



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's discussion. Consideration of Helsinki's possible lessons for the Middle East is timely and relevant. I can think of no better group to move debate on this topic in an informed and constructive direction. With your concurrence, I will offer some brief observations. These are very much personal views. They do not reflect any official position or agency assessment.

The impetus for today's discussion rests with the positive examples that Helsinki Final Act principles and the OSCE experience might provide for other regions. Ambassador Kampelman and Minister Sharansky have once again done great service by underscoring their possible application within the Middle East.

To my mind, the value of Helsinki's lessons will, in the first instance, lie more for U.S. policy-makers as to the requirements and possible tactics of shaping a successful long-term collaborative strategy for the United States in the Middle East -- and less in the sense of prescribing any preconceived institutional template to be applied to that region from the outside.

I am skeptical of using an immediate focus on specific organizational models or transplants as a starting point for this discussion. This is not just because there are profound differences between the problems and recent histories of Europe and the Middle East. Even more important right now are widely-held popular sensitivities throughout the region to any notion of an external formula for change, let alone misperceptions of an American desire simply to impose our own plans and structures.

We have, of course, an important role to play in moving these issues forward -- and we should be alert to efforts of some regimes to try to invoke resistance to external ideas and pressures simply as an excuse for inaction. But it would be a serious mistake for our policies to neglect a critical political fact of life: that to be effective, genuine reform and major change must be seen being seen as driven largely from within the region itself .

Thus more fundamental and immediate questions relate to how the U.S. (and Europe) might support more effectively advocates of reform from within the Middle East?

How can we best differentiate our bilateral approaches to take account of different problems and diverse opportunities within individual countries of the region?

How -- and under what conditions -- should we try encourage a process of greater multilateral dialogue on issues of regional cooperation, security and fundamental freedoms? How could any such sort of initially informal dialogue gradually be given both operational focus and meaningful follow-up?

But the most important question will be whether any such process can come to be perceived as genuinely "owned and led" by a growing community of stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental in nature, drawn from among the different states and peoples of the Middle East.

Good answers to those questions will not come quickly or easily -- and our process of developing answers will have to be seen as taking place in collaborative partnership with governments, groups and individuals of the region itself.

That sort of broad exchange has begun, evidenced in part by the G-8 Summit's statement last week on "Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa." But, as the bumpy diplomatic road to the Sea Island meeting illustrated, moving from generalities to specifics will continue to be very difficult. The issues themselves are tough -- and there are persistent differences of tone, emphasis and vision not just between the U.S. and specific governments of the region but among many of those governments themselves as well as with other G-8 members as well.

Faced with this challenge, a close reading of Helsinki's history of the last three decades might give certain help. First, it would flag the need for a sense of strategic perspective and great patience: Supporting this sort of transformative agenda within a region even more challenging than Cold War Europe will require a much longer-term and sustained diplomatic commitment than American political calendars usually allow for. This should be seen as a generational project.

Second, Helsinki's history would also suggest the importance of tactical flexibility on our part, especially as circumstances and expectations evolve within the region evolve. We should take care not to lock into any single organizational concept too early on.

There will be a variety of ideas from within the region -- different possible experiments with regard to individual issues or sub-regional arrangements -- which we should be prepared to explore and encourage as appropriate. An openness to consider specific sub-regional steps might provide the most chance for initial progress.

Third and not least, the Helsinki process succeeded in no small part because its agenda was cast broadly enough to reflect issues seen as important, in various and different ways, for almost all of its participants, both in the East and West. This past strategy has direct relevance for any comparable future effort within the Middle East.

In some circles within the Middle East, the labels “Helsinki” or “OSCE” are perceived -- or misperceived -- as almost exclusively focused on a U.S.-driven agenda of human rights issues alone which, in turn, is aimed solely at advancing our own strategic advantage. That is, of course, a serious misreading of the breadth of the Helsinki “Baskets.”

In its philosophy and practice, the OSCE reaffirms an equal status and legitimacy for each of its participants and their respective security concerns. It stresses reciprocity and continuous engagement. On that very basis, it has been often noted that the OSCE experience in political-military confidence-building could offer much, for example, in the development of a multilateral forum on regional security issues within the whole or parts of the Middle East.

But Helsinki-inspired efforts in this direction, especially on a comprehensive or pan-regional basis, will risk being undercut, as they have been before, if they are not seen as taking account of those security and political questions perceived by many who live within the Middle East as central.

Two examples: Longstanding frustrations -- on all sides -- over lack of progress towards a meaningful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian question on terms that produce a viable Palestinian state as well ensure Israeli security will inevitably cloud local debate over any new initiative. Similarly the degree and pace at which security and well-being come to be restored within a sovereign Iraq will have a profound influence on perceptions of regional stability.

To cite these various complications is not to deny the important challenge for U.S. policy-makers set by the previous speakers: the need to think creatively about Helsinki’s potential lessons and examples for the Middle East.

Rather this is to underscore that any American strategy to that end would have to be long-term in perspective, collaborative in nature, broad in substance, and widely perceived as meeting the political needs, both real and perceived, of the region itself.

Mr. Chairman, I think that the Commission could have a constructive role in framing any further consideration of such a long-term strategy by:

- continuing the useful discussion begun through today’s hearing with a follow-on focus on hearing directly from a greater number of concerned and appropriate individuals from throughout the Middle East;

- exploring ways to provide both visibility and moral support for those groups and individuals from within the Middle East who seeking the application of Helsinki-like principles and standards within their own societies; and

- strengthening substantive engagement on these very issues with your legislative counterparts from throughout the Middle East, both on a bilateral basis and multilaterally through the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

