

OPENING STATEMENT OF
CONGRESSMAN BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING
“IRAN CRISIS: A TRANSATLANTIC RESPONSE”

June 9, 2005

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate you convening today's hearing on the state of human rights and democracy in Iran. Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism. Developments in Iran have obvious implications for other countries in the Middle East -- including several OSCE Mediterranean Partners as well as the OSCE participating States themselves. While there is much talk about bringing democracy to regimes in the Middle East, security concerns usually eclipse that aspect of the situation in Iran.

Frankly, democracy is not a word that comes quickly to mind when thinking about Iran. Elections scheduled for next week for the largely symbolic position of president have raised the profile of Iranian politics. I understand that literally hundreds of potential candidates were scrapped and now a handful or so of individuals are vying for that position. Last week Iran's most prominent investigative journalist, Akbar Ganji, urged a boycott of the elections, citing the unfair and undemocratic nature of the process. I hope that the experts with us today can shed some light on what, if any, relevance the elections have.

During the Commission's hearing last year on the "The Middle East: Would The Helsinki Process Apply?", Natan Sharansky -- a true champion of human rights -- made a particularly poignant observation: "The lesson of Helsinki is that when demands to uphold human rights are backed up by effective action, the cause of freedom and peace can be advanced. The danger today is that the commitment to spread human rights and democracy in the Middle East will remain an empty promise."

The United Nations and the U.S. Government have consistently criticized Iran's human rights practices and strict limits on democracy, particularly Iran's suppression of political dissidents and religious and ethnic minorities.

While there may be limited leverage over the regime in Tehran, it is our responsibility to use those opportunities that we do have. As Ranking Member of the Trade Subcommittee of the Committee on Ways and Means, I am mindful of Iran's keen interest in membership in the World Trade Organization. In 2001 I successfully offered an amendment in the Ways and Means Committee to extend the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) for an additional five years. Iran must make progress with the European Union (EU) on dismantling its nuclear program, as it begins its accession talks with the WTO to conform its trade practices to the organization's standards.

As a cosponsor of the Iran Freedom Support Act and a longtime member of the Commission, I am particularly mindful of the importance of holding the current regime in Iran accountable for its threatening behavior while at the same time supporting a transition to democracy in Iran. This legislation would increase U.S. sanctions contained in ILSA, make exports to Iran of WMD-related technology sanctionable activity, and raise the threshold for the President to waive ILSA's provisions or terminate its application. The legislation also specifies criteria for designating pro-democracy groups eligible to receive U.S. aid.

I continue to have concerns about Iran's material support to groups that use violence against the U.S.-led Middle East peace process, including Hizballah in Lebanon and the Palestinian groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Some reports also indicate that some senior Al Qaeda activists are in Iran as well, although Iran claims they are "in custody" and will be tried.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today.