

Statement by Rep. Alcee L. Hastings
Ranking Member, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
“The Arab Spring and Central Asia: Growing Pressure for Human Rights?”
May 11, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I commend you on holding this hearing. The ongoing drama of the Arab Spring is clearly the most important story of the year and possibly of our time. It is at least as significant, in my view, than our great success in finally ridding the world of Osama bin-Laden. In fact, developments in the Middle East and North Africa, where people have arisen to pursue democratic change, undercut al-Qaeda’s entire narrative, while rejecting its methods. Whether these events might spur similar outcomes in other parts of the world, specifically Central Asia, is a natural question for this Commission to investigate.

As former President and current Special Representative on Mediterranean Affairs of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, I have visited all the states of Central Asia, as well all of those of the OSCE’s Mediterranean Partners. Throughout my travels in these regions, I have been struck by certain structural similarities between them. Setting aside Israel, both regions are primarily Muslim. Both, you might say, are struggling with the consequences of colonialism. Both have large and growing young populations, which are to varying degrees frustrated by the lack of opportunity, and which have faced entrenched elites that resist systemic reforms, even when they talk about their necessity.

On the other hand, the states of Central Asia are full-fledged members of the OSCE, which they voluntarily joined in 1992. They thereby promised to carry out the organization’s commitments in the human dimension. How well they have done can be gauged in the State Department’s annual reports, which on the whole, present a pretty depressing picture.

It is easy to become discouraged. We should remember, however, that Central Asian countries have been independent for not quite 20 years. I say that not to excuse their well-known shortcomings in democratization and human rights but simply to state a fact. The lands of the Middle East and North Africa have had far more time to build a modern polity with accountable government and rule of law but sadly, little has been accomplished. Only now, because of the stirring courage displayed by many thousands of people, has the opportunity for a real paradigm shift finally emerged.

The obvious question that arises is whether possibilities for reform, without major uprisings, exist in Central Asia. I’m sure our witnesses have strong opinions about that key issue but I just want to say that I hope the answer is “yes.” In my contacts with Central Asian leaders, I have always stressed the need for gradual, positive change.

Today, everyone knows instantly what is happening all over the globe. Both for societies seeking examples of successful pressure on governments and for regimes determined not to yield to such pressure, the power of precedent is important. Experiences in one country or region naturally engender hopes or fears in others. But nothing is inevitable and that doesn’t necessarily mean similar conditions will lead to similar conclusions.

Moreover, Tunisia and Egypt have responded quite differently to the popular call for change than Syria or Libya, and they have more in common with each other than any of them has with Central Asian states. It is not so easy to make predictions about how events in one region or country might influence outcomes in another.

These are difficult questions to answer; frankly, I am glad I don't have to. That is precisely why we're here -- to hear from smart people who have thought long and hard about the issues. I salute their willingness to tackle such knotty topics and I look forward to learning from them.