist converts the Syria conflict is producing – converts with battle-hardened fighting experience. The U.S. intelligence community estimates that there are between 75,000 and 115,000 fighters in Syria, including more than 20,000 affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an Al-Qaida affiliate. The International Center for the Study of Radicalization estimates up to [11,000 individuals from 74 nations are fighting in Syria](#).

Most of the extremists come from elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. We have not even begun to understand the long-term impact of their eventual return home and the destabilizing effect they may have on their countries of origin.

I cannot think of a more urgent crisis in the world today, certainly not one with greater geopolitical consequence. The security vacuum left by the Syrian crisis has allowed Al-Qaeda to establish a new geographic base of operations on the borders of key western allies, including Israel, Jordan and NATO-member Turkey. If the war goes on for another year, or two years or three, one is hard pressed to adequately portray the immense human suffering, and humanitarian disaster that will be left in its wake.

International Republican Institute Efforts in Syria

IRI is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that was founded in 1983 along with the [National Endowment for Democracy](#) and our sister organization, the [National Democratic Institute for International Affairs](#). Our mission is to advance freedom and democracy worldwide by developing political parties, civic institutions, open elections, democratic governance and the rule of law. We currently work in more than 80 countries around the world and maintain offices in more than 30.

IRI helps men and women working to bring liberty to their lands. We know that they, not IRI, make their countries free, but as many we have worked with over the years will attest, IRI has been a vital partner in the emergence of democracy in many lands.

IRI can help catalyze the efforts of democratic activists in a country – so long as they want change more than we want it for them. We do not export or implant democracy, and we certainly do not attempt to export “Western” democracy. We understand in doing our work that nations will adopt and adapt democratic methods and forms to fit their unique historical experiences and culture. For this reason, we impart global experiences and knowledge. This has included sharing Canadian experience on a number of occasions through highly qualified IRI staff that call Canada home.

With the terrible situation I’ve described in Syria you might think a democracy organization like ours has no place in the midst of a civil war. Our Syria program however is one of our most active in the Middle East region. Often at great risk to themselves, the democratically minded Syrians we work with consistently tell us they want and need our partnership and assistance.

This gives us confidence in knowing there is a strong constituency for democracy inside Syria but one that is under extreme pressure and deserving of more support. IRI helps in four ways: First, a Schools of Politics program that provides political know how to grassroots moderate leaders from inside Syria, individuals who oppose both the Assad regime and the radical Islamists, to help them build strong political and civic movements. Second, a democratic governance program that helps improve the ability of Syrian local councils in opposition held areas to inform citizens of their important work and to work in a unified way when engaging external audiences. Third, efforts that build the credentials of women leaders in Syria, so that when the “day after” comes, there will be a broad network of Syrian women who take part in decision-making. Fourth, we support the Syrian Youth Congress to encourage collaboration among Syrian student and youth groups.

A stand out of IRI's current program is our ongoing efforts with Syrian women, a demographic that has been disproportionately impacted in an environment of extreme violence. IRI's global women's initiative, the [Women's Democracy Network](#) (WDN), has trained and supported nearly 500 Syrian women through a dual-track approach; one, providing tools to ensure women's equality and rights are enshrined in all levels of decision making processes, including negotiations and transitional processes; and, two, on the local level, building the skills of women from inside the country to initiate peace-building and reconciliation efforts.

These efforts have led to the development of the Syrian Women's Network (SWN), a unified umbrella organization committed to ensuring Syrian women have a place at decision making tables. SWN coalesces women from opposition and citizen movements that represent a cross-section of Syrians living inside and outside the country. Currently, SWN is actively campaigning for the release of detainees by raising awareness about the number of people detained, as well as the specific locations of where the detainees are being held. SWN representatives have taken this cause to Geneva several times and plan to continue utilizing every opportunity to engage decision-makers on this issue.

At the local level, women-led peace building circles trained by IRI exist in eight out of 14 provinces in Syria and are another important effort to promote women's inclusion in local and provincial council decision-making. In a town in the Damascus countryside, for example, a women-led peace circle negotiated and achieved a 20-day ceasefire. WDN also initiated a "hotline" in Geneva to connect Syrian women who were present at the negotiations with international negotiation and mediation experts.

The goal of IRI's programming in Syria is to help emerging Syrian leaders represent the needs of Syria's "moderate middle," the plurality of society that subscribes neither to the Assad regime's propaganda, nor the radical Islamism promoted by al-Qaeda affiliates. It also ensures that marginalized parts of society, especially women and youth, have the opportunity to participate fully in decision-making.

Many of the Syrians we work with have come to view IRI as a lifeline to the outside world. They risk their lives to take part in our programs but do so because they believe we provide value in furthering their democratic goals and help their voices be heard. And yet, we all know more can be done.

Recommendations

The international community provides extensive humanitarian assistance that is essential, but it must also recognize the importance of the "day after" and the transition the country will inevitably find itself in. We must help prepare Syrians who do not aspire to the worldview promoted by Al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremists by providing the skills and resources they need to positively impact Syria's transition. The effort is ongoing, but needs more support.

[Canada's notable \\$353.5 million](#) contribution for Syria humanitarian assistance, as well as sizable development and security assistance is making a difference. I am certain this investment is appreciated by the Syrian people.

Going forward, to further build the foundations conducive to a democratic Syria, we believe support for local and provincial councils should be increased. These councils can serve as working models of democratic governance in areas outside the Assad regime's control and must be given more support.

As a bulwark against jihadist recruitment, we think efforts teaching democratic values to young Syrians as well as those helping Syrian youth to organize politically should be strengthened.

We also think additional support for inclusive peace building is needed so that equal opportunities are presented to all Syrian citizens, and especially women, to take part in rebuilding their country.

Lastly, regarding the UN-led negotiation process at Geneva, IRI's Chairman Senator John McCain said, "After three weeks of talks, we are moving further and further away from a peaceful political solution in Syria. The Assad regime has accelerated its attacks against the Syrian people with more Syrians killed in the three weeks since peace talks began than at any other time during the conflict."

A negotiated settlement is at this point as elusive a prospect as ever but it does not preclude efforts to develop democratic values and institutions that are both worthy and necessary to the success of an eventual political transition.

We need to give the moderate opposition a better chance to succeed and eventually provide security and responsible governance in Syria after Assad. At IRI, we believe the best way to achieve these goals is additional support for democratic governance in areas of the country outside of the Assad regime's grip.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, the Syrian people cannot indefinitely endure the immense suffering they face. The Middle East region cannot afford the long-term systemic consequences of a sectarian religious war. The international community must act to end this conflict, and all countries committed to democratic values must help put a political transition process in place that achieves a democratic outcome for Syria and its varied communities.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer your questions.

The International Republican Institute

A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, IRI, founded in 1983, advances freedom and democracy worldwide by developing political parties, civic institutions, open elections, democratic governance and the rule of law. IRI has conducted programs in more than 100 countries and, along with WDN, is currently active more than 80 countries. The Institute receives funding through grants from the U.S. State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, a number of European foundations and aid agencies and other Western countries, and the United Nations.