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Støre details effort for peace in Libya

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While Norwegian fighter jets were bombing Libya in the spring of 2011, Norway's foreign minister at the time got the son of the country's dictator Moammar Gadhafi on a phone line. Jonas Gahr Støre has now spoken with Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK) about the secret attempt at Libyan peace talks for the first time.



Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, shown here defending Norway's participation in the NATO bombing of Libya in August 2011, when he hoped the opposition's armed battle against the Gadhafi regime would soon end. Støre has now detailed, for the first time, Norway's attempts to strike a peace deal in Libya earlier that year. PHOTO: Utenriksdepartementet/Ministry of Foreign Affairs

"It wasn't exactly a heartfelt phone conversation," Støre told NRK in describing the direct contact he had with Gadhafi's son, Saif al-Islam. In all secrecy, Norway had launched into a phase of diplomacy aimed at settling differences between the Gadhafi regime and those leading public uprisings against it and the man who controlled Libya for many years.

NRK reported that Norwegian diplomats worked intensely both from Oslo and in other European cities in early 2011 to establish negotiations between Gadhafi's regime and its opposition. Støre involved himself personally, and later met a highly placed person from the regime in Oslo. It was during that meeting that phone contact was established with Gadhafi's son, who later was taken prisoner and tortured by opposition forces.

Diplomatic efforts in Tripoli also

Støre wanted to know whether there was any point in continuing attempts to reach a peace settlement. "I wanted to hear whether he (Saif al-Islam) understood what we were talking about and whether he could commit to following up whatever was negotiated," Støre told NRK.

Even though Gadhafi's son was clearly aware that Norway was taking part in NATO's UN-

sanctioned bombing of Libya, he was willing to speak with Norway's foreign minister, who in turn served Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg at the time. Stoltenberg later became NATO's secretary general.



Norway played an extremely active role in the bombing of Libya in the spring of 2011. Jonas Gahr Støre served as foreign minister in the former left-center government at the time that was led by the now-NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg. Both Støre and Stoltenberg have since been criticized over the bombing carried out by Norwegian F-16 fighter jets like this one taking off from Souda Air Base on Crete, bound for an attack on Libyan targets. PHOTO: Forsvaret/Lars Magne Hovtun

It was not a successful or reassuring conversation between Støre and Gadhafi's son. NRK reported that Saif al-Islam had also spoken with various Norwegian diplomats in Tripoli during the very week when the UN Security Council approved a resolution, in March 2011, that allowed the NATO bombing to proceed. The resolution opened up for use of "all necessary means" to protect Libyan civilians from their leader Gadhafi. In practice, that allowed the military intervention that ultimately led to regime change. Gadhafi was tracked down and taken prisoner himself later that year.

The conversations in Tripoli were revealed in last week's [report from a Norwegian commission that examined Norway's participation in the bombing of Libya](#). An unauthorized biography of Støre, who succeeded Stoltenberg as Labour Party leader and now heads the opposition in Norwegian Parliament, also revealed the diplomatic attempts in Tripoli, and [Støre has spoken about them earlier](#), but is now providing more details.

Dramatic departure from Libya

Støre said the Norwegian diplomats were flown into Libya with civilian aircraft, but suddenly found themselves in a city where bombing could begin at any time and all civilian flights were cancelled. The lives of Henrik Thune, Henrik Hovland and Jon Hanssen-Bauer were suddenly at stake, and they had to leave the country as soon possible. That made them dependent on the Gadhafi regime itself.

"We had to get these guys into a car through the contacts we had and drive westward towards Tunis," Støre recalled. "I breathed a sigh of relief when they got out of Libya and came home to Norway."

Negotiations continued through the spring despite all the bombing. It reached a climax on April 28, 2011 when delegations from both the Gadhafi regime and the opposition met for secret talks at a hotel in Oslo. Støre called those from the opposition "reliable and decent" people, indicating they did not include anyone from the Islamic extremist groups that have since grabbed power in what's now chaos and anarchy in Libya.

The two sides actually agreed on a document that could lead to a peaceful transition of power and allow for Gadhafi to withdraw. "There was an emotional mood, these were people

who knew one another and loved the same country," Støre told NRK, adding that he took part in what proved to be the last meeting between the two sides.

Støre said he began to realize by late May that the attempt at peace would not succeed. Gadhafi reportedly believed his military had made progress and he wouldn't back down, Støre said, "and I think that happened over the objections of his family's advice." Opposition forces were also poised for a military solution and it all ended with Gadhafi's seizure and lynching on October 20, 2011.

Fending off criticism over Libyan involvement

Norwegian politicians have since done a lot of soul-searching over whether it was correct for Norway to participate in the NATO bombing, where its fighter jets were extremely active. Both Stoltenberg's government and Støre himself have been questioned and criticized in the aftermath, which left Libya basically out of control and also a main channel for human smugglers sending migrants to Europe.

That may be why Støre, facing criticism again in the wake of last week's report, is now willing to discuss Norway's attempts at finding a peaceful solution to the Libyan crisis. Støre now wants to become Norway's next prime minister and is clearly eager to defend his record and role in the Libyan offensive.

Støre also told NRK that even though he had close contact with his US counterpart at the time, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Norway ultimately did not win support for its Libyan peace efforts from the White House and former US President Barack Obama. Neither France nor Great Britain contributed to the Norwegian peace initiative either.

"My impression is that there wasn't much at stake for them," Støre told NRK. "It was clear that Gadhafi would fall and they looked in another direction. I think that's one of the reasons that Libya became such a big tragedy."

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