

**Statement by Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin**  
**Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**  
**“The Arab Spring and Central Asia: Growing Pressure for Human Rights?”**  
**May 11, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, this hearing raises an important and timely topic. The events in the Middle East and North Africa have already redrawn the geopolitical map, evoking fears of worse instability and religious radicalism but also raising hopes of democratic development that will lead to a more peaceful world.

Perhaps the main lesson from the last six months is that where politics does not offer citizens a say in governance and redress of grievances, the street is the only outlet. Corruption and lack of economic opportunity fuel public resentment towards those in power, who use their positions to line their own pockets. Unfortunately, these conditions also characterize much of Central Asia, where leaders have generally consolidated super-presidential systems that allow them to remain in office while impeding the rise of any competing institutions. The question naturally arises if similar unrest could erupt in that region.

In many post-Soviet states over the last few months, officials have leaped to deny the possibility of such events in their countries. “It could never happen here” they claim, citing the popularity of their presidents or the public’s fear of instability or the absence of some other prerequisites for mass demonstrations of discontent.

It is not surprising that officials in Central Asian countries would reject the possibility that their regimes are vulnerable to the wave that has swept over the Middle East and North Africa. Our task is to investigate to what degree their assurances are well-founded or whether we have reason to expect protests in Central Asia. What seems clear already is that some leaders are concerned enough to tighten control of new technologies – such as mobile devices that can access the Internet- which were used in North Africa and the Middle East. For example, Uzbekistan recently instructed mobile operators to notify regulators of any bulk distribution of text messages with “suspicious content,” to monitor social networking sites, and to be prepared to immediately switch off their Internet networks if directed by authorities.

Events in North Africa and the Middle East have taken many by surprise, including the region’s rulers – some of whom are now ex-rulers. This hearing will elucidate whether Central Asian leaders have good reason to be nervous. I look forward to hearing the views of our witnesses.