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The secret talks that nearly saved Gaddafi

Exclusive: On the 10th anniversary of Nato’s Libya campaign, Norway’s former foreign minister reveals behind-the-scenes negotiations which sought to end the war, report **Joe Dyke** and **Imogen Piper**

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The famously erratic Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was refusing to leave the country, with negotiations around whether he could remain in the country but leave politics



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hundreds



were dead as government forces and **Nato**-backed rebels fought a brutal conflict, but in a hotel room 2,000 miles away the warring sides agreed a secret **deal** to end the war.

The confidential **Norwegian**-brokered talks – full details of which are being revealed exclusively by *The Independent* on the tenth anniversary of the Nato bombing campaign – were the closest the world came to a peaceful end to Libya's 2011 civil war.



In the end the talks fell apart and rebels, with Nato's support, ultimately captured and killed Gaddafi. More than 1,000 civilians were killed during the war, **according to new research** by the civilian casualty monitor Airwars.

In the decade since Libya has been embroiled in perpetual conflict, with the country eventually becoming the second largest base for Isis. This week an interim unity government was sworn in, the latest political attempt to stem violence in the country.

In his first interview with international media regarding the 2011 negotiations, the then Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Store, who brokered the deal, accused France and Britain of opposing a negotiated solution.

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Then UK prime minister David Cameron and French president Nicolas Sarkozy have long been accused in some quarters of seeking regime change at all costs, claims they deny.

"I felt that the mindset in London and Paris didn't have openings for really reflecting on the diplomatic option," Store told *The Independent*. "Were [France and Britain] willing to look at something beyond military solutions? The jury is still out.

"Had there been in the international community a willingness to pursue this track with some authority and dedication, I believe there could have been an opening to achieve a less dramatic outcome and avoid the collapse of the Libyan state."



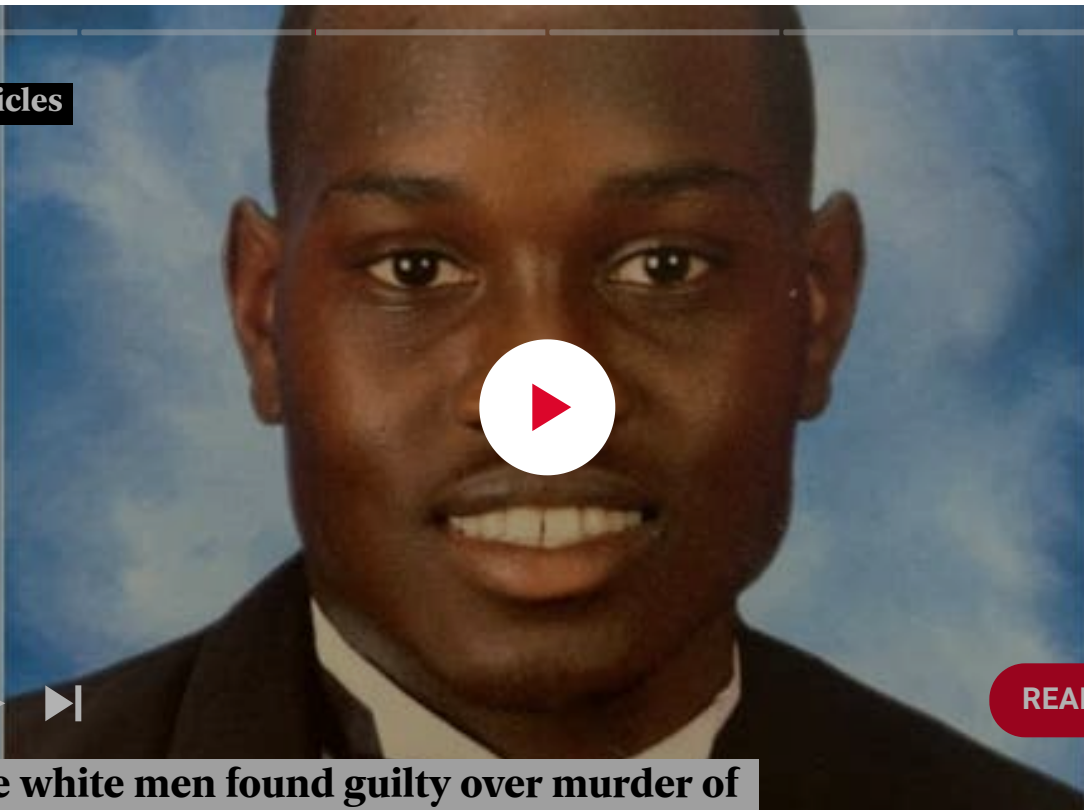
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thousands taking to the streets demanding an end to Gaddafi's rule.

Security forces cracked down brutally and Gaddafi promised to crush the "rats on the streets".

On 17 March 2011, the United Nations voted to intervene to stop Gaddafi killing his own people, with Nato aircraft flying more than 7,000 strike sorties against Libyan forces over the following seven months.

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But Gaddafi's allies were also quietly seeking a negotiated outcome. While publicly promising to crush the rebellion, Gaddafi's favoured and most prominent son Saif al-Islam invited top Norwegian officials to Tripoli to negotiate.



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Libyan rebels fire a rocket as they enter the northern city of Sirte, 10 October 2011
(EPA)

Norway became an active member of the Nato bombing campaign, eventually dropping nearly 600 bombs. But at the same time the country's prime minister Jens Stoltenberg, who is now Nato's secretary-general, asked foreign minister Store to continue the top secret talks, hosting them in Norway.

The country has a long history of quiet diplomacy in the Middle East, including brokering the 1993 Oslo Accords that saw mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

They were not the only ones attempting negotiation – the African Union tried to broker its own peace deal – but Norway achieved a breakthrough.

After weeks of back-and-forth talks, Store organised the first face-to-face meeting



Multiple attempts to reach Zeidan for this article failed. Ismail initially told *The Independent* he was willing to discuss the talks but did not reply to multiple follow-up messages.

Store said the atmosphere was “emotional – these were people who in front of us could share how they knew the same people and both cared about their country”.

Norwegian diplomats went back and forth, eventually hammering out a “comprehensive plan” to end the crisis. The first line stated: “Colonel Gaddafi has decided to leave power and step aside and to end the first phase of the revolution.”

Store even spoke to Saif al-Islam on the phone to confirm this plan had backing at the highest levels in Libya.

What would happen to Muammar Gaddafi, however, remained a key sticking point. The famously erratic leader was refusing to leave Libya, with negotiations around whether he could remain in the country but leave politics.



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Smoke rises in the sky after a Nato airstrike in Tripoli, 7 June 2011
(EPA)

“People very close to Gaddafi, people in the legal apparatus, in his family, supported what was on the table,” said Staale Wig, a Norwegian biographer of Store who first uncovered the existence of the negotiations years after the war. “But the final mile was for Gaddafi to say ‘I agree to move into exile’ or where he would live.”

Store himself accepts “we don’t know” if Gaddafi would have been willing to ultimately resign or if more extreme rebel groups on the ground would have accepted a deal, but said major western nations weren’t interested in a negotiated settlement.

He said they took the deal agreed in Oslo to the United States, France and Britain. In Libya the war had reached a stalemate, with relatively few civilians killed in May, June and July, new research shows.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, was reportedly keen but the other two nations weren’t interested, Store said.

“Had there been a will to do it ... one could have imagined some kind of ceasefire in the military campaign to allow diplomats to move in,” Store said.

“But the military operation had already lasted for eight weeks, the dynamic on the ground was changing and, frankly speaking, the will to rally behind such a process was not there.”

William Hague, UK foreign secretary at the time, declined to comment. David Cameron’s office did not respond but in his autobiography he denied seeking regime change, saying he “pushed and pushed” for a negotiated settlement but Gaddafi was unwilling.

After the 2011 war Libya slid into a new civil war, which lasted much of the last decade. Barack Obama later described the lack of post-conflict planning as the



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Store, who now leads Norway's opposition Labour Party, said the failure to take the 2011 negotiations seriously was made more tragic by the lost decade that followed it, in which the country became "a theatre for remote battles – other countries fighting it out to the last Libyan".

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