

Libya's Lawless Skies

Hundreds of civilians have been harmed by airstrikes in Libya since NATO's 2011 intervention - but no party ever accepts responsibility.

By [Samuel Oakford](#)

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In-depth Report: [NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA](#)

A new study of the security situation in Libya between 2012 and 2018 by Airwars and the New America Foundation has identified hundreds of civilians credibly reported killed and injured by domestic and international airstrikes - but with no accountability for those deaths from any belligerent.

In total at least 2,162 strikes were identified by Airwars during the nine month research project, based on local public reporting and official claims made between 2012-2018. At least 242 civilians likely died in these actions according to local communities, yet not one of the eight belligerents identified in the new study has ever conceded casualties from its actions - an unwelcome echo of NATO's 2011 Libya campaign, in which the alliance boasted at the time of causing zero civilian harm.

The new Libya findings were officially launched June 20th in Washington DC.

“Libyans have been living with significant security concerns in the years since NATO's 2011 intervention - though with little interest from the outside world,” said **Chris Woods**, the Director of Airwars. “A key way to better understand this neglected conflict is to understand what Libyans themselves are reporting - particularly when it comes to civilian harm.”

Monitoring

A small team of Airwars researchers - based in both the troubled nation and in Europe - poured over thousands of local Arabic-language reports dating from the years after dictator **Muammar Gaddafi** was deposed and killed in 2011.

A range of troubling patterns emerged, including intense urban bombardments; attacks on boats and ocean-going vessels; and the frequent killing of poor foreign workers and migrants alongside Libyans.

By far the most concerning trend was that of impunity among all parties to the conflict. In many respects, Libya offers a more lawless and uncontrolled version of long-criticised US counterterror operations in Somalia and Pakistan. In Libya a handful of countries now conduct strikes unilaterally - with some such as the UAE and France never choosing to declare their actions.

Research indicates that Libya has become a country where other nations and local actors

have few qualms about dropping explosive munitions from above - while never taking responsibility for their effects below. New America's report accompanying the Libya launch is aptly titled Lawless Skies.



Image of an alleged LNA airstrike in Benghazi on October 18th 2014 (via Alzarook_Nabbos on Twitter)

No accountability

NATO's intense Libya air campaign ended in 2011. But peace did not return to Libya with the death of long-standing dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Instead the North African nation has lurched from crisis to crisis, sliding into civil war in 2014. Even today Libya has two rival governments. Former US president **Barack Obama** has described his administration's failings over Libya as [his greatest foreign policy regret](#).

Funded by the Open Society Foundations, Airwars has partnered with the US think tank New America for the Libya project. New America pioneered the monitoring of CIA drone strikes in Pakistan in 2010, and brings a wealth of analytical expertise to the project. **Peter Bergen**, the Director of the International Security and Future of War Program at New America, said of the partnership:

"The two organizations believe that helping to document the largely forgotten war in Libya is a necessary public service."

The new project seeks to highlight ongoing security concerns for ordinary Libyans - while also helping to provide more reliable data on civilian harm for policymakers and investigators.

"An important feature of the conflict in Libya post-2011 has been the rise of airstrikes by multiple domestic and international belligerents," New America notes in its own report release June 20th. "At least four foreign countries and

three domestic Libyan factions are reported to have conducted air and drone strikes in Libya since 2012.”

Many of the world’s most fearsome air forces, including those of the US, the UAE and France – as well as Egypt – have bombed targets in Libya in recent years. Yet after six years and more than 2,100 airstrikes between them, no single actor has admitted to harming civilians in Libya from the air – a startling and troubling failure of accountability.

Some international powers don’t even acknowledge they are bombing Libya in the first place. The UAE [conducts drone and airstrikes from a ‘secret’ base in eastern Libya](#), deep inside the territory of one of the country’s two main warring factions. Yet no strikes are ever publicly declared – and no subsequent civilian harm acknowledged.

AFRICOM’s **Major Karl Wiest** told Airwars that

“With regards to the specific incidents you highlighted and asked our team to review, they are not assessed as credible with the information currently available.”

“One of the most notable lessons of our Libya research was the abundance of belligerents we had to deal with,” said Airwars investigator **Oliver Imhof**. “It was at times difficult to keep track of them all. It shows to what extent Libya institutionally has become a failed state after the 2011 revolution – even though the extent of the conflict is much less horrific than in Syria or Iraq.”

Problematic as international actions are in Libya, the majority of more than 2,000 airstrikes identified since 2012 were in fact carried out by local actors. The largest and most active Libyan air force is that of **Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar**’s Libyan National Army (LNA) – which according to its own reports has conducted more than 1,000 airstrikes in recent years.

With the country’s military assets divided after the fall of Gaddafi, a smaller number of strikes has also been carried out by the internationally recognized General National Assembly (GNA). Neither the LNA or GNA has ever been known to have acknowledged killing or injuring a single civilian.

Despite its lack of international recognition, the LNA is in fact far more transparent about its actions than most foreign militaries engaged in Libya. Most of its strikes were officially declared at the time via media and social media outlets. With the exception of the United States (which itself has declared more than 500 recent airstrikes in Libya), no other belligerent regularly reports on its actions.

The array of domestic and foreign actors – and often challenging local reporting of events – can at times be far more confusing than Airwars’ longstanding monitoring in Iraq or Syria.

“We have events in Derna, Benghazi and al Jufra Distract where multiple local sources claimed variously that Egypt, the UAE and sometimes France were involved,” said **Osama Mansour**, Airwars’ chief Libya researcher.

RT Arabic showing footage of an alleged Egyptian airstrike on Derna on February 15th 2015, reportedly leading to seven civilian deaths

Patterns of civilian harm

The ending of NATO's 2011 Libya campaign did lead to an initial lull in military actions by all parties. The number of alleged civilian casualty incidents tracked by Airwars was minimal through the end of 2013. However in 2014 – as the nation slipped deeper into chaos – local accounts and public reporting indicated at least 242 strikes – with the following year seeing 201 more strikes.

Yet as so-called Islamic State gained a foothold in Libya – and as the nation's two rival factions went to war – more than 1,000 airstrikes were reported in 2016. Since then, 536 separate strikes were monitored in 2017, and 121 have been recorded so far in 2018.

Several additional patterns have emerged during the monitoring of strikes. As seen elsewhere in the region, urban areas have often borne the brunt. Nearly a third of all monitored strikes took place in Sirte – largely related to the 2016 US campaign there targeting ISIS.

However, despite heavy bombardments of residential neighbourhoods by various actors in both Benghazi and Sirte, the number of reported civilian deaths in these urban locales is relatively low when compared to recent conflict modelling in Syria and Iraq. This pattern is not limited to urban airstrikes, and may have several explanations – including lower population densities, and possibly more limited public reporting in Libya.

“Notably, the airstrikes that did not result in casualties among civilians were often declared by militaries, whereas in the event of any casualties everyone kept mute,” noted Mansour.

#بنغازي | قصف سلاح الجو الليبي قبل قليل لاهداف تابعه لتنظيم الدوله #داعش بمنطقة شارع الشريف pic.twitter.com/Mj200CX67C

— (إمحمد بالريش (المرنقي) (@belreish) [September 24, 2015](#)

Heavy alleged LNA bombardment of residential neighbourhoods in Benghazi in 2015, reported via Twitter

Multiple actors

While American airstrikes in Libya often capture international attention, domestic actors are in fact responsible for most bombings. Airwars has monitored 1,122 strikes allegedly involving the LNA (Libyan National Army) – more than half of all actions documented by Airwars. These allegedly led to the deaths of between 95 and 172 civilians – the largest non-combatant death toll tied to any one belligerent.

The UN-recognised GNA (General National Assembly) has also reportedly conducted at least 68 strikes, leading to a minimum of between 7 and 9 civilian fatalities. However, a number of incidents that cite the GNA also accuse other belligerents, including the United States. Including such contested incidents, between 44 and 66 additional civilians deaths may in

fact be associated with GNA attacks.

In 2016, the Obama administration listed Sirte as an “area of active hostility,” thereby avoiding strict limitations and civilian protections imposed by the [2013 Presidential Policy Guidance](#). Hundreds of strikes followed in Sirte under Operation Odyssey Lighting, between August 1st and December 19th of that year.

US strikes have focused primarily on ISIS targets, though they have at times operated in support of the GNA. The US is the most transparent of all actors in Libya, generally announcing when it has carried out actions. AFRICOM officially declared 495 strikes during the Sirte campaign, with a further 15 strikes before and afterwards.

For those actions, researchers tracked between 6 and 13 likely civilian deaths – none of which have been acknowledged by the US. US aircraft may also be implicated in up to 14 additional events in which at least 34 more civilians reportedly died – though these claims have also been attributed by some local sources to the GNA.

AFRICOM’s Major Karl Wiest told Airwars that

“With regards to the specific incidents you highlighted and asked our team to review, they are not assessed as credible with the information currently available.”

Major Wiest added that the US command had also itself investigated two claimed civilian harm events in Libya, but had deemed them non-credible:

“From the Fall of 2016, the command has assessed two (2) recorded CIVCAS allegations related to operations in Libya. After thorough investigations, both claims were deemed not credible. In fact, the evidence gathered in one of the investigations strongly suggested that our adversaries in the region were simply lying about alleged civilian casualties in order to bolster their public perception. Evidence found at the time of the respective investigation to support this finding included our adversaries publishing photographs from another area of responsibility while claiming they were new CIVCAS incidents in Libya.”

AFRICOM declined to offer additional information when asked to identify the two events by date and location.

Additional state actors

Egypt meanwhile has launched an increasing number of strikes in Libya, often in the vicinity of a shared frontier. Strikes also take place on occasion in heavily populated areas. In February 2015, Egypt reported bombing alleged ISIS targets in Libya in response to the gruesome murder of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in the country. The attack, which took place in Derna, reportedly killed at least 7 civilians and injured at least 21, according to local accounts.

Amnesty [International later investigated the incident](#) and determined that “the Egyptian Air Force failed to take the necessary precautions” in launching the attack. According to local sources monitored by the Airwars/ New America project, Egypt has carried out at least 93

strikes in Libya, which have killed at least 13 civilians.

The Egyptian government only occasionally confirms its strikes, often after attacks in border areas where smuggling or terrorist activity is alleged. A reported strike on August 21st, 2017 is indicative: video posted on the Army Facebook page shows the destruction of what the military said were nine SUVs carrying weapons and explosives in the border area. On some occasions, such as an October 30th, 2017 strike in the Kufra district along the border, there are local reports that the targets hit are in fact civilian vehicles. However given the scarcity of information, it is at times hard to confirm such cases. The Egyptian military has itself not admitted to harming any civilians in Libya.

Libya Today TV showing footage of Egyptian strikes near the border

Egypt has also played host to UAE assets engaged in their own cross-border raids. The UAE also carries out drone and air strikes in support of the LNA from within Libya. On many occasions, both the Gulf nation and the LNA might be blamed for casualties, making precise tracking more difficult. However, Airwars has monitored at least 41 strikes allegedly carried out by the UAE, leaving at least 11 civilians dead.

“While Egypt mostly seems to be interested in securing its border from smugglers and alleged terrorists with airstrikes, the reasons for Emirati involvement in Libya are less obvious due to its geographical distance,” said Imhof. “However, its current interventionist foreign policy seeking to fight political Islam and jihadism could be an explanation.”

France does not confirm its own actions in Libya, though local reports often accuse Paris of being behind attacks – particularly in the south. Often, blame for such incidents is split between France and the LNA – and in some instances they have blamed one another. A January 10th 2016 strike reportedly killed at least 15 people – likely combatants. The LNA blamed France, while the French government in turn blamed the LNA. On November 14th of that same year, France allegedly killed at least four civilians in Wadi al Shatii district – though again, this could not be confirmed.

Overall, France has been cited for five alleged strikes in the reporting period, while it was mentioned in three more reports that also blamed the LNA – strikes that allegedly left at least 20 civilians dead.

One of the most troubling aspect of airstrikes in Libya is how many actions are by unknown belligerents. 165 Strikes without any named belligerents were assessed by Airwars. Of those, 25 were incidents of concern according to Airwars researchers, and 12 allegedly left civilian casualties.

On February 7th 2016 for example, an unknown aircraft bombed the Bab Tobruk neighborhood of Derna. Four civilians were reported killed. Though no group or nation claimed responsibility, local sources, including members of the GNA, accused the UAE of involvement.

Researchers contacted all eight local and international belligerents for comment on reported civilian harm from their actions in Libya. Only the US’s AFRICOM responded. These strikes – and the lack of clarity around them – are indicative of what New America has termed

'Lawless Skies'.



Alnabaa shows the aftermath of the airstrike on February 7th

Troubling targets

A number of troubling patterns emerged from Airwars monitoring of civilian harm in Libya. Maritime traffic is frequently a target – with researchers tracking 66 strikes that reportedly hit vessels, including boats and ships off the coast of Libya.

The great majority of Libyans live in coastal areas, and the waters north of the country are used by an array of Libyan and foreign vessels, including – according to local sources – boats transporting weapons. In some cases such attacks are acknowledged by the LNA, which has posted videos of target vessels, for instance off the coast of Benghazi.

Images of a burning oil tanker and its injured crew members, hit by an alleged LNA airstrike on May 11th 2015 (via Omar al-Warfali)

Airwars also identified a likely under-reporting of civilian casualties among non-Libyan populations. While the killing of Libyan citizens in airstrikes often garners local headlines, the deaths of 'foreigners', especially Sudanese or Chadian civilians, tend only to be footnoted, or are even reported only in Sudanese or Chadian media. Yet scattered accounts suggest a significant toll. UNSMIL reported that on May 15th 2018, three Eritreans were killed and eight more injured when their vehicle was bombed along the Libyan-Egyptian border by "unidentified air assets" – most likely an Egyptian airstrike.

Hospitals, power stations and other critical infrastructure have also been targeted or struck by several parties to the conflict in Libya. On January 12th 2016, the LNA reported airstrikes against targets in Benghazi – attacks that the UN Mission in the country (UNSMIL) later condemned for hitting a power plant in the city. In October of that same year, the LNA reportedly targeted a hospital in Benghazi.

The new project by Airwars and New America marks the most comprehensive modelling of airstrike harm since NATO's 2011 intervention. Even so, its findings may represent an undercount of civilian casualties.

A key part of Airwars' role is to permanently archive reports and claims - including photographs and videos - in case they are removed from the internet. In Iraq and Syria for example, up to 50 per cent of local reports disappear from the Web within 12 months. People are killed and towns overrun, Facebook and Twitter accounts banned, and videos and news sites blocked.

Those vulnerabilities are likely to extend to Libya, and it is probable that much media and social media material has already been lost, in particular from the earlier years after Gaddafi was deposed.

"Public reporting often seems low in Libya compared to Syria and Iraq, even for recent cases," says Oliver Imhof. "We simply don't know how much material was lost over the years, especially during the early years of the conflict."

The LNA's 2016 Facebook page - a key resource for confirming hundreds of publicly declared airstrikes - was luckily [archived](#) in its entirety by Airwars before being deleted recently by the LNA. Without those archives, a troubling lack of accountability for military actions in Libya would be worse than it already is.

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