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Chair

The Honourable Rob Merrifield

Standing Committee on International Trade

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC)): I call the meeting to order. Could we have members take their seats?

Today, for the first hour, we are continuing our study on the Canada-Jordan free trade agreement.

We have a special guest with us today: Ambassador Zoubi. Thank you very much for coming in. You have some people with you, and I'll ask you to introduce to the committee.

We want to thank you for taking the time to come in. It's a very important free trade agreement. We're looking forward to moving forward on it as soon as possible.

The floor is yours as we continue our serious deliberation on the merits of this free trade agreement.

His Excellency Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi (Ambassador, Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan): Good morning, and thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I know I'm the first Jordanian to talk to you about the subject, and I thank you for the invitation. Also allow me to voice my admiration for the comprehensive approach your committee has taken on this subject, which we attach great importance to in Jordan, namely Bill C-23, the Canada-Jordan Economic Growth and Prosperity Act. I shall try within the allocated 10 minutes to shed some light on certain areas that were not covered in the previous sessions.

Jordan is partner to eight free trade agreements, four of which are multilateral regional agreements with regional economic groupings such as the Arab countries and the European Union. We also have economic agreements and arrangements relating to trade, investment, and double taxation with 77 countries, including Canada.

For its part, the Jordan-Canada free trade agreement is a concrete example of Jordan's striving to support its economy through a viable partnership in international trade while at the same time building on a long history of close ties with a like-minded country. We consider Jordan and Canada to be very close in our positions internationally in other arenas and we see eye to eye on many subjects.

The following are some examples to put to you here today. Jordan is the only Middle Eastern member in the Human Security Network, and our two countries contributed in the development of the International Criminal Court. Jordan was also one of the first countries in the Middle East to sign and ratify the anti-personnel mine ban convention in 1998. By next month, we will be free of all

known land mines in Jordan, ending an operation of demining that started in 1993 to clear over 300,000 land mines.

For decades Jordan has been the largest host to Palestinian refugees. Our country of six million people hosts about half a million Iraqis, and with the recent Syrian situation, our records show that over 80,000 Syrians have passed to Jordan through border crossings. Eight per cent of those newcomers are students who have been admitted to Jordanian schools. Canada's history in positive involvement in refugee issues in the Middle East includes support to UNRWA and having been once the gavel-holder of the committee on refugees during the multilateral peace talks with Israel.

The Honourable Lester Pearson is considered the father of the peacekeeping concept. Since 1989 over 100,000 of our troops have participated in more than 32 United Nations peacekeeping missions. As of November 2011, Jordan is the largest provider of civilian police personnel and fifth-largest provider of military personnel to United Nations peacekeeping, deploying both men and women.

On the humanitarian level, Jordan dispatched eight field hospitals, covering Afghanistan, Gaza, Benghazi, Jenin, Ramallah, Liberia, and Congo. The two hospitals in Afghanistan have treated more than half a million cases since their first deployment in December 2001, and the hospital in Gaza has treated 800,000 cases since 2008.

Two years ago Jordan began sending imams—Muslim clergymen—and combat-trained women into the villages of Afghanistan. Their mission was to preach moderate Islam to Afghan women. His Majesty King Abdullah II said that the people who he thought really hold the power, those who are going to make an impact, are the women, and nobody is talking to them.

Mr. Chairman, His Majesty King Abdullah II paid close attention at a very early stage to the necessity and urgency of political reform while focusing on the concerns and sometimes frustrations of the youth. In 2009, before the Arab Spring, His Majesty presented the Prime Minister of Jordan with a set of reforms to fight corruption, increase transparency, protect the rights of women and children, and remove all obstacles to the development of a free and professional media industry. Such an open, inclusive, and tolerant political sphere determined that the course of reform in Jordan is peaceful, gradual, and evolutionary.

In the past 15 months, Jordan has witnessed more than 100 protests, marches, or sit-ins per week, reaffirming and enhancing the peaceful character of the Jordanian political discourse.

•(1105)

In 2011 His Majesty King Abdullah II initiated the constitutional reforms. The royal committee entrusted with reviewing the Constitution suggested amendments to 42 fundamental articles of the Constitution to ensure the provision of the constitutional foundations that guarantee the balance between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, established for the first time a constitutional court that will safeguard the constitution, and set up an independent electoral monitoring commission, as stipulated by the National Dialogue Committee.

The government is currently completing the legal infrastructure legislation that will ensure the integrity and credibility of the political process, primarily through a political parties law and a representative election law. With endorsement of the new laws, Jordan will have accomplished most of the legislative infrastructure required for an institutional process to ensure that engagement of the grassroots, of political parties and unions, and of Parliament and government lives up to national ambitions and expectations.

It is true that the King of Jordan appoints the Prime Minister, but this appointment has to gain the approval of our elected Parliament with a two-thirds majority in a vote of confidence. The number of political parties in Jordan exceeded 30, yet due to prevailing voting trends in the voters in Jordan, many parties never made it to Parliament. The maximum majority obtained was 6%, which we admit is very low. It follows that His Majesty names an independent personality as a Prime Minister, the approval of whom remains vested in Parliament during a confidence vote. The aim of the new political parties law and the new election law is to further enable political parties to achieve the required majority to form a government.

Mr. Chairman, for political reforms to be incremental, durable, and sustainable, they need to be made in conjunction with economic reforms that develop the economy so as to reflect on the living conditions of Jordanians. Since 1989 Jordan has been committed to economic and fiscal reforms aimed at decreasing the budget deficit, achieving healthy growth rates, limiting unhealthy subsidies, and gradually moving toward a market economy.

The regional upheavals, armed conflicts, increases in energy prices, population movements, and most recently the disruption of the Egyptian gas supply to Jordan—the gas supply that comes from Egypt to Jordan has been bumped 15 times so far since the Arab Spring, and it costs us about \$5 million a day for each day that supply is halted—have forced the Jordanian government to intervene in the economy, at a massive cost to the budget, to limit the impact of such upheavals on the living conditions of Jordanians. This has impacted our progress in economic reforms, since Jordan imports 96% of its energy needs.

Solidifying national political and economic reforms and allowing them to progress and flourish require a conducive regional environment. Democratic transition must be combined with peace and security regionally to avoid the risks of radicalization, derailment, or hijacking, hence ensuring that the transition toward the desired reforms will fulfill the aspirations of the public for freedom and prosperity.

Finding a just, lasting, and comprehensive peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and achieving the two-state solution is the utmost priority of Jordan. The Arab-Israeli conflict is the core issue in the Middle East. It has consumed immense energies and rendered development and reform efforts secondary to the efforts of settling the conflict and stabilizing the region. Peace is a prerequisite for stability and development, and these two are essential to democracy and good governance.

Jordan believes a timelined resumed peace process should be launched as soon as possible, with defined terms of reference and a clear end point based on the original terms of reference. Those terms of reference are the United Nations Security Council resolutions 242, 338, and 425 and the “land for peace” formula; the Arab peace initiative of the Beirut Summit; and United Nations Security Council resolution 1397, which is the two-state solution.

Earlier this year Jordan embarked on a diplomatic effort to break the impasse that had befallen the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, and this culminated in exchanges and direct exploratory talks. Those talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis took place in Amman.

•(1110)

These talks were serious, and we hope that they have enabled us to maintain the timetable identified by the quartet in its September 23, 2011, statement under which an agreement on all issues should be reached by the end of 2012, realizing the two-state solution.

I thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have just one quick question to follow up on your testimony. When you don't get your energy from Egypt, if it's disrupted, where do you get it from?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: That's a good question. We go back to the old system. The old system is using diesel, and that costs a lot. We don't produce it in Jordan; we import it. It has very negative impacts on the environment, which we thought we had already passed.

The explosions, or whatever is hindering the supply, occur within Egyptian territory. Our partners in Egypt try as fast as they can to fix it and to protect the lines, but politics are also involved over there. We know that those explosives are not directed at Jordan; the same line supplies Jordan and Israel, so again we know it's attacked for political reasons.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move on to questions and answers.

Mr. Masse will begin.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. You started with a really good and pertinent question.

We're actually interested in moving this file forward, but the biggest stumbling block that I have is the human rights and labour issues in Jordan.

I thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for being here today, and hopefully you can provide some more detail as to what's happening in Jordan with regard to migrant workers and domestic workers and their rights as individuals, because we see them as key and central for Jordan to move forward with Canada in terms of a trading relationship.

My first question is this: why can non-citizens in Jordan not organize under the labour accord, as you rely a lot on foreign workers for Jordan? Why can they not organize under your current legal system?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: I thank you very much for your question and I am happy that you share our aspiration to end the process of this important free trade agreement between us.

In Jordan, let me go back a little bit in history. His Majesty King Hussein ruled for over 40 years, and literally, he built Jordan. He built the new Jordan that we know.

His Majesty King Abdullah, when he acceded to the throne in 1999, was in a country where you have 70% of the population under the age of 30, so he started a set of reforms and he started a set of... We know, as Jordan, we were partners to many international agreements. Many of them are in human rights, and in that area we boast that we are ahead of anybody else.

Then you have your international commitment, and at the same time you have to apply it within your government and within your country, so we started that process. It started about 2003, with what we called at the time our "national agenda". The aim of the national agenda was to bring the international commitment closer to application in Jordan.

Doing that, at the same time we started our negotiations with the European Union. We have an association agreement between us. This association agreement has a meeting of the councils between Jordan and the EU every six months, and we work on a set plan of action. That plan of action covers many aspects. The three main subcommittees are the human rights subcommittee, the justice and peace subcommittee, and the subcommittee on social affairs.

On all those points that you mentioned about the labour laws, we have our international commitment and we have our application in Jordan. With our new laws, any labour in Jordan, be it foreign labour or domestic labour, is now covered within the Jordanian law. There is no exclusion and no different treatment.

• (1115)

Mr. Brian Masse: Are you suggesting that civil servants, domestic staff, gardeners, cooks, and agricultural workers are actually now covered? I ask because my understanding is that they are not covered and non-nationals are not covered. Are you telling us today that they are all covered under the current Jordanian law? I want that to be very specific. Are they covered, yes or no?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: I can't give you a yes or no. I can tell you the following: there are groups—

Mr. Brian Masse: It's pretty simple. Are agricultural workers covered by the labour laws in Jordan right now, whether they are domestic or whether they are foreign nationals? Are they covered by labour laws if they are working in the Jordanian agricultural community right now?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: It has nothing to do with the origin of the worker; it has to do with the sector that they are working in. If you have a sector that has more than two or three workers, then everyone is covered. The next step will be to work on individuals.

You mentioned agricultural and domestic workers. I add fishermen to that also. Those are the categories that you are referring to, but that has nothing to do with their origin, if they are Jordanians or if they are foreign workers. It is the sector of the industry that we are covering, and this is the next step that we are getting to.

Mr. Brian Masse: I do appreciate that, but what sectors are covered and what are not? I need to know that, because we have some challenges here in Canada, believe me. I come from an area where we use migrant workers from Mexico for the agricultural industry, and we've had to fight to get them the proper coverage in standards even in our own country.

I'm not here to say that we're the greatest, because we have some issues and I deal with these on a regular basis every day; at the same time, what I'm trying to learn from you is whether you have different standards for different industries, and, if so, what they are.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: If you'll allow me to rephrase for you, we don't have different standards, but different steps for different industries. We started with the larger industries and we're moving to the industries that have smaller numbers of individuals working in them. If you want to look at some of those examples, domestic workers are one of them, but that's not in the law. Now we have stronger laws that cover them, meaning, if I can elaborate, that we've been having some problems in the area of domestic workers.

I was listening to the deliberations of the committee. Some of them were that you have cases in which their passports were held or they were not paid in full, etc. All these practices are against the law. Anybody who does that is breaking the law. Now we are applying the law. Recently we have had a stronger application of the law, whereby every new worker who comes to Jordan has to have a bank account where their money should be deposited.

They have hotlines to call for any complaint they might have. When they come to Jordan, they are given brochures about their rights and what they can do, as well as where they can contact their embassies. Those brochures are in different languages, not only Arabic or English.

There's one more thing: we're working on making them apply for social security. Now again I'm talking about industries that have a single worker, not more than that.

One of the sectors you mentioned, which was in the media also, is the agricultural sector, but that isn't all the sector. It doesn't cover it all. If you have a branch that has more than three or four people, they are covered already. What dictates it is the number of workers, as I stated.

• (1120)

Mr. Brian Masse: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

Would you be open to having a delegation to see, on the ground floor in Jordan, these...?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Please do.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Keddy is next.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, Your Excellency and guests.

This has been a very informative session up to this point. Maybe, just before I ask you a question, I'd make a statement that we certainly welcome the NDP support of this free trade agreement. It would be a first. It would be a welcome change of tack and certainly something we need for the betterment of our country.

I would like to drill down just a little more and allow you some time to be very clear in your statement to Mr. Masse.

Correct me if I'm wrong: my understanding, from what you've said, is that all the larger industries that have hundreds of employees are given the same rights as Jordanians under the labour law that exists. The smaller numbers, which I expect would be domestic help of two or three people, are not organized at this point. However, it's not clear that they don't have the same rights as other workers. Do they or do they not have the same rights as other workers?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you very much for the explanation. This is exactly what I meant.

The rights they have are in the application. The written law is not as extensive and does not cover as much as it does for the larger numbers, but we are getting to that point.

They have their rights and they have their laws. They come to work in Jordan under a contract agreement, and the government monitors their work. There is a special unit in the ministry of labour that can go to any house to check on the workers' situation, so they are followed up, but it's not yet written extensively in the law as much as we want it to be, when compared to other sectors in the industry.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Thank you very much for that clarification, and I would congratulate you on your demining efforts. It's absolutely remarkable that in practically a decade you've been able to come within sight of complete demining in Jordan.

The fact that you signed trade agreements with 77 countries, the fact that you are absolutely a gateway into the rest of the Arab world, and the contribution that you've made to democracy around the world with your peacekeeping soldiers and missions are to be lauded, without question.

I can't help but think that this agreement with Jordan is not dissimilar in many ways to the agreement with Colombia. There has been a remarkable change in Colombia over the last couple of decades in terms of labour reform and environmental reform. There is a renewed respect for the rule of law, and the country has really come into the 21st century.

We signed a free trade agreement with Colombia, and I think the situation is similar with Jordan, in many ways. You've had a peaceful transition of power, which is to be lauded, with your new king.

I think it's absolutely remarkable that you're moving in this direction and have had as little conflict as you have. For all of those reasons, I sincerely congratulate you. It's important to us.

I would like you to expand a little on the possibilities. This is a trade agreement. We've seen what happened with your trade agreement with the United States; trade has increased substantially, I think by over 400%, since the agreement was signed. Would you expect that same type of expansion of trade to occur with Canada, Your Excellency? Also, with regard to trade, could you expand on your role in the greater Middle East area?

That's a long, complicated question; the chair will give you time for a long, complicated answer.

• (1125)

The Chair: Okay, you've finally got a question. Let's go.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you for your generosity, and thank you for your kind words. It's really good for us to see for ourselves that we are doing something useful within our region and that we are appreciated by partners, and as I started saying, by like-minded countries.

Jordan is making the demining efforts while we still have countries that are negotiating peace. We are pushing for peace with the one side, and we are also working on the ground by demining and through other participation.

We don't like to compare free trade agreements, but our whole concept is to increase our partnerships with the United States, with the EU, and of course with Canada. I remember in 2000, when we signed our free trade agreement with the U.S., that there was a study in the United States saying that this amount of trade would be insignificant to the United States. Now, after 10 years, there is a report listing Jordan as 78th on the list of the United States' partners in free trade. Seventy-eight out of 200 is a good number for us.

Even if you look at Jordan-Canada trade before the free trade agreement, we have tripled in that time the amount of trade we have between us. We know that sometimes bureaucrats sit and negotiate and talk and set things on paper, but we know that we have a very active private sector and we work in a market economy. Our economies are close and the banking systems in our countries originated from the same system, so I know that many levels are going to be there to trade.

You mentioned, if the expression is right, that we are here to sell Jordan. At the same time, it's a small region. If you drive from the northern part of Jordan to the southern part, you'll cross to Saudi Arabia before somebody driving from Ottawa would make it to Windsor. We are a very small country, but being small gives us manoeuvrability and movability in the region.

Our trade relations with Iraq have been established for a long time. Many countries, as you have heard in previous sessions, have their embassies located in Amman. They cover Iraq at the same time.

Our other neighbour to the south is Saudi Arabia. It's part of the GCC countries, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Our neighbours to the north are Syria and Turkey, so our position is a linking point between Europe and the Gulf States.

As we are a small country, it would be easy to have a railway that could connect all these areas together. We have no problem talking to any of our neighbours. As I mentioned, the 77 countries we have our agreements with include, of course, Israel, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and all our extended neighbours.

Almost everybody, as we said, speaks English in Jordan, so it won't be hard, and of course you'll find people in Jordan who speak French, so the infrastructure is there. I'm sure that our private sectors on both sides will be very creative in expanding the volume of trade between us.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ambassador, for a really good overview of the situation in Jordan.

I want to come to the labour issues eventually, but I'll spin off the question Gerald asked about the idea of Jordan basically providing an opportunity for Canada as a gateway to the Middle East. Given the uncertainty and the economic pressures in the region now—and you certainly mentioned them in terms of it costing your economy \$5 million a day, I think you said, when that energy pipeline from Egypt shuts down—where do you see the major export opportunities for Canada?

I'm well aware of the agriculture side. That's an industry I'm from. Where do you see the major export opportunities if you're trying to convince Canadians to enter into this agreement? There has to be a benefit on both sides. Where do you see the opportunities for Canadians, from where you sit?

• (1130)

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you very much. That's a very excellent question.

To start with, the problems that we have in our region were not made yesterday. I mean, this is the story of our lives: we try as much as possible to maintain peace and security in our region and at the same time deal with daily business. If we were to be distracted or halted by the events that happen in the Middle East, no one would have trade. As an example, the free trade agreement with the U.S. or the European Union wouldn't have thrived and prospered or increased in amounts.

The number one priority for us is to keep the area as peaceful as possible. Number two is for business to continue. I give you the example of Lebanon, which has lived for years in fear of war. The war would be going on in one part, and in the other part, where there was no fighting, they'd be building and importing material to work over there. Of course it's a distraction to have all this instability in the region, but that doesn't mean that trade cannot prosper or cannot continue as it is.

Hon. Wayne Easter: There was an interesting session yesterday at Carleton University, and you or some of your people might have even been there. They held a session on Canada-Arab relations and economic and political perspectives. Peace in the Middle East was the key issue, and how you get there. It was a really good session, and I expect you likely had people there.

I want to come back to the trade question again. Brian raised a lot of concerns, and opponents to this trade agreement usually base their opposition on labour concerns and environment concerns, mainly labour and human rights. Convince me that this is a good deal for Canada.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: To start with the Carleton University event, I was there last evening, and it was very interesting. I wish there had been a more optimistic view than what you heard yesterday, and I assure you that at certain times in history we were very optimistic.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I don't want to interrupt you, but I do think there were some messages for the Government of Canada in that session yesterday, and I hope they take them to heart as well.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: I wasn't one of the speakers, so I'll leave that to whoever spoke.

To convince you, we have to convince each other. We are committing to this as partners. My role is to shed light on what questions you might have. This is to the benefit of both our countries.

I know our economies are different. Canada's economy is—knock on wood—way better than Jordan's, but in the end we are going to be partners in the area. I'm not going to use the argument—which I agree with totally—that has been presented by DFAIT in their meeting here, but this is an opportunity for Canada to maintain its presence in the region. It's an opportunity for Canada to work with traditional competitors, as they've been described, within the region, but I say “partners”, because everybody is going to benefit, starting with Jordan.

We are learning with time the laws that you are talking about. I'm not saying that we just started knowing everything, but with time we are learning. We learn from our mistakes, and we learn from other people's experience.

The signing of the free trade agreement with Canada is similar to coming to the dining room after the work in the kitchen has been done. It came after 2009 when Jordan had already finished its commitment, its application of the laws within Jordan. I cannot claim that we have already reached the point of perfection; we always work for more and for better cases.

Our negotiation with the European Union is an example. Jordan was given advanced status in its relation with the EU. We were the second country after Morocco to obtain that status. That status is not given only for economic work; it expresses the work on committees that cover human rights, social affairs, and justice and security.

I'll just read to you the main points that were discussed. Under the social rights committee we covered social rights and social dialogue; social inclusion and social protection; employment policy; migration and asylum; development of human resources, education, training, and youth; and public health.

Under the justice and security subcommittee we covered the independence and impartiality of the judiciary; good governance and transparency; the fight against organized crime; the fight against human trafficking; the fight against drugs; money laundering; cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremism; and development of adequate correctional centres conditions.

The third committee, a subcommittee under that agreement, was the human rights committee. Some of the subjects it covered were democracy and the rule of law; human rights and fundamental freedoms; the freedom of the media; freedom of expression; and freedom of association and assembly.

I'd be happy to provide the committee with copies of that.

● (1135)

Hon. Wayne Easter: That would be helpful. These are useful committees.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: After discussing all these matters, we came out with advanced status, so there is a process and there is progress.

The Chair: Thank you. He's a believer.

Mr. Shory is next.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ambassador, for coming to this committee this morning.

You can keep on convincing Mr. Easter and his friends from the other side. We are already convinced that free trade is always good. It creates jobs and it moves the economy in a positive way.

By signing this agreement, this government is ensuring that Canadian firms will be able to compete in the Jordanian market on an equal footing with firms from across the world. It was interesting when you made a comment on the energy supply from Egypt and how, if that fails, you go back to using diesel, which has an adverse effect on the environment. Would you comment on what Jordan's mining industry looks like and how the Canadian mining industry will have opportunities in that market?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: To start with what has already been achieved, our potash industry in Jordan, our national company for potash, has been opened for a strategic partner, meaning it went under the process of privatization. Our Canadian partner owns 28% of the shares of that company. That's already established.

We have discovered uranium in abundance in Jordan, and that has opened new possibilities. We import 96% of our energy, and this discovery gave us ideas of peaceful nuclear energy. The Canadian technology, the CANDU, is the only technology that can use uranium without having to enrich it outside Jordan and bring it back in. We'll abide fully with the international agreements on non-proliferation and we'll be transparent.

We try to be an example in all we do. Whatever we do, we try to be an example in the region, so our nuclear program will be within that framework. We have hope in our uranium and we have hope in having partnerships. So far, the companies that want to work in Jordan have been shortlisted to three. One of them is a Canadian company. That's one of the major projects in mining that we have in Jordan.

● (1140)

Mr. Devinder Shory: We understand that Jordan is a small country with a population of six million, but it is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which consists of countries that together have a population of 40 million or so, so it will be a huge opportunity. Also, once this agreement is implemented, I believe there will be an elimination of tariffs on a lot of stuff. I would like you to comment on what kind of tariff barriers and non-tariff barriers will be eliminated by this agreement, and how will it open the markets. After that, if we have some time, please try to convince Mr. Easter.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you.

Dr. Bashar Abu Taleb (First Secretary and Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan): Most of the tariff reductions will take effect immediately, but there are some that will go through progressive reduction and be phased out gradually.

The Chair: You have another couple of minutes, if you want.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Do you want to go ahead?

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you. I will. I just have a couple of quick comments.

We met on the 15th with a number of witnesses regarding the agreement, discussing everything from agriculture to labour to Nygård, which is actually a garment industry. Even though the labour organization had always come with some concerns, what's important is that they recognize the significant changes.

I thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for your clear comments about that. Not all of us, as Brian mentioned, are all there yet in every sector. I think the important part is that we continue to work towards improving conditions, always, for workers. I appreciate your comments on that subject.

I'm wondering, though, if you have some idea about the comments that since Jordan does not have a very big market, why are we interested in working with Jordan in a free trade agreement? We don't want to lose sight of the fact that there's always more than dollars involved in free trade. It's about relationships. It's about access. It's about logistics. It's about expansion, and being able to reach out. It's not just for Canada, but I'm suggesting also for Jordan, since you have a North American free trade....

Do you have any sense of the net impacts of the free trade agreement on Jordan? Do you have those numbers—the net impact for you, the positive?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: The net impact of...?

Mr. Bev Shipley: I mean the net impact of the free trade agreement between Canada and Jordan. This will be about dollars and cents.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Okay.

So far, the volume of trade between Canada and Jordan has risen to \$100 million per year. We're looking forward to increasing it. If we want to go with the ratio that was applied to the free trade agreement with the U.S.—multiplying that by four—within four or five years, that's what we're looking for.

Other than that, we look for the interaction that we have between us. We have students who already come to study in Canada. Our laws in Jordan allow for dual citizenship, so you have people who are Jordanian and Canadian at the same time. They come here as students. Many of our community that I meet here are students who came to live here. Most of them are looking forward to going back to work.

It will open more areas of work and cover areas such as university studies and degrees. Now, if we have those people, with their knowledge of Canada and their ability to move between the two countries, we're putting high hopes on what they can produce for us.

I'm not here to boast, but when we look at the Jordanian community here, maybe our numbers are not high—officially, we have over 5,000 people, but we think we have more than that—then out of those, as part of our consular section, we try to reach Jordanians who might need help here, meaning prisoners, etc.

We found that of the prisoners who spend over two years, there are only two Jordanians who are in prison. We know that our relationship and our work together is...

I'm sorry if I'm taking too much time.

• (1145)

The Chair: Excuse me. That's fine. Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Côté.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for taking the time to answer our questions.

I attended the interparliamentary conference on the millennium development goals, in London, and I had the opportunity to talk to many of my parliamentary colleagues from Asia and Africa. They talked about how proud they were to be members of Parliament and to be able to move democracy forward in their countries. So I would like to pay tribute to His Majesty for the reforms that he has set up to improve the situation for his people.

Let me go back to the working conditions for immigrant workers. Clearly, after the special economic zones were created, Jordan received a large influx of foreign workers. In the March 21 issue of *Embassy*, you said that there is new legislation for the social protections of immigrant workers. Mr. Ambassador, would it be possible to provide the committee with a copy of the new legislation to compare it to the former one? Would you be able to submit that type of document?

[*English*]

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you very much.

Merci. My French is a little bit worse, so please bear with me.

You referred to His Majesty as “His Majesty”, and I thank you for that. In that particular article they referred to him as “Mr. Abdullah”, so that article was not really very accurate, but I respect whoever wrote it. Let's not dwell much on that.

There isn't a new law. It was shown as a new law that came out. There is not a new law; there are new applications, which I talked about. One of them is with regard to opening a bank account and one of them is to reinforce the checking on work.

The problem that used to exist in Jordan was in relation to domestic workers. They have to be welcomed in Jordan through two bureaus or agencies. One of them is Jordanian and the other one is local, from wherever the worker has come. Coming to Jordan, they are given a certain amount of pay, but it's more feasible for them to leave the houses where they are supposed to work and go into the market in Jordan to work in another industry, because they get paid more outside. One of the new applications increases their pay at the domestic house where they are supposed to work and where their contract is.

Having a domestic worker in Jordan entails two payments. One of them goes to the worker and the second has to go for his or her residency in Jordan during that time, which has to be paid to the government. Whoever pays it is the household that welcomes him or her.

If a domestic worker comes to a house and suddenly runs away, the person who brought him or her, let's say, does not feel obligated to pay for his or her residency in Jordan, and that's where the problem happens. The workers go out and work somewhere else, and when it's time for the worker to leave, the records will show that the worker or somebody who was supposed to pay for the worker did not pay. That would cause some problems in leaving the country.

In that, the workers' respective embassies were involved. Recently a number of those persons who were in that situation have had their situation somehow managed. Either the amount was paid or it was cancelled.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Ambassador, could the committee have a document that compares the new measures with the previous ones?
[*English*]

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Sure, I'll work on that. It's a pleasure.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté: Thank you.

I would now like to move on to another topic.

One of the most important measures that really support the status of workers is the right to freedom of association. The New Democratic Party has been advocating for that since its inception. I would like to talk about the various groups of employees, including gardeners, cooks, domestic workers and agricultural workers.

Could you describe their situation specifically and assure us that they are able to bargain collectively—simply put, to form groups that protect their rights collectively?

• (1150)

[*English*]

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you very much.

I think that also has been covered by the first question. It's not a matter of the origin of the worker; it's the industry itself, and the number of workers. The right of association is there and does exist, but it's not applicable in an industry that has a very limited number of people.

As I said, this is not the end of it. We are still working on that.

Maybe I'll give the floor to my colleague to read about the ILO.

[Translation]

Dr. Bashar Abu Taleb: Your Excellency, Jordan has ratified 24 ILO conventions, seven of which are fundamental conventions. Unfortunately, the convention on freedom of association was not part of those conventions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank our honoured guests. Your Excellency, Mr. Al-Khaleidi, and Mr. Abu Taleb, you honour us by being here today.

It seems to me that we were close once before, in the last term, to putting this deal together. Unfortunately, politics can get in the way of politics sometimes, and that prevented us from doing it. It's my sincere hope that my colleagues opposite, particularly in the official opposition, understand—I say this with great sincerity—that if we cannot put a deal with Jordan together, where we can we put a deal together?

I look at your country as moderate, strategic, progressive, and growing in opportunities, not just financially but also in terms of how you deal with your people.

Your Excellency, your comments about this make me very optimistic. You talked about peace, and I think that peace grows economic opportunity among all of us.

In that vein, my first question to you is about the Arab Spring. How has that impacted Jordan and your approach to business? Could you give me a sense of that, please?

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you very much for your kind words.

I know we've been very close, yet, as you said, it's politics. In Jordan we understand the pace at which things are going, but we are eager for the free trade agreement to come into force.

As I mentioned, I think what prompted the Arab Spring all over the Arab world was the economy. People took to the street, and they had their slogans. They started out being of an economic nature. Once they were on the street, the whole agenda opened up to include political and human rights, etc.

Jordan was no exception. People came out because of the economic situation and the state of our youth. I mentioned that 70% of our population is under the age of 30. The old formula was to finish school, go to university, get a good degree, get a good job, and end up in the middle class, working and achieving.

Right now that formula doesn't work. For the first time in Jordan, we had Ph.D. holders who were unemployed. They were looking for jobs. This applies to the whole Arab world.

When people took to the street, the agenda that prevailed was economic; relatively speaking, we had no problems with human rights. We had no vendetta between the people and the government itself. In this sense, it was a little bit easier for our government to interact with the people for reform. Everybody was calling for reforms, starting with His Majesty, as I said, even before the Arab Spring started. It's a gradual process. It's a process that has to be done and felt by everybody.

Thank God, as we said, that we didn't have any incidents or clashes or whatever in the some 4,000 demonstrations that took place in Jordan during those 15 months.

• (1155)

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you.

The visit by His Majesty King Abdullah II to Canada almost five years ago was really what precipitated the opportunity we now have to do this deal.

I want to remind everyone here about what we mean by a free trade agreement: it's a rules-based system that we put in place to eliminate barriers to business opportunities between us. It's rather interesting that the U.S. has been there 10 years. We're way behind in that. For us as Canadians, if we don't understand that we're behind our great neighbour, who is also our competitor when we try to do business with you, it's a challenge.

You already have that free trade deal with the United States. I think I understand why we would want to do it with Jordan, but please help me understand why you want to do this so badly with Canada.

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Again, as I said, part of how we help the economy is to work with free markets and to be part of international trade. We joined the WTO. That was one of the first things we achieved after His Majesty acceded to the throne.

We tried for a long time to become members of the WTO, and finally we managed to do it. Our approach is about partnership and opening up. That's the kind of economy we understand.

The more the merrier, to start with. As we said, we're very close to Canada. We work on the same basics. My colleagues and I cover the United Nations representing Jordan. I know on a day-to-day basis how close our relationship is to Canada in Geneva. In our work in the United Nations Human Rights Council we work very closely together. In New York also, we cover together many political and other matters that are neglected by other countries.

What we want to achieve is to build on our relationship with a partner that we know is like-minded and to work together. The free trade agreement between Canada and Jordan is a perfect example of that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Côté has one last question. We have a couple of minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for answering one final question.

Among the guarantees that workers have, the right to strike is fundamental. It is pretty much a sacred right in Canada.

Do Jordanian workers have the right to strike without the government's permission?

[*English*]

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: Thank you very much.

Allow me to add something: I followed with interest your intervention either in this committee or in the House of Commons, and I appreciate how fond you are about the subject.

That said, yes, they can strike. It used to be that they had to get the approval of the government; right now, no: you have to inform the government. Sometimes you need to inform the government because you don't know what will happen in the street. If there is no reply from the government, it's as if you have the green light; you can go ahead and do it.

So yes, they can strike. Recently we had the strike from the teachers and nurses. Even the strikers are getting to be more aware and more mature, meaning that when teachers felt they were affecting the students after two weeks of study, they decided to come

back. The nurses' strike was done in shifts, as they also work in shifts, so this shows how much judgment.... People have their needs and people need to express their needs, but at the same time, they're not ruining the whole system in which they are working.

There was an interesting article in *The Globe and Mail* on Friday. It describes two demonstrations that occurred in Jordan. The first demonstration happened and it was in progress. The second demonstration did not really agree with the first one, but they were going slower, so they couldn't mix. When they were almost mixed, the police came just to be standing there between them; then everybody went home and—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Ambassador, could you reassure me? Does that apply to all groups of workers?

[*English*]

H.E. Basheer Fawwaz Zoubi: It is the ones that the labour law indicates, excluding the four groups that you mentioned, again because the law is not there yet—but they can go out and do it, and nobody is going to stop them. They'd be one of the 4,000 demonstrations that happened.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much for coming in and answering the questions. It's been a very informative hour. We look forward to a free trade agreement with Jordan. We will continue our deliberations and we will be moving forward on our witness list. We will move on to clause-by-clause study very soon.

Thank you very much.

I will suspend the meeting now until we are set up for the next hour.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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