

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": The Hon. Morton Halperin Oral Testimony

November 27, 2001 MR. HALPERIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a great pleasure to be here. I had, as you indicated, thought I was going after Under Secretary Dobriansky, and intended in part to comment on her statement. Let me say, having read her statement, I find almost nothing in it that I disagree with. It is a statement of aspirations, of intentions, which I think reflect the views of this administration and previous administrations. The problem much more is in the implementation of those good intentions in specific situations. Let me say I'm very pleased to be here. I apologize for not having a prepared statement. The problem is one learns very bad habits when in the government. After I accepted this invitation, I sat back confidently waiting for a draft of a statement to arrive on my desk. [Laughter.] MR. HALPERIN: And only very late did I realize that that no longer happened. And so I will need to speak extemporaneously. Let me try to answer your four questions, and then to present some additional points that I think are relevant to the issues that you're dealing with. The first question is: "How is U.S. foreign policy, including its focus on religious freedom, changed as a result of the events of September 11th?" And I would argue that the change is likely to be relatively small for two reasons. First of all I think religious freedom and promotion of religious freedom has never been the overriding objective of any administration. That is, it has always been one of the things that we took account of in dealing with other countries. It is an issue that we have raised in our discussions with other countries, more since the enactment of the legislation which created this Commission and the office in the State Department, but even since then and prior to September 11th, as this Commission knows, the Clinton Administration and the Bush Administration, have both put the promotion of religious freedom on the scale of things to promote. They both talked about it, but it has not been in any country or in any part of the world central to the determination of our relations with other countries, both because we have other interests in many places that are at least as important, and because it is not clear how one in fact brings about fundamental changes in practices which restrict religious behavior. I think in most countries that to press religion, they view that as necessary, maybe even essential to their remaining in power, so that giving them lectures about the need for more religious freedom is heard as telling them that they should give us power in this society because we know that in many totalitarian regimes, religious institutions are the place where political dissent begins. That was certainly true in Central Europe. It's true in other parts of the world. So that this is not a demand that other countries can respond to easily by giving us a remote airbase. It goes to the fundamental nature of their political power. So that I think on the one hand concerns about there being a fundamental change may exaggerate how much religious liberty played a central role before September 11th. But I would also argue that the change in American policy after September 11th will not be as great as some people have feared and some people have hoped. Mr. Chairman, I'm happy to stop and have you hear Paula first, if you would like to do that? CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Well, I'm happy to do it right away, but--we welcome you, nice to have you here. MS. DOBRIANSKY: My apologies. CHAIRMAN YOUNG: No, we certainly understand. But why don't you just continue? MR. HALPERIN: So that I think that we will, as Under Secretary Dobriansky's testimony makes clear, continue to give importance to religious freedom. We will continue to raise it, and my guess is that the importance of particular countries will change very rapidly as our struggle against terrorism moves to different parts of the world. Countries that border on Afghanistan will find themselves much less central to our foreign policy in a few months than they were a few days ago, and the question of which countries will suddenly become very important will, I think, depend on what the next target is of terrorist activities. I think this could change very rapidly. We may find that Pakistan has gone from being a central supporter to a central area of concern, for example, depending on how the situation in Afghanistan ends. So I think the concern that we will be so dependent on a couple of countries, that at least in those countries we will fail to raise the issue of individual liberties, belied by the fact that this administration has continued to raise those concerns even in the midst of the debates about bases and other support, and I think the importance of those countries will decline. The second question goes to how the process of foreign-policy making has changed, and I think I'll leave that question to my colleague on the panel. The third question says: "Has the change in U.S. foreign policy affected the ability and willingness of the United States to raise this issue, particularly in countries cooperating against terrorism?" I've already suggested that I think much less than has been suggested. We expect every country to cooperate in the struggle against terrorism, and I think we will continue to raise human rights concerns and should continue to raise human rights concerns, including concerns about religion in those countries. And as I say, which countries are particularly important will change over time, so that I would expect that we will go back to a balance that's not very different than the one we had before September 11th. Now, finally on the question of: "Can promoting religious freedom be a tool in the campaign against terrorism?" I would say yes, but only if we put it in the context of an understanding of the relationship between societies that promote terrorism and religious liberty, and this is, I think, unfortunately more complicated than we would like. And so let me make a few comments about that relationship. First I would argue that religious freedom can in fact only be protected in a country if that country is a viable constitutional democracy with a constitutional provision that provides for religious freedom, both for the majority and for minority religious groups, and in which that right is backed up by an independent judiciary and a role in the judiciary in protecting religious freedom, that in any situation short of that, there can be more or less religious freedom. We can push for less persecution of particular groups and individuals, but if we are looking to build a world in which there is religious freedom and religious tolerance, I think we need to understand that that needs to be a part of the building of a world of constitutional democracies in which they are various rights protected by a constitution, by an independent judiciary, and backed up a free press. And, therefore, I would urge this Commission to put as much effort on promoting and supporting the efforts of the United States and other countries to sustain the democratic transition that is going on in the world, as you do in focusing on specific issues of religious

freedom in particular countries. And I would underline the fact that the question of how we make the constitutional democracy compatible with Islam is one that has to be and should be a central concern of anyone who cares about religious freedom and who cares about democracy and freedom in general. And in particular, I think it's worth reminding ourselves that the place in which Muslims have the greatest religious freedom is in fact I think in India, rather than in countries with a Muslim majority. And we are confronting a number of situations now where countries with substantial Muslim majorities are struggling to maintain democracy and to establish democracy in a way that's compatible with the religious beliefs of all the people in the society. Indonesia and Nigeria are obviously the two largest and most dramatic examples of that. And in that connection I think we have to deal with the fact that while many elements of democracy, as we practice it in the United States, are in fact universal. One that is not is our notion of the separation of church and state. There are many democratic countries, both old democracies, as you know, as well as new democracies, which simply do not accept the principle of the separation of church and state and where there is a state-sponsored religion, and I think we need to do a lot more thinking, particularly in Muslim countries, but it's also an issue in Israel and continues to be an issue even in many established democracies about how you promote religious freedom for everyone while respecting the rights of a majority to maintain a state-sponsored religion, and to have that in some forms influence the policies of the state. I think especially in Muslim countries that will continue to be an important issue. And finally, let me note the difficult question that rise from the fact that some forms of religious freedom in nondemocratic countries can turn out to be extraordinarily dangerous for all of us. We've all come to understand, particularly after September 11th, the danger that arises from the fact that in many nondemocratic societies with Muslim majorities or large Muslim populations, religious education and organization in religious institutions becomes the only form of political protest, and for many people the only means for primary education. And out of that has come teaching and training about extremist forms of religion including practices that promote terrorism. How one deals with that I think is extraordinarily difficult, and it is part of, I think, a larger problem, and one that I think has become more important after September 11th, and one that I think the Bush Administration has begun to grapple with and that we all need to grapple with, which is how do we assist and promote a transition to constitutional democracy in the countries particularly of the Middle East, but in Central Asia and in South Asia as well, in a way that doesn't lead to the establishment of radical Islamic regimes which provide new bases for terrorist support, but in fact leads through a process to the establishment--and here I will end as I began--of constitutional democracies which allow for religious beliefs to be protected and practiced both by the majority and the minority. I think those are very difficult issues, both theoretically and in practice, and ones that I think this Commission needs to grapple with. Let me say again how pleased I am to have the opportunity to appear here and engage in a dialogue with you. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Dr. Halperin, thank you very much.