

Opening Statement
Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin, Ranking Member
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing: The Middle East: Would the Helsinki Process Apply?
June 15, 2004

Thank you, Chairman Smith, for conducting this hearing at such a critical and opportune moment. The ongoing development of the Bush administration's policies for the Middle East plainly show the need for the Commission to examine the applicability of the Helsinki Process as a possible model for the region.

Embracing the standards of democracy and human rights embodied in the OSCE—particularly by the new governments in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, could help establish a lasting peace and prevent the continuous slaughter of innocents. The Helsinki Process could be instrumental in this context in several respects.

First, by embracing commitments similar to those of the OSCE, Afghanistan and the new Iraqi state can, in a sense, tie themselves to the mast of reform. If extremist, illiberal domestic elements were to attempt to return to power, this kind of commitment could serve as a partial buffer, a kind of linchpin for the current democratic momentum. Second, simply put, commitments encourage ordinary citizens in signatory states to push for government and individual accountability.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Israel's commitment to democracy and the rule of law stands in stark contrast to the repressive policies of the other regimes. In Iran, the legislative elections in February of this year demonstrated once again the clerics' inveterate opposition to a real opening of the political system. In Lebanon, Syrian troops remain in control of the southern part of the country, despite Israel's withdrawal in 2000. And in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt there are serious restrictions on the press and opposition groups. The establishment of an OSCE-like process in these countries, supported by the United States and her allies, would lighten the heavy hand of dictatorship by providing support for real democrats in the region.

As the Helsinki Watch Monitoring Groups did in Mr. Sharansky's day, NGOs could garner international recognition as they call for reform.

Regional minorities are in need of protection. In Iran, for example, there are close to 12,000 Jews who face constant restrictions on the practice of their religion. The Bahá'ís face similar persecution by Iranian officials. Indeed, one of the keys to the future stability of Iraq will be adequate protections for the Sunni and Kurdish minorities. The adoption of OSCE-like principles in the Middle East would mark an important starting point for resolving these issues, among others, and bringing peace and stability to the region.

I welcoming this opportunity to hear how the region could be encouraged to develop habits of communication and principles of cooperation that will benefit the security of all.
