

NOTES FOR A SPEECH AT THE EMERGENCY DEBATE ON THE SITUATION IN IRAQ

September 16, 2014

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Mr. Speaker,

I am pleased to be here to provide an overview of the crisis in Iraq. The crisis which gathers us today hit us all in the summer, with shocking images of ISIL executions and Iraqi civilians displaced by the conflict. In order to understand how we got to that point, there are elements of Iraq's history and social fabric which need to be laid out.

Iraq is a diverse country and home to several religious and ethnic minorities – some of which are now sadly famous for being targeted by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Lavant (ISIL). However, Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims and ethnic Kurds are the three main groups that compose its population. In the last three decades, each of these groups has suffered traumatic experiences at the hands of brutal terrorist groups, militias and governments.

Until 2003, Iraq was governed by the Sunni-backed government of Saddam Hussein, whose gross human rights violations against his own people are well-known and documented. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, in particular Shias and Kurds, perished under his reign. Following the transitional period which followed Saddam's fall, a Shia-led government was elected in Iraq with promises of an inclusive government.

But these promises were not fulfilled. Between 2003 and 2013, the Sunni population grew increasingly marginalized. De-Baathification laws, which were aimed at removing the influence of Saddam Hussein's party in the new Iraqi political system, barred Sunnis from employment in the public sector and made them second-class citizens. Sunnis became easy targets for arbitrary arrests under Iraq's Anti-Terror Law. In the spring of 2013, Iraqi forces violently cracked down on Sunni protests, killing approximately fifty people.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish people in the north were developing their institutions and turning their region into a safe investment hub. Thanks to a safe haven and no fly zone imposed by the US and allies over northern Iraq in 1991, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was relatively isolated from the violence that affects the rest of the

country. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution also granted the Kurds considerable autonomy, and close to one fifth of the federal budget. But these provisions were not fully implemented by Baghdad, which fuelled discontent and aspirations of greater autonomy.

That is the situation that was in place when the recent crisis started: a centralized and authoritarian government led by the Shia majority, a disgruntled Sunni minority, and Kurdish people in the north, with growing aspirations of economic and political autonomy.

ISIL's resurgence in Iraq started gradually, preying on the vulnerabilities that I described, and in particular the marginalization of Sunnis. Since 2010, the terrorist group had focused most of its activities in Syria, after being defeated by Iraqi and US forces, backed by Sunni militias.

Throughout 2013, ISIL increased the tempo of attacks and bombings in Iraq. That year alone, approximately 10,000 Iraqis died as a result of violence.

In January, ISIL took control over parts of Iraq's western province of Anbar, including the towns of Ramadi and Fallujah, less than 100 km from Baghdad. At that stage, the Minister of Foreign Affairs publicly expressed Canada's concern and called upon the Iraqi government to work across religious and ethnic lines to resolve the crisis.

The population of Anbar is mostly Sunni. Some of them were so disenchanted with the Maliki government that they viewed ISIL as a viable alternative, or at least were willing to tolerate ISIL's presence. Many have changed their minds since. Although the Maliki government was unpopular among Sunnis, the vast majority of people in Anbar did not welcome ISIL's occupation. Like anyone would do in the face of brutal oppression, they tried to flee ISIL's violence, which resulted in a first wave of internal displacement. In total, almost half a million people from Anbar were forced to leave their homes between January and May of this year.

Despite these challenging circumstances, Iraq was able to organize parliamentary elections in late April. Former Prime Minister al-Maliki's Dawa party won, but fell short of a majority. Maliki's popularity was low, and Sunnis and Kurds were reluctant to join his coalition.

In June, ISIL made a rapid advance towards the north, reportedly with support from Sunni tribes. It captured Mosul, Tikrit and several other cities, villages and key infrastructure. Mosul is Iraq's second city and its control was a significant victory for ISIL; not only in terms of territory, but also because of the oil and cash seized by ISIL.

Canadians were also shocked to see reports about some of their own fighting with ISIL in Iraq.

Throughout the summer, ISIL continued to move towards the north, moving towards KRG-controlled territory. ISIL's advance was accompanied by reports of horrible human rights abuses. ISIL itself texted and tweeted about these disgusting acts, posting pictures and videos online. Near Tikrit, several hundred members of the Iraqi army were executed and buried. Near Mosul, ISIL executed approximately 500 prisoners. And as we know, two US journalists, who have since been joined by a British aid worker, were savagely beheaded in retaliation for U.S. air strikes.

In July, the Prime Minister strongly condemned religious persecution by ISIL in Iraq.

Indeed, Yazidis and Christians were being kidnapped, raped and killed. Some were able to flee to safety, but in August, several thousand Yazidis got trapped on Mount Sinjar; whole families with nothing but the clothes on their backs. At that stage, the US decided to intervene with humanitarian airdrops and air strikes.

Throughout June and July, the humanitarian crisis deepened. During those two months, another half million Iraqis were displaced, most of whom sought refuge in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Their testimonials, some of which were shared with the Minister of Foreign Affairs heard while in Iraq two weeks ago, are chilling. It will take time for Iraq and the international community to get a full picture of the numerous abuses committed by ISIL during the summer months.

During this dark period, the newly elected Iraqi parliament elected a speaker, Salim al-Jabouri, and a president, Fouad Massoum, who in turn nominated a Prime Minister designate, Haider al-Abadi. At every step, Canada encouraged the Iraqi leadership to continue its progress toward the formation of a new inclusive government. We did so because we strongly believe that there can be no enduring peace in Iraq without an inclusive government.

Like most terrorist groups, ISIL preys on divisions. The marginalization of the Sunni population under Iraq's last government allowed for ISIL's recent come-back in Iraq. So it is important for the new government not to repeat the same mistakes.

Luckily, a new, legitimate and inclusive government led by Haider al-Abadi was sworn in on September 8. Along with our allies, we are determined to give that government the tools it needs to get the job done.

Canada is already one of the main contributors of humanitarian assistance. We will continue to support Iraqi security forces, including Kurdish Peshmerga, which are fighting ISIL. Our assistance includes air support and military advice. A broad international coalition is forming against ISIL, and a growing number of countries are doing their share alongside Canada.

Last year, we passed the *Combating Terrorism Act*, which creates an offence of leaving or attempting to leave Canada to commit certain terrorism offences. These offences can carry a prison term of up to fourteen years. While in Iraq, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced \$5 million in programming to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. We are working with likeminded partners to address this problem and these efforts will continue.

Canada is also committed to countering terrorist financing. ISIL – also known as al-Qaida in Iraq – is a listed terrorist entity in Canada. Under Canadian laws, our financial institutions have an obligation to freeze ISIL’s assets and to disclose details of assets to law enforcement.

And finally, we will continue to push for an effective, inclusive, and representative federal government in Baghdad through our programming and diplomatic actions. And by inclusive, I am not only referring to the composition of the government, but also to the government’s program and actions.

Restoring trust among Iraq’s religious and ethnic communities will take time. Years of sectarian and ethnic violence have left deep scars. But one thing is certain: ISIL offers no future to Iraqis, be they Sunni, Shia or Kurdish. Canada and our allies are determined to help the new Iraqi government offer its people an alternative to sectarianism and violence.

Thank you.