



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: His Excellency Natan Sharansky

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Senators, Members of Congress and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

In recent months, there has been much talk about creating a “Helsinki strategy” for the Middle East. President Bush, Prime Minister Blair and other world leaders have spoken about the connection between freedom and security. They have noted that the lack of freedom in the countries of the Middle East breeds fundamentalism, hatred and ultimately, the terrorism that endangers the region and our entire world. Calls for reform have also come from within. A document produced two months ago at the end of the Alexandria conference, which was attended by representatives of civil society institutions within the Arab states, pointed to the urgent need for political, economic and social reform in the Arab world.

These are certainly positive developments.

I know there are those who argue that the free world has no right to “impose” democracy on other countries. I reject this argument because I do not accept the premise that by helping free societies emerge, the free world is imposing anything on anyone. We must always remember that non-democratic regimes do not represent their peoples and therefore have no right to claim to speak on their behalf. Those who argue that Arabs do not want to live in democratic societies should put their ideas to the test. They will find that like Americans, Britons, Germans, Italians, Japanese, Taiwanese, South Koreans, and all other peoples, Arabs want to live in free societies. They may not want to live in a Western democracy, but they will seek to live in free societies that reflect the heritage, culture and traditions of the Arab world.

I will be happy to expand on these ideas further, but the primary purpose of my testifying here is not to engage in abstract debates, but rather to discuss how a Helsinki Strategy for the Middle East might work in practice. Fortunately, the democratic world has had some experience with helping free societies emerge, and it is to this experience that we can turn now for guidance.

Let me start by reminding everyone that many dissidents behind the iron curtain initially saw the Helsinki Agreements as a sell-out. They were concerned that the Soviets were being granted real political and economic benefits in exchange for lip service on human rights. Their concerns were not unjustified. The Soviet leadership surely believed that they were

hoodwinking the West with an empty promise in a non-binding agreement. Moreover, just as today many are willing to have reform in the Middle East take a back seat to various other objectives, a generation ago, many in the West were fully prepared to sweep human rights under the rug of détente.

But some dissidents, including myself, saw Helsinki as a potential watershed. For the first time, the USSR's international standing was linked to the regime's treatment of its own citizens. The critical question was how to turn that formal linkage into a practical tool for pressuring the Soviets to change their human rights policies. This would not be easy. Unlike the Jackson Amendment, which was binding and which set clear standards for compliance and clear penalties for non-compliance, Helsinki was non-binding with no monitoring mechanism.

But we dissidents believed that if we could turn those non-binding Helsinki commitments into an internationally accepted measure of Soviet intentions then the agreements could become a catalyst for change. That is why we formed the Helsinki Group in Moscow in 1976 and why this committee was established later that year.

Because of our work, your work, and the work of courageous leaders in the West who insisted that the Helsinki commitments be upheld, the strategy worked. The Soviets soon realized that they could not take one step in the international arena without the spotlight of world opinion exposing their human rights policies and their treatment of political dissidents.

Before Helsinki, the Soviets could have it both ways: They could have the benefits of cooperation with the West – legitimacy, trade, scientific and technological cooperation, and a host of other benefits – and at the same time control and repress their own people. But in the atmosphere that was created after Helsinki, the Soviets were forced to choose: Respect human rights or give up all the benefits of cooperation with the West. What many had once viewed as lip service to human rights turned out to be one of the most fateful decisions of the Cold War.

My Friends,

In order to ensure that the free world's commitment to democracy in the Middle East becomes more than lip service, as has unfortunately been the case so many times in the past, non-democratic regimes in the region must understand that they too face a clear choice. If they continue to repress their people and stifle dissent, they will lose all the benefits that the free world, led by the United States, has to offer, from legitimacy and security guarantees to direct aid and trade privileges.

The free world does not need to wait for Arab regimes to consent to reform. If there are courageous leaders in the Arab world who are genuinely willing to democratize and liberalize their countries, than we should applaud and support them. But if we condition reform on the agreement of non-democratic leaders, it may never come. We must be prepared to move forward with a policy of linkage despite their objections.

The non-binding recommendations of the Alexandria conference that discuss a number of political, economic and social reforms that should be made in the Arab world could be turned

into a yardstick to measure the intentions of Arab governments and to chart their progress. For that to happen, governments, the media and human rights activists in the “West” must be willing to shine the spotlight on dissidents and other advocates of democracy within the Arab world.

I am often asked where all the Arab dissidents are? Where is the Arab Sakharov? I have heard it said time and again that the lack of dissidents in the Arab world is “proof” that unlike the people of the Soviet Union, the Arabs really don’t want to be free, that they really don’t want democracy.

I would like to remind the skeptics that in the 1930s, there were no dissidents in the Soviet Union whose voices were heard in the West. The reason was not that no one in the USSR wanted to be free, but that the price for dissent was death. In the 1970s, when the price for dissent was prison or exile, a few hundred dissidents emerged. But we dissidents still were only the tip of an iceberg. Beneath the surface were hundreds of millions who wanted their freedom.

The lack of dissent in the Arab world today is a function of the lack of international concern for how Arab regimes deal with dissent. I am certain that the more support we give those fighting for democracy in the Arab world, the more other Arabs who support them will have the courage to step forward. International scrutiny over how Arab regimes treat their own people will turn the trickle of dissent we see today into a flood.

Indeed, for a “Helsinki Strategy” to work, potential dissidents and civil institutions working for democratic reform in the Middle East must be confident that the free world will not turn a blind eye to the harsh measures Arab regimes will almost certainly employ against them. No less important, these dissidents must know that the free world’s support for their efforts will not be abandoned in the name of achieving “stability” or preserving good relations with a non-democratic regime or some other goal. They must be assured that the free world believes that the best guarantor of stability and good relations with any country is for democracy to take root.

The free world must also be willing to link its international policies to how Arab regimes treat their own people. In many ways, Middle Eastern regimes today are even more dependent on the “West” than the USSR was in 1975. If the free world uses this leverage, Arab regimes will no longer be able to violate human rights with impunity.

The United States, for example, might insist that if the Saudi regime wants American protection, it will have to change its draconian emigration policies and improve its record on women’s rights. The direct aid and grants that are provided to countries in the region might be withheld if the recipient countries imprison dissidents, particularly advocates of democracy. European states, for their part, might demand that if the Palestinian Authority wants to keep receiving financial support, it will have to show that these moneys are being used to improve the lives of the Palestinian people and not to fund terrorism and corruption.

The lesson of Helsinki is that when demands to uphold human rights are backed 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. That would be most unfortunate. Just as Helsinki helped liberate hundreds of millions of people and defeat an evil empire that threatened the democratic world, the same approach today can transform the Middle East from a region awash in terror and tyranny into a place that provides freedom and opportunity to its own people as well as peace and security for the rest of the world.