

ARGUMENT

NATO Killed Civilians in Libya. It's Time to Admit It.

The alliance bombing campaign had a devastating toll—but, a decade after the war, leaders have still not taken responsibility.

By **Joe Dyke**

MARCH 20, 2021, 6:00 AM

Attia al-Juwaili may never know which country's laser-guided bomb

killed his young daughter. It could be a British, French, or American pilot who struck, but until he finds out, his family's hopes for justice are forever on hold.

It has been 10 years since the NATO-led coalition dropped the first bombs targeting Libyan strongman Muammar al-Qaddafi's forces—turning the tide in Libya's civil war and playing a critical role in bringing down the dictator. The merits of that intervention have been long debated, with foreign meddlers and local rivals and extremists thriving in the vacuum ever since.

But there was a more direct cost. In a war fought expressly to protect civilians, NATO's airstrikes inadvertently killed dozens. New research by the civilian casualty monitoring watchdog Airwars, where I am the senior investigator, lays out for the first time the estimated number of civilians killed by all parties to the 2011 war—including both Qaddafi forces and Libyan rebels. Almost none of the families left behind have received compensation or an apology.

While NATO insists it took steps to avoid killing civilians, when there were casualty allegations it had limited mechanisms to assess on the ground, with one former official saying they “really had no idea.”

And those seeking an apology have instead found themselves trapped in a nightmare in which NATO itself does not make condolence payments but insists accountability must be sought from individual nations. Yet, even a decade on, countries including the United Kingdom, France, and the United States still refuse to accept public responsibility for any harm they caused.

A family photo of Arwa al-Juwaili taken before she died in a NATO airstrike in the village of Majer, Libya, on Aug. 8, 2011. COURTESY OF ATIA AL-JUWAILI, HER FATHER.

Juwaili's family and a few others had sought refuge in the village of Majer in northern Libya a few weeks before the deadly strike, after fleeing the encroaching ground war between Qaddafi's forces and NATO-backed rebels.

It was Ramadan, so prayers lasted late into the evening. Afterward, the women and children went inside, while the men sat in the August heat chatting.

"Then everything was black, we couldn't see anything. After the smoke subsided it was clear the second floor was destroyed," Juwaili told *Foreign Policy*.

The men rushed forward, searching through the rubble for survivors. Fifteen minutes later, another strike killed many of the rescuers.

Juwaili hunted frantically for his 2-year-old daughter, Arwa, eventually finding her lifeless under the rubble. "Thank God her body was not ripped apart," he said.

The [United Nations](#) later concluded 34 civilians died at Majer that night, including Arwa. NATO called the site a command and control node for Qaddafi's forces. The residents denied this, and U.N. investigators found no evidence of military activity.

"My message to NATO is that yes, mistakes happen, but you need to correct such mistakes," Juwaili said. "I feel that we were treated as if we were nothing and they did not look back. I hope when Libya is back on its feet, we get justice."

NATO's seven-month intervention in Libya in 2011 was ostensibly carried out to protect civilians.

Qaddafi had [brutally crushed](#) an Arab Spring rebellion against his four-decade rule and was closing in fast on Benghazi, the last bastion of the uprising. The U.N., fearing a new Srebrenica, [voted to intervene](#) to protect civilians.

NATO led a subsequent international bombing campaign, with the U.S.-dominated alliance claiming to take significant steps to avoid killing civilians—employing rigorous target monitoring and delayed-fuse weapons. At the end of the war, its head Anders Fogh Rasmussen [boasted](#) of "no confirmed civilian casualties caused by NATO."

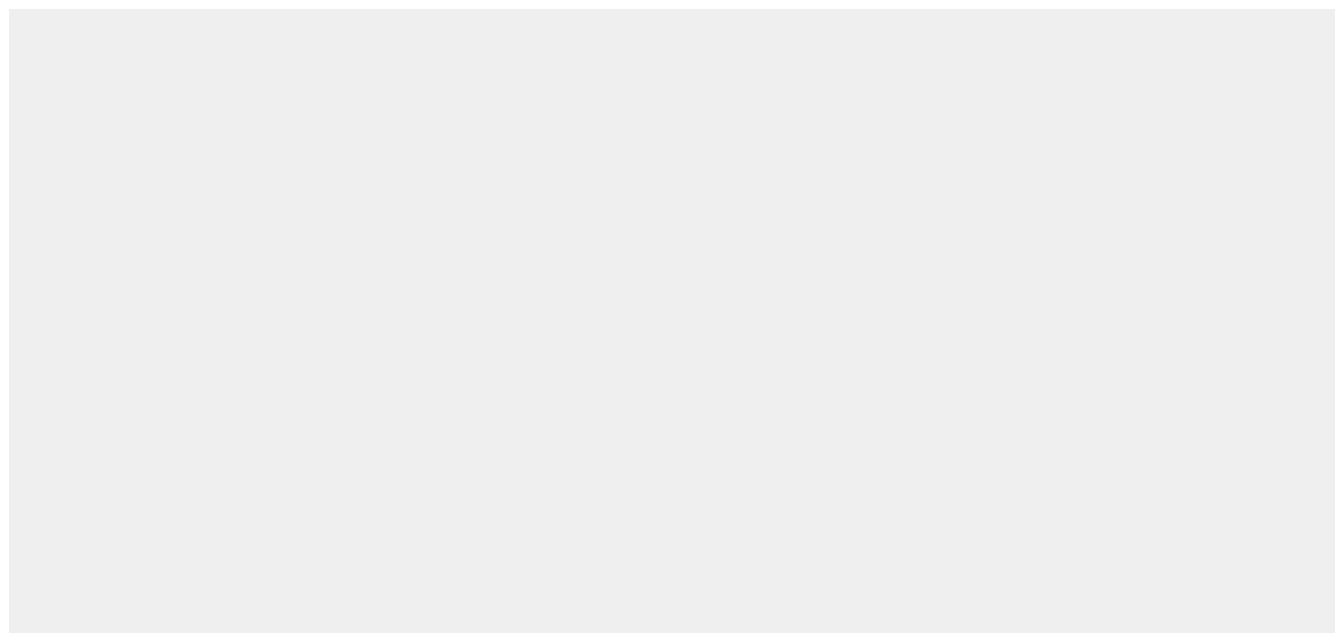
Human rights groups and U.N. investigators on the ground unearthed a more complicated story. They found multiple cases of civilian harm, with a [U.N. commission](#) concluding that while NATO fought a "highly precise campaign with a demonstrable determination to avoid civilian casualties," the coalition had killed at least 60 civilians in the 20 events the commission investigated.

New research from [Airwars](#) concludes that this number could be higher still. Using hyperlocal open-source material to assess for the first time the entirety of reported civilian harm by all parties during the 2011 war, it found NATO strikes resulted in between 223 and 403 likely civilian deaths in the 212 events of concern reviewed.

View Airwars' interactive map of civilian fatalities in 2011 [here](#).

This paled in comparison to the killings by Qaddafi's forces; according to local communities, they were responsible for between 869 and 1,999 civilian deaths. And rebel actions resulted in between 50 and 113 fatalities.

The real Qaddafi and rebel numbers are likely higher still; documentation of NATO strikes was more comprehensive at the time, and much online social and local media from 2011 has disappeared.



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Few of those killed by Qaddafi's forces were struck by airstrikes or artillery, likely due to NATO imposing a no-fly zone and taking out the regime's heavy weapons.

Instead, violence had spiked at the beginning of the uprising—with security forces indiscriminately firing on protesters—and again in August as Qaddafi's forces lost the capital, Tripoli. They carried out a series of massacres, including reportedly using grenades to kill more than 60 prisoners packed into a warehouse.

Rebels also committed atrocities—killing at least 24 civilians while forcing all 48,000 residents of Tawergha to flee after accusing them of Qaddafi sympathies. Gabriel Farag, a man from the town, told *Foreign Policy* more than 100 men detained by rebel forces are still missing, including his brother. A decade later, Tawergha remains largely deserted.

Libyan authorities proved largely incapable or uninterested in pursuing post-conflict justice. The first post-Qaddafi government established a mechanism to compensate victims but shelved it as the country slid further into civil war in 2014, a former Libyan government official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Several of those interviewed for *Foreign Policy* said they received compensation from the government for damage to their homes—but no official condolences for loved ones killed.

After the U.N. investigation into the 2011 war, NATO carried out its own six-month internal review of alleged cases of civilian harm, retired British Army Maj. Gen. Rob Weighill, the Combined Joint Task Force head of operations during the conflict, said in an interview. On one or two occasions they found misfires, but for the other events, including the Majer attack that killed young Arwa, they concluded that their actions were justified.

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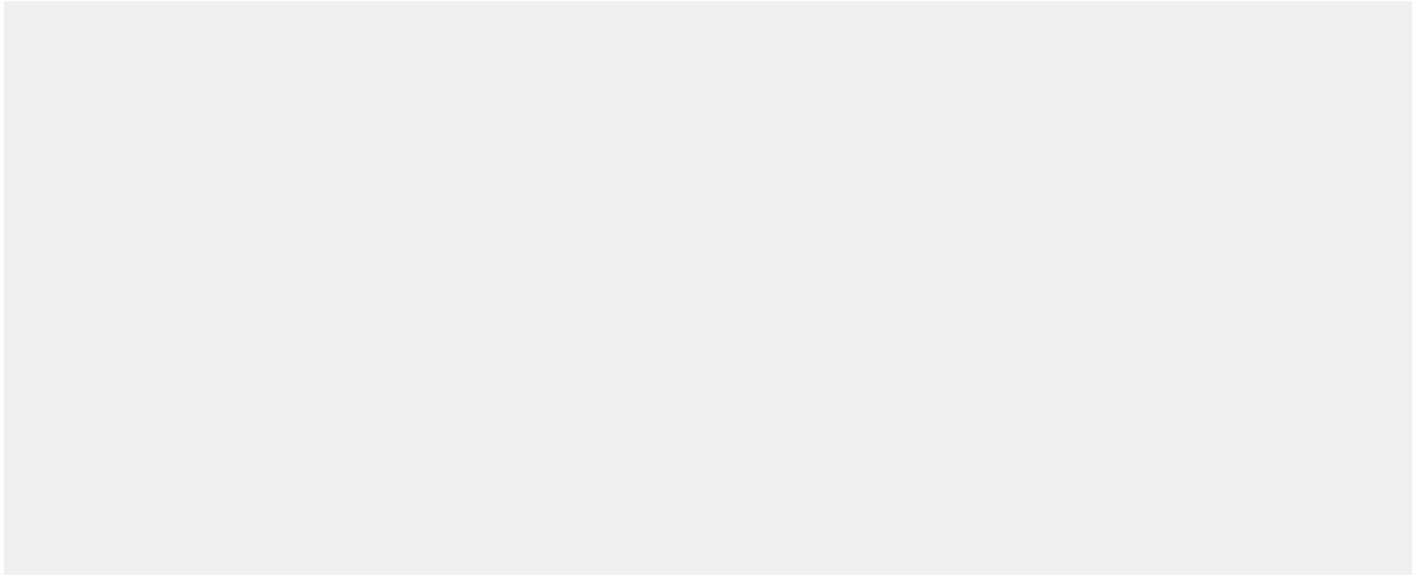
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He insisted that even the second NATO attack in Majer, which killed many of those rushing to rescue the injured, was justified. Such so-called double-tap strikes are often criticized for killing civilians. “It was still operating as a command and control bunker,” Weighill said. “We wouldn’t have hit it if it hadn’t been.”

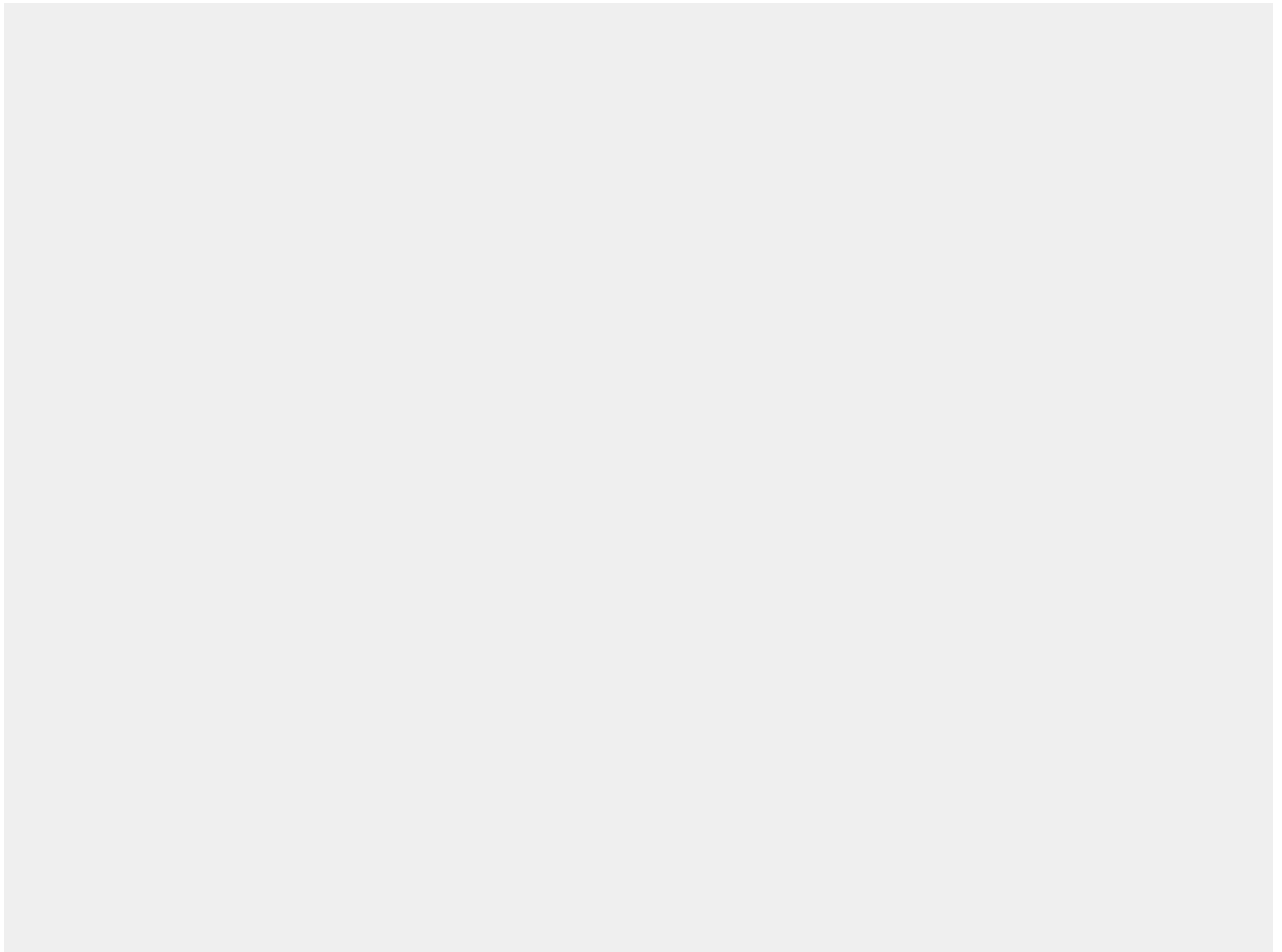
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Weighill described a conversation he had with the then-supreme allied commander Europe, U.S. Adm. James Stavridis, after the war. “He said, ‘What level of confidence do you have that you didn’t kill people?’” according to Weighill’s recollection. “And I said, ‘Zero level of confidence.’”

“We really had no idea,” he adds. “If you look me in the eye and say, ‘Were there any missions you undertook that edged outside the targeting directive or were not legal?’ I would say, ‘No.’ Now, did we kill civilians? Probably.”



A building struck by a NATO airstrike in the village of Majer on Aug. 8, 2011.



Photos of those killed at the site of a NATO airstrike in the village of Majer on Aug. 8, 2011. COURTESY OF ATTIAAL-JUWAILI

Long a military taboo, admitting to killing civilians has become more common in recent years.

The U.S. Department of Defense has led the way, admitting that its forces killed more than 1,300 civilians in the U.S.-led coalition campaign against the Islamic State—though watchdogs such as Airwars estimate the real number to be far higher.

Other key allies remain in denial. The U.K. has admitted to just one civilian fatality in six years of bombing the Islamic State, and France none.

NATO itself now has a dedicated Civilian Casualty Investigation and Mitigation Team for Afghanistan. Mark Goodwin-Hudson—who as a lieutenant colonel in the British Army headed that team in 2016 and is now a consultant for the Center for Civilians in Conflict—said it was not just morally right but made military sense to compensate families.

“In terms of winning the war, you have got to admit mistakes, particularly in the case of committing civilian harm and appropriate reparations,” he said. “Especially in contexts where you are meant to be fighting for hearts and minds.”

In theory, international coalitions such as NATO are about collective responsibility. Yet for the civilians they harm it often feels like collective evasion.

But victims of NATO strikes in Libya find themselves caught in a bind. To seek an apology, they have to know which individual country carried out the strike, yet states still hide behind the anonymity of the coalition.

Eight NATO nations carried out airstrikes in Libya during 2011: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *Airwars* submitted Freedom of Information requests and press questions to each regarding individual strikes that reportedly killed civilians, including in Majer. Denmark and Norway provided partial information, while all others either did not respond, or declined to answer—citing collective responsibility.

The U.S. military said all questions should be answered by NATO. Current NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu did not respond to requests about specific incidents.

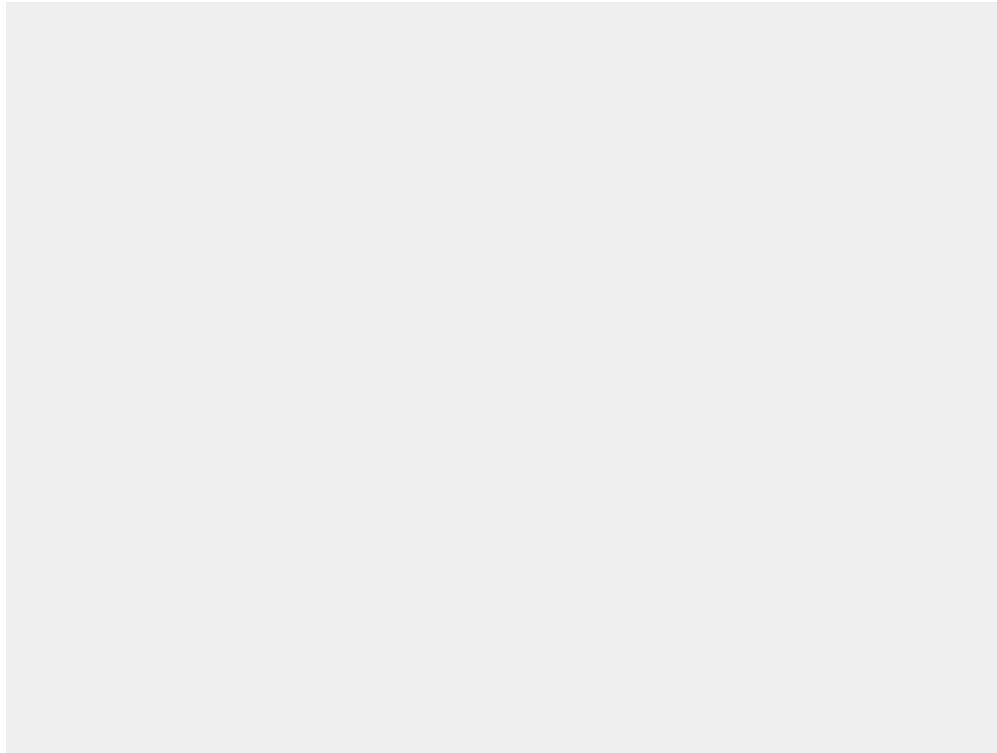
“NATO as an organisation does not make condolence or ex-gratia payments,” she wrote by email. “As a voluntary gesture to ease civilian suffering, NATO Allies have made payments to victims of military operations in Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq,” she added. “We hold no records of Allies making payments in relation to the Libya operation.”

Lungescu insisted that NATO had “no mandate” to investigate inside Libya after the 2011 conflict ended. “At the time, the Libyan authorities indicated that they were establishing their own mechanisms to review incidents which affected civilians. We offered to support that process but the Libyan authorities did not take NATO up on the offer,” she wrote.

In theory, international coalitions such as NATO are about collective responsibility. Yet for the civilians they harm it often feels like collective evasion.

When a 2015 Dutch airstrike killed dozens of civilians in Iraq, the Netherlands hid behind the anonymity of the anti-Islamic State coalition for four years, despite knowing within hours that it was culpable. When this was eventually exposed by investigative journalists, it nearly brought down the Dutch government. Crucially for survivors, the country has since agreed to an unprecedented 4 million euro fund (nearly \$5 million) to rebuild the town, and it has launched a review to improve military transparency and accountability for civilian harm.

Both NATO and individual member states almost certainly know which countries carried out which strikes that led to civilian harm in Libya. A new NATO "Protection of Civilians" handbook issued on March 11 notes the need "to prevent, identify, investigate, and track incidents of civilian casualties from [our] own actions, while also providing amends and post-harm assistance when civilians are harmed as a result of these operations." Yet a decade of silence on Libya suggests NATO has little real willingness to follow that path.



The Gharari family home after an airstrike in the Souq al-Jumaa region of Tripoli on June 19, 2011.

Some cases should have been simple to apologize for. At around 1 a.m. on June 19, 2011, a bomb hit the Gharari family home in Tripoli, killing five people. NATO immediately announced a "weapons system failure" that "caused the weapon not to hit the intended target, and reportedly resulted in a number of civilian casualties."

But an apology in English a continent away did not translate in the chaos of Libya's 2011 war. Angry neighbors spread rumors that the family had caused the strike by being Qaddafi sympathizers.

Mohammed al-Gharari, whose sister and her two children were among those killed, decided to fight for an apology and clear the family name. But he soon learned there was no clear route to justice.

Without knowing which nation dropped the bomb, he couldn't even ask for reparations or medical support for those injured in the NATO attack.

In desperation, he eventually traveled to Brussels, home to NATO headquarters. He paid a Belgian lawyer thousands of euros in a futile attempt to find out what the alliance knew about his family's tragedy—including which nation had killed them. The money is long gone, but that information remains classified. Yet as Weighill noted, the nation that conducted the strike which killed Gharari's family had internally admitted, almost immediately, that the operation "didn't go well."

Gharari is angry that he may never be allowed to know which nation is responsible, and he says they are hiding behind NATO anonymity. "This state has to assist the wounded and compensate them as soon as possible. Their admission will also clear my name," said Gharari, speaking recently from Libya.

"If there is any justice I will get my apology." ■

Joe Dyke is a senior investigator at the civilian casualty monitor Airwars. Twitter: [@joedyke](https://twitter.com/joedyke)

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<caption id="attachment_1038647" align="alignnone" width="1024" class="none mid_width_graphic_photo">interactive map of civilian fatalities in 2011 here." width="1024" height="480" /> View Airwars
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We really had no idea, he adds. If you look me in the eye and say, Were there any missions you undertook that edged outside the targeting directive or were not legal? I would say, No. Now, did we kill civilians? Probably.

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Yet a decade of silence on Libya suggests NATO has little real willingness to follow that path.



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 }

var oPageData = {"post_type":"post","post_id":"1038557","url":"/2021/03/20/nato-killed-civilians-in-libya-its-time-to-admit-it","env":"production"};
 var customAlertsLocal = {"wpNonce":"c0874a933a"};
 var fpUtilsLoc = {"isDev":"","redirectUri":"https://foreignpolicy.com/share_redirect/"};
 var pianoData = {"cache_group_nonce":"b7e3df4aa6","use_piano_environment":"production","userLevels":{"isReg":false,"isSub":false,"isInsider":false,"isPremium":false,"isIspyPlus":false,"isIPAccess":false}};
 var postDataPiano = ["Libya","Middle East and North Africa","NATO","War","article"];
 var hostURL = "foreignpolicy.com";
 var takeoverSettings = [];
 var chartbeatData = {"category_name":"Argument","author_list":"Joe Dyke"};
 var myFpAlertsLoc = {"isVIPEnv":"1"};
 var fpNativeAdData = [];
 var zMoatADVERTISER = {"moatPassback":"editorial"};
 var jetpackLazyImagesL10n = {"loading_warning":"Images are still loading. Please cancel your print and try again."};
 _stq = window._stq || [];
 _stq.push(['view', {v:'ext',j:1:l:10.3,blog:'162972146',post:'1038557',tz:'-5',srv:'foreignpolicy.com'}]);
 _stq.push(['clickTrackerInit', '162972146', '1038557']);
 /*<[CDATA[*] window.lightboxjs || function (c) { function g(b, d) { d && (d += (/?.test(d) ? "&": "?") + "Iv=1"); c[b] || function () { var i = window, h = document, j = b, g = h.location.protocol, l = "load", k = 0; (function () { function b() { a.P(1); a.w = 1; c[j] ("load") } c[j] = function () { function m() { m.id = e; return c[j].apply(m, arguments) } var b, e = ++k; b = this && this != i ? this.id
 */

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|| 0 : 0; (a.s = a.s || []).push([e, b, arguments]); m.then = function (b, c, h) { var d = a.fh[e] = a.fh[e] || [], j = a.eh[e] = a.eh[e] || [], f = a.ph[e] = a.ph[e] || []; b && d.push(b); c && j.push(c); h && f.push(h); return m }; return m }; var a = c[j]._ = {}; a.fh = {}; a.eh = {}; a.ph = {}; a.l = d ? d.replace(/^\/\//, (g == "https:" ? g : "http:") + "///") : d; a.p = { 0: +new Date }; a.P = function (b) { a.p[b] = new Date - a.p[0] }; a.w && b(); i.addEventListener ? i.addEventListener(l, b, !1) : i.attachEvent("on" + l, b); var q = function () { function b() { return ["<head></head><", c, ' onload="var d=', n, ";d.getElementsByTagName('head')[0].", d, "(d.", g, "('script')"., i, "=", a.l, "\"></", c, ">"].join("") } var c = "body", e = h[c]; if (!e) return setTimeout(q, 100); a.P(1); var d = "appendChild", g = "createElement", i = "src", k = h[g]("div"), l = k[d](h[g]("div")), f = h[g]("iframe"), n = "document", p; k.style.display = "none"; e.insertBefore(k, e.firstChild).id = o + "-" + j; f.frameBorder = "0"; f.id = o + "-frame-" + j; /MSIE[ ]+6/.test(navigator.userAgent) && (f[i] = "javascript:false"); f.allowTransparency = "true"; l[d](f); try { f.contentWindow[n].open() } catch (s) { a.domain = h.domain, p = "javascript:var d=" + n + ".open();d.domain=" + h.domain + ";;", f[i] = p + "void(0);" } try { var r = f.contentWindow[n]; r.write(b()); r.close() } catch (t) { f[i] = p + 'd.write("' + b().replace(/"/g, String.fromCharCode(92) + "'") + "');d.close();' } a.P(2) }; a.l && q() }(); c[b].lv = "1"; return c[b] } var o = "lightboxjs", k = window[o] = g(o); k.require = g; k.modules = c }({}); /*>*/ window.lightboxlib = lightboxjs.require("lightboxlib", "//www.lightboxcdn.com/vendor/044b8435-d6a0-427d-af56-ee8f6ae795a/lightbox.js?mb=" + (new Date().getTime()));
```