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Libya

NATO's "Conspiracy" against the Libyan revolution

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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In an op-ed published in the Wall Street Journal (19 July 2011), Max Boot—the aptly named neoconservative author and military historian known for his support for “democracy promotion” at the point of a gun, and an ardent supporter of full-scale US military engagement in Libya—referred to a Financial Times article (15 June) that compared the current aerial bombing campaign over Libya and the Kosovo air war in 1999 in order to emphasize “the lack of firepower in the Libya operation.” Boot commented, dwelling on the same comparison with additional details:

"The earlier war was hardly "Apocalypse Now"—it was tightly limited in its own right. But after 78 days in Kosovo, NATO allies had committed 1,100 aircraft and flown 38,004 sorties. By contrast, in Libya NATO had sent just 250 aircraft and flown 11,107 sorties. Not coincidentally, after 78 days Slobodan Milosevic decided to relinquish Kosovo, whereas even after 124 days—and counting—Gadhafi continues to cling to power."

NATO's Libyan Paradoxes

In Operation Desert Storm launched by the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1991, it took only 11 days to equal the above number of air sorties flown over Libya in 78 days. The total number of sorties in 43 days of Desert Storm reached 109,876—an average of 2,555 per day. After the devastation brought about by that “storm” and further bombing campaigns during the 12 embargo years between 1991 and 2003, 41,850 sorties were flown during the first 4 weeks alone of so-called Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of these, 15,825 were strike sorties, averaging 565 per day. Andrew Gilligan could write accordingly in The Spectator (4 June):

"For all the ritual incantations about "intensified" attacks and "heaviest bombing yet," the bombing is and always has been relatively light. Across the whole operation, the number of Nato strike sorties—only a proportion of which actually result in airstrikes—has averaged 57 a day, less than half the number in the alliance's very similar mission in Kosovo, and a mere fraction of what the US and Britain did in Iraq."

Add to this that it takes much more pressure to force a dictator to relinquish power than to force one to abandon a section of his territory. Since Gaddafi's chance of regaining control over Benghazi is close to nil, he actually would have been happy to get rid of the rebellious city and with it the whole region east of Ajdabiya in a bid to save the throne of “King of kings of Africa” for which he has been lavishly buying allegiance since 2008. That is why he concentrated so much military power and violence on trying to seize Misrata, the key rebel-held city in western Libya that prevented him from de facto partitioning the country. And that is why insurgents have clung obstinately to Misrata despite the heavy violence inflicted upon them, even though they had the option of being evacuated by sea with the rest of the city's inhabitants, like the thousands of migrants and wounded who were moved out of the city in this way.

The early propaganda accusations against the insurgents alleging that they were carrying out a plan to partition the country have been thoroughly disproved by their relentlessness in fighting for the liberation of their country's whole territory from Gaddafi's dictatorship. This is happening despite the very high cost for them due to the wide disproportion between their ground forces and those of the regime—a disproportion in armored vehicles, artillery, missiles, and trained combatants that is only partially offset by NATO's intervention. Military correspondents reporting from the various fronts of the Libyan ground war emphasize both the poorly-armed, poorly-trained, amateurish and chaotic character of the insurgents' forces and the amazing dedication of a large number of civilians turned into fighters for the liberation of their whole country. This dedication explains the rebels' determination to continue fighting

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against such heavy odds, confronting the well-equipped and well-trained forces that are generously paid by Gaddafi's regime.

The crucial questions are then: why is NATO conducting an aerial campaign in Libya that is low-key not only in comparison with the air component of the war to grab similarly oil-rich Iraq, but even compared to the air war for economically unimportant Kosovo? And why is the Alliance at the same time refraining from providing the insurgents with the weaponry they have consistently and insistently requested? On the face of it, there are two striking paradoxes at play here.

The first paradox is that in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the US-led wars emphasized the "nationalization" of the conflict (in the spirit of the "Vietnamization" that preceded the US withdrawal in 1973). In Libya, with local forces begging NATO to provide the weapons they need and assuring that with adequate armament they could finish the job of liberating their country very soon, NATO refuses to arm them—a fact that the limited delivery of weapons by France on the Western front does not alter substantially.

This is despite the fact that, contrary to the Afghans, the insurgents are willing and potentially able to pay for whatever weapons would be delivered to them. As everyone knows, it is not in the tradition of Western merchants of death to turn up their nose at such juicy sales opportunities. They all competed so zealously to sell weapons to Gaddafi in recent years that they managed to strike deals with him for close to one billion dollars between the end of 2004, when their governments lifted their embargo on Libya, and the end of 2009. This included cluster bombs, sold by a Spanish firm, which Gaddafi did not hesitate to use against his own people.

The logical corollary of NATO's refusal to arm the insurgents would have been its waging a very intensive war campaign to compensate for the weakness on the ground of those it purports to support. And yet—second paradox—NATO's Libya air campaign pales in comparison with the Kosovo one, not to mention other US-led aerial operations in recent times. This fact is strongly resented by the Libyan insurgency, as Western correspondents have reported since the early days of NATO's air war. As C.J. Chivers related on July 24 on the New York Times' "At War" blog, the rebels' frustration has actually kept growing:

"One of the consistent experiences of reporting alongside opposition fighters in Libya is feeling the delineation between what the rank and file have to say of the NATO bombing campaign and the statements of the officials in the Transitional National Council [TNC], the de facto rebel authority. Officially, the rebel leadership cannot thank the pilots flying overhead enough. The political figures of the TNC are given to vanilla declarations of full support and gratitude for the work of NATO, whose leaders they clearly are wary of offending.

"Those closer to the fighting or who live in harm's way, however, have a richer take. They, too, express gratitude for NATO's early work in the war, when Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's forces were stopped by airstrikes from overrunning the rebels in the east and crushing the uprising in Benghazi. But they also express deep and sometimes agonized frustration at the pace and target selection of the air support, and talk often of what they perceive to be NATO half-stepping and incompetence."

Could it be that NATO, which blithely side-stepped the UN Security Council (UNSC) in waging its air war against the Serbian Milosevic regime in 1999, suddenly converted to the observance of the rule of law in international affairs? Hardly. Is it then that NATO feels compelled to stick to the letter of UNSC resolution 1973, which authorized the air campaign over Libya? Only a fool would believe that. Both the letter and the spirit of that resolution have been largely violated by NATO's campaign, which went way beyond "all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack." It included a high proportion of raids on Tripoli and other regime-held territories, thus increasing the risk and extent of the "collateral damage" that NATO inflicts upon the civilians it is purporting to protect.

The "strict implementation of the arms embargo" called for in the UNSC resolution is definitely not what is preventing NATO powers from arming the rebellion. Had the intentions of these powers been to deliver significant weapons to the rebels, neither Moscow's nor Beijing's vetoes could have prevented the US and its allies from doing what they wished, as they did in the Balkans in 1999 and again in Iraq in 2003. Likewise if NATO is not intervening on the ground, this is definitely not in observance of the UNSC resolution's exclusion of "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." It is principally because the rebels themselves have been adamant about rejecting a ground intervention. A billboard in Benghazi's Tahrir Square, the photo of which can be seen on Palestinian journalist Dima Khatib's blog, pointedly explains: "No to foreign intervention on our soil, Yes to arming the rebels."

A Mutual Distrust

The distrust is plainly mutual. The Western powers' practical attitude toward the Libyan rebels stands in sharp contrast with their attitude toward the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) prior to and during the 1999 war, or their attitude toward the Northern Alliance prior to and during their bombing of Afghanistan starting in October 2001. Witness the permanent Islamophobic emphasis in the Western media on the role of "Islamists" in the Libyan rebellion given as a pretext for not supplying the rebels with weapons, and compare it with their complacency about the presence of similar groups among Kosovar forces, not to mention the fact that the Afghan Northern Alliance (whose real local name is United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) is overwhelmingly composed of groups upholding shades of fundamentalism that are only slightly less extreme than the Taliban's own brand. The Western media hypocritically denounces Islamic fundamentalists when they are anti-Western and yet remain very circumspect about the most fundamentalist state on earth and the main worldwide sponsor of the most reactionary brands of Islamic fundamentalism, namely the Saudi kingdom.

The Western media were never worried about the heterogeneity of the Afghan forces regrouped in the Northern Alliance, to which they handed power in Afghanistan. And yet in 1992—after defeating the Najibullah regime which had been propped up by Moscow until the Soviet Union's demise at the end of the previous year—the very same components of the Northern Alliance had turned Afghanistan into a chaotic battlefield that constituted a Hobbesian "war of all against all." The "Islamic State of Afghanistan" proved such a bloody mess that the Taliban won a relatively easy victory in 1996. Of course, no such concerns were haunting Washington when it decided to topple the Taliban by the joint action of Northern Alliance troops and its air power—with an average of 85 strike sorties per day during 76 days from the beginning of operations in October until 23 December 2001 (i.e., 50 percent more than the average over Libya).

The paradoxical character of Western intervention in Libya has been underlined by various observers who saw its rationale as centered around securing control over post-Gaddafi Libya. Many sympathizers of the Libyan insurrection—some of them, myself included, expressing understanding for the fact that Benghazi asked "the devil" for help against a massacre foretold—warned the rebels from day one against portraying this devil as an angel on that occasion, and against fostering illusions about the Western powers' real motives. Such early suspicions were soon confirmed by the evolution of the situation in Libya, to the point that there is now widespread conviction in Arab anti-Western circles that NATO is deliberately prolonging the war and hence the Gaddafi regime's existence. This conviction was clearly articulated by Munir Shafiq, a former leader of a Maoist current in Yasser Arafat's Fatah and the general coordinator of the Islamic-Nationalist Congress (an umbrella organization for a variety of parties and personalities, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Hezbollah), in a column on Aljazeera.net (4 July, in Arabic):

"No one can understand the reason why NATO's airplanes are focused on bombing positions in Tripoli that are almost decoys, while they let missile batteries, artillery and military vehicles bomb Misrata as well as other towns.

They even let columns of Gaddafi's forces move around in the open without attacking them. Where then is the protection of civilians, and where is the assistance to the people in getting rid of Gaddafi?

"America and NATO's position is flagrant in conspiring against the people's revolution in Libya and maintaining Gaddafi's forces in activity until they manage to control the TNC and maybe also some field leaders. They would only then topple Gaddafi, as they are conspiring against the people, the revolution and Libya's future."

Such a strong suspicion echoes a feeling expressed among the Libyan rebels themselves, as illustrated by the statement of one of their local leaders to the Beirut daily Al-Akhbar (2 June):

"According to Abu-Bakr al-Farjani, the spokesman for the local council of the city of Sirt, which adheres to the oppositional TNC, NATO itself is progressing slowly in its military operations against Gaddafi's brigades in order to maintain him longer in power, and to increase thereby the price the opposition can be requested to pay to world powers and to the major companies that stand behind them."

NATO's Plans for Libya

These are not phantasmagorical figments of some Middle Eastern inclination toward conspiracy theory. They correspond to real facts on the ground, such as the shifting location of NATO strikes in Libya as analyzed by Tom Dale in The Guardian online (4 July). And above all they correspond to an all too true "conspiracy" by NATO powers about Libya's future. The plan was revealed by Andrew Mitchell, the UK international development secretary, on 28 June: a 50-page "stabilisation document" devised by a UK-led international "stabilisation response team" (involving Turkey) designs a post-Gaddafi scenario on the assumption that the King of kings will step down or be removed. This is because, despite repeated Western attempts to convince the TNC to cut a deal with Gaddafi himself as has been regularly leaked to the media over the last months, the TNC has made it clear that the removal from power of Gaddafi along with his sons was non-negotiable for the Libyan rebellion. Even the prospect of giving Gaddafi a comfortable retirement in Libya, which was tentatively and timidly evoked by the TNC under Western pressure, was quickly withdrawn due to the uproar it created in rebel ranks.

A key protagonist of Western attempts to cut a deal with Gaddafi's inner circle is his son, Saif al-Islam, the man who bought himself a PhD (on civil society and democratization) from the London School of Economics and procured visits and advice from Richard Perle, Anthony Giddens, Francis Fukuyama, Bernard Lewis, Benjamin Barber and Joseph Nye, among others, in order to "enhance the profile of Libya and Muammar Qadhafi." Saif told the Algerian daily Al-Khabar (11 July, in Arabic) that the French government, despite its official posture on Libya, negotiated with Tripoli:

"We are holding now negotiations with Paris, we have contacts with France. The French told us that the TNC is subordinate to them; they even told us that if they reached an agreement with us in Tripoli, they would impose a ceasefire on the council. ... I say, if France wants to sell "Rafale" planes, if they want to conclude oil deals, if they want their firms to come back, they need to talk with the legitimate Libyan government and with the Libyan people, through peaceful and official channels."

The King of kings, for his part, shows no readiness to oblige. He reiterated on 23 July his harsh criticism of the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples for having overthrown their own dictators. In any event, the NATO UK-led blueprint is based on the scenario of a "ceasefire between the regime and the rebels," meaning that the regime's apparatuses and barons will remain in place.

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The overarching concern of the UK-led NATO roadmap is to avoid a repetition of the catastrophic US-led handling of the situation in post-invasion Iraq. There, the Bush administration was confronted with a choice between co-opting the bulk of the Ba'athist state and dismantling it wholesale. It opted for the latter option advocated by Ahmed Chalabi and the neocons with their crackpot blueprint for a US minimalist client-state in Iraq. Consequently, the new Libyan roadmap is inspired by the CIA-sponsored scenario that was discarded in Iraq. As Mitchell explained, it is based on "the recommendation that Libya should not follow the Iraqi example of disbanding the army, which has been seen by some officials as a strategic mistake that helped fuel the insurgency in the sensitive and volatile circumstances after Saddam Hussein's overthrow."

This same concern was impressed upon the TNC by British foreign secretary William Hague the day after he visited Benghazi on 5 June.

"No de-Baathification, so certainly (the rebels are) learning from that," said Hague. "They now need to publicize that more effectively, to be able to convince members of the current regime that this is something that would work."

The same concern is dictating the Western powers' attitude toward the revolutionary upheaval in Syria. Their leverage in Libya is much more powerful, however. Mitchell's depiction of the "strong input" of NATO powers and their allies in managing post-Gaddafi Libya "short of "boots on the ground" is so hilarious that one wonders whether he wasn't being tongue-in-cheek:

"The EU, NATO and the UN would take the lead on issues of security and justice; Australia, Turkey and the UN would help with basic services; Turkey, the US and the international financial institutions would lead on the economy." But, added Mitchell: "It is incredibly important that the whole of this process is Libyan-owned. This has been done as a service to the Libyan people."

This plan A does not go without a plan B, indicating Western powers' lack of faith in the likelihood of a post-Gaddafi "orderly transition" (to borrow the phrase that was repeated like an incantation by the Obama administration about Egypt). Reporting on the UK-led plan, the Wall Street Journal revealed (29 June) that UN officials are preparing "contingency plans" including "the deployment of an armed, multinational force" that "would likely be comprised of troops from regional nations such as Turkey, Jordan and perhaps from African Union nations." One of the advocates of such a deployment is unsurprisingly one of the Western leaders most hostile to the Libyan rebels, Gen. Carter Ham, the present commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM). He shares this attitude with the Algerian military to whom he paid a visit in early June, warning against the risk that arms circulating in Libya could fall into the hands of al-Qaeda. (Another factor in Algiers' hostile attitude is probably the Amazigh emancipation in Western Libya.)

It did not take the Libyan TNC long to abide by NATO's instructions and produce its own version of the NATO roadmap, obviously designed in such a way as to satisfy the Western obsession with "the Iraqi example." A copy of this 70-page Libyan blueprint was leaked to the London Times, which published a summary on 8 August. It describes such implausibly detailed figures that its authors can only be suspected of trying to please their NATO overlords:

"It claims 800 serving Gaddafi government security officials have been recruited covertly to the rebel cause and are ready to form the "backbone" of a new security apparatus.... The documents claim that the rebel groups in Tripoli and surrounding areas have 8660 supporters, including 3255 in the Gaddafi army. A mass defection by high-ranking officials is considered highly likely, with 70 percent of them judged to support the regime out of fear alone."

Dissension in Opposition Ranks

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The comment by the Times shows skepticism about the TNC's regime-cooptation scenario: "This is likely to prove not only risky, but controversial, with many rebel fighters determined to sweep away all vestiges of the regime." As the Wall Street Journal had noted in its reporting on the UK-led roadmap:

"Many rebel brigades have evolved into militias—some of which resent taking orders from or working alongside those who held military or security positions in Col. Gadhafi's regime and later switched sides to join the rebellion that erupted in February. Some influential rebel leaders have called for purging regime loyalists from any future force and giving priority to those who fought against Col. Gadhafi."

Rebel determination to purge those who took the side of Gaddafi against the insurrection is actually the key to understanding NATO's paradoxical behavior described above. NATO powers do not want the rebels to liberate Tripoli by their own means, as the London *Economist* stated bluntly (16 June):

"The hope among Western governments is that the rebels will not capture Tripoli after a headlong advance from the east, with the attendant risks of retribution being inflicted on Qaddafi loyalists en route. Rather, the preference is for the regime to implode from within and for the people of Tripoli to rise up to remove the colonel—an eventuality widely reckoned, in Western government circles, to be getting close."

Tom Dale has commented on this NATO preference for an "implosion from within":

"But why would the western powers prefer a coup by Gaddafi's inner circle to victory by the rebel army? Such a coup would imply a negotiated settlement between the elements of the old regime still around Gaddafi, and the rebel leadership—which itself incorporates many ex-regime figures. Western governments want stability and influence, and they see the figures of the old regime, minus the Gaddafi family, as the best guarantors of that."

This last assertion should be qualified. Take Major Gen. Abdul-Fattah Younis, one of the key figures of the Gaddafi regime who defected to the rebellion a few days after it started, for instance. A military commander of the Libyan rebellion who was recently assassinated, he had been a vocal critic of NATO's performance. And he developed a very antagonistic relationship with CIA asset Col. Khalifa Haftar (sometimes spelled Hifter) who, after living in exile for close to a quarter of a century, mostly in the US and on the CIA payroll, returned to Libya and was given a high ranking military position by the TNC under Washington's pressure. The man was loathed by many in the Libyan opposition. As journalist Shashank Bengali explained on the Real News Network (14 April):

"There's some concern here that Hifter's long time in the US, his alleged ties to the CIA and other US officials, make him a bit of a controversial figure for Libyans, who really feel this is a homegrown uprising. They want foreign support in the forms of weapons and recognition for the Libyan opposition government. So they also want this to be not a rebellion that's overtaken by an outside force such as the CIA."

The hostility between Younis and Haftar led some to believe that the assassination of the former was designed by the CIA in order to clear the way for the latter. However, Younis was not replaced by Haftar but by another early defector from Gaddafi's regime, Gen. Suleiman Mahmoud, commander of the Eastern province based in Tobruk prior to his defection. In fact, conditions do not seem to be favorable to the men with the strongest foreign links, as comments on the dissolution of the provisional Cabinet by the TNC in the wake of Younis' assassination indicate:

"The reshuffling also seemed to represent an effort by interest groups within the rebel movement, including homegrown leaders who helped start the uprising, to assert their power by sidelining leaders who had returned from exile and held key posts. For months, there had been complaints that cabinet members were unknown to most Libyans, spending most of their time abroad — especially in Qatar, the country that has emerged as the rebels' most

enthusiastic patron.

"A rebel spokesman said that Mr. [Mahmoud] Jibril [the neoliberal economist appointed by the TNC to head its Cabinet, after having presided over the Gaddafi regime's neoliberal reforms from 2007 until the uprising], who has rarely been seen in Benghazi, would be required to start spending more time in Libya."

A plausible account of Abdul-Fattah Younis' assassination was given by his collaborator, Mohammed Agoury, who attributed the killing to members of the February 17 Martyrs Brigade. (According to another source, the perpetrators belong to an Islamic group calling itself the Abu Ubaidah Ibn al-Jarrah Brigade.) Agoury's testimony provides a glimpse of the complex and heterogeneous composition of the rebellion:

"The February 17 Martyrs Brigade is a group made up of hundreds of civilians who took up arms to join the rebellion. Their fighters participate in the front-line battles with Gadhafi's forces, but also act as a semi-official internal security force for the opposition. Some of its leadership comes from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an Islamic militant group that waged a campaign of violence against Gaddafi's regime in the 1990s. ... "They don't trust anyone who was with Gaddafi's regime, they wanted revenge," said Agoury."

Another revealing event showing the heterogeneity in opposition ranks was the "Conference for National Dialogue" held in Benghazi on 28 July. It was attended by 350 participants including members of the same February 17 Martyrs Brigade and former members of the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Brotherhood itself denied any connection with the conference. The participants emphasized Libya's unity, its Islamic character, and the necessity of an encompassing national dialogue, while TNC member Al-Amin Belhaj stated that although Gaddafi and his sons could not stay in power, they could remain in Libya under protection. Apparently, some of the participants had contacts with Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, a fact that fits well with the latter's recent declarations to the *New York Times*.

"I released [Libyan Islamists] from prison, I know them personally, they are my friends," he said, though he added that he considered their release "of course a mistake" because of their role in the revolt.

A demonstration took place outside the hotel where the conference was held. Aljazeera.net's report shows a young man holding a placard saying in the name of the 17 February Revolution's Youth: "The National Conference only represents itself." The demonstrators stressed their rejection of any dialogue with Saif al-Islam and his collaborators. They accused the conference organizers of resorting to militias in order to seize power before Libya's liberation is completed. Naima Djibril, a jurist and member of the Benghazi "committee for the support of women's participation in decision-making," complained to the website of the exclusion of women from the conference.

Further details of the TNC's blueprint, as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* (12 August), show a reassuring acknowledgement of the complexity of the Libyan situation and plans to tackle it in a democratic way:

"The blueprint acknowledges that the leadership in Benghazi doesn't yet have official backing from regions still under Col. Gaddafi's control, setting out a process to fill 25 empty posts intended to represent those areas on the 65-seat body. Under the plan, current members of the council would be proscribed from running in the first two rounds of national elections and accepting political appointments in those governments....According to the document, an expanded National Transitional Council "including new representatives from Gaddafi-held areas" would govern for eight months after Col. Gaddafi's fall, during which time elections would be held to select a constitutional committee and choose a 200-member interim national congress. District representation in the congress would be divvied up based on a 2010 population census. The congress would govern for an interim period of less than a year, during which time a new draft constitution would be voted on in a national referendum and the new permanent

government of Libya would be elected in line with the parameters laid out in that constitution."

One can only hope that reality will match the blueprint. But the odds are against the smooth implementation of this scheme given the extraordinary tangle of tribal, ethnic and political forces that constitute Libyan society that is just coming out of more than four decades of one of the craziest dictatorial rules in modern history. The recently published provisional constitution based on the above-mentioned blueprint is already contested in Benghazi, and the TNC is accused of working behind closed doors. The key difference between the Libyan political tumult and the situation that prevails in Egypt is that the opposition and the regime are territorially separated in Libya, and that the ruling family has been dismissed in Cairo but not yet in Tripoli. As in Egypt, the political battle rages on between various groups in the opposition, some of them, especially among Islamic forces, willing to compromise with the regime's institutions, while others, especially among the youth, reject this perspective and want a radical transformation of their country. Another major difference is the absence in Libya of the role of the workers' movement which is very important in the Egyptian process. (However, Kamal Abu-Aita, the president of the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade-Unions, told me that a similar independent federation was recently founded in Benghazi.)

The situation in Libyaâ€”as in Tunisia and Egypt and all the other countries of the Middle East where the present revolutionary process is unfoldingâ€”is only at the beginning of a protracted and tumultuous course of development. This is the normal destiny of revolutionary upheavals. Western powers will have much difficulty controlling the process. They don't have troops on the groundâ€”let alone the fact that they failed anyway to control the situation in countries where their forces are deployed, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The process of peoples' liberation and self-determination is convoluted, and can well go through ugly phases. But without this process and the readiness to pay the inherent cost, which may prove heavy indeed, the whole world would still live under absolutist regimes.

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