

A close-up photograph of a person's face, specifically the right side, peering through a dark, rusted metal window frame. The person has dark skin and short, dark hair. Their eye is visible, looking towards the camera. The background is a bright, clear blue sky. The metal frame is thick and shows signs of wear and rust.

REFUGEES DEEPLY | Quarterly

THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN: European Priorities, Libyan Realities

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Prologue

August 14 began calmly for Riccardo Gatti. On the first morning of a new search and rescue mission in the central Mediterranean, the former yachtsman turned activist walked the grayed wooden deck of the Golfo Azzurro, a trawler that has been stripped of its bulky fishing equipment to make space for life jackets and water bottles.

Its previous mission had tested everyone's patience when several Italian ports refused to allow the vessel to dock and unload its rescued asylum seekers, a sign of the increasing political pressure on rescue charities such as Gatti's Proactiva Open Arms. The only consolation had been that the ship's unwanted cargo were in fact a trio of

PREVIOUS Libya, Surman: Women are seen inside the overcrowded cell inside Surman detention center. ALESSIO ROMENZI

ABOVE Libya, Zawyia: A migrant is seen inside his cell in Al Nasr detention center for migrants in Zawyia. ALESSIO ROMENZI

Libyan musicians who serenaded the crew as they searched for a safe port.

Now stationed 27 nautical miles off the coast of Libya, Gatti's vessel was on standby for boats in distress. Instead they were approached by the C-Star, a vessel chartered by European anti-migrant activists. The Golfo Azzurro crew braced for a confrontation.

The C-Star dispatched its speedboat, which came alongside and slapped a sticker on the hull emblazoned with the group's name: "Defend Europe."

The two groups of Europeans, one intent on saving lives, the other on stopping migrants from reaching their continent, exchanged words "that were not kindly," Gatti said. The confrontation was emblematic of the heated debates over immigration that have come to dominate the public square in Europe, turning the Mediterranean into both a political stage and a graveyard.

It was the arrival of a third vessel on the scene that served as a reminder these arguments have real consequences beyond Europe.

The newly arrived gray-hulled patrol boat said it was from Libya's coast guard, and a crew member demanded to know whether the rescuers had permission to be there. The charity vessel replied that it was in international waters and needed no such permission. By this time, the crew of the Golfo Azzurro had locked themselves inside or below deck, standard procedure during a pirate attack.

Over the radio, a man speaking in halting English from the Libyan patrol boat read what sounded like a prepared statement: "You are sailing in our waters



Rescued migrants shelter on the deck of the Golfo Azzurro in January, 2017. AP PHOTO/EMILIO MORENATTI

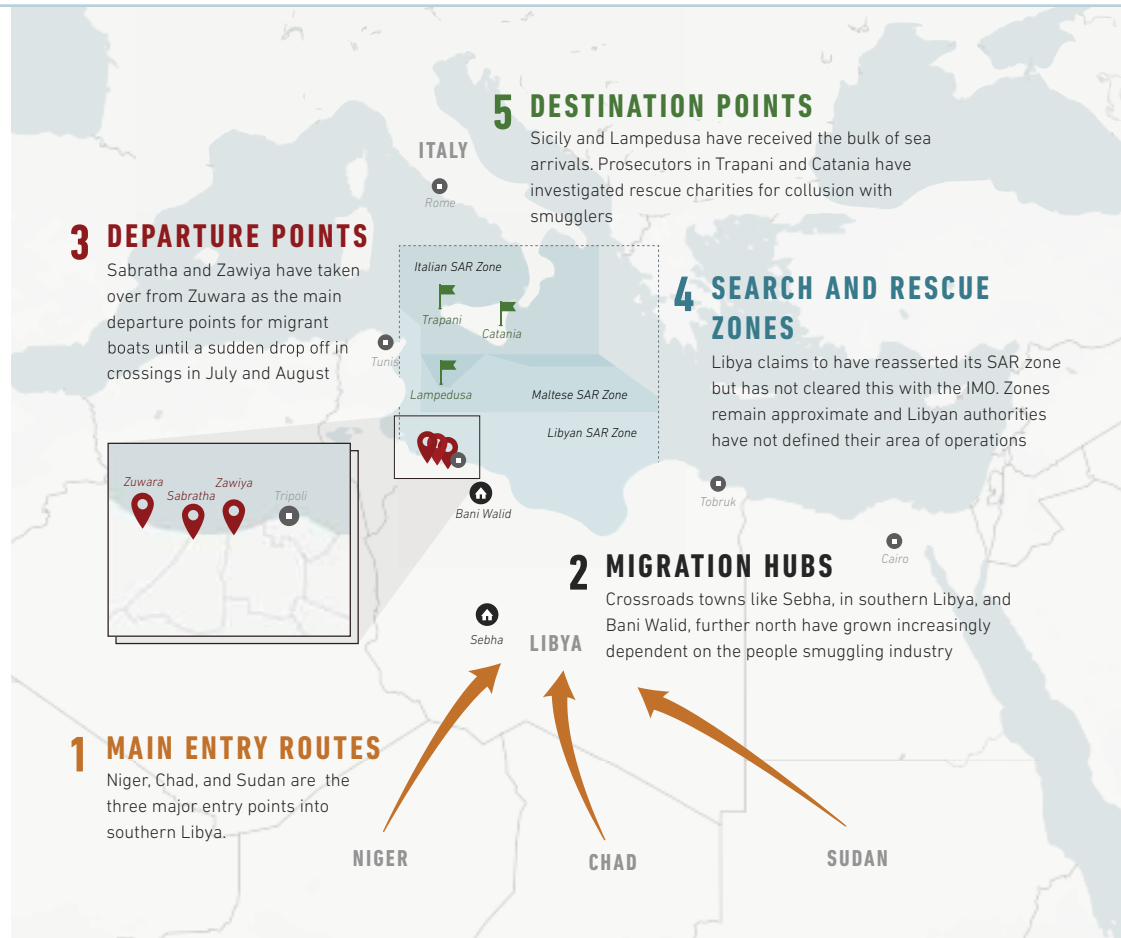
for over ... months now and you are conducting activities that cause problem to Libyan state sovereignty. Therefore I ask you to alter your course toward Tripoli port. If you do not obey the orders right now you will be targeted.”

The Golfo Azzurro hailed the Italian coast guard, which has been coordinating search and rescue operations off Libya in the anarchy that followed the ouster of the Gadhafi regime in 2011, but no help was offered. When they appealed to the European Union naval mission to counter smuggling, the answer was the same.

“We were under attack and we were on our own,” Gatti said.

THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN CORRIDOR

The central Mediterranean is now the busiest mixed migration route into Europe. The geography and the politics of the region have dictated roles for the main actors from the E.U. to member states Italy and Malta, as well as Libya and the countries on its southern borders in the Sahel.



The Libyans demanded that the Golfo Azzurro lower its ladder to be boarded. The rescue ship ignored the order and set a lateral course at low speed to gain time. Once it came within 24 miles (39km) of Libya's coast it would be inside the country's "contiguous zone," an extension of territorial waters, and could be lawfully boarded.

"We knew if we enter 24 miles we are fucked," Gatti said.

For the next hour and a half the Golfo Azzurro was threatened repeatedly. Then, after a seven-minute radio silence, came a curt order to head due north. The standoff was over. But the parting line from the supposed coast guard boat was chilling: "If we see you again we'll kill you."



CHAPTER 1: The Cruel Sea

The first three months of 2017 marked the high point of an extraordinary period during which nongovernmental organizations took on the leading share of responsibility for saving the lives of migrants in the central Mediterranean.

Of the nearly 180,000 people rescued between North Africa and Europe during 2016, 46,796 were saved by NGOs. That was 10,000 more than either the Italian navy or coast guard. The trend continued into this year, with nine main organizations operating as many as 13 search and rescue vessels of varying sizes, plus two spotter planes, in the area.

But their success was met by a powerful backlash. As the scale and

ABOVE Libya: The shore between Zawyia and Tripoli. The morphology of the coastal area is perfect to access the water without being seen. ALESSIO ROMENZI

impact of NGO operations grew, their role in central Mediterranean migration flows was questioned and challenged as never before. By September 2017, widespread threats and intimidation both legal and physical reduced the presence of private rescuers to a single vessel.

The blowback against the civilian activists began in earnest in December 2016 when a leaked report from Europe's border agency Frontex accused them of colluding with smugglers. Previously, the civilian activists had been accused only of being a "pull factor" – tempting migrants to risk their lives at sea to reach Europe.

Two prosecutors on Sicily, the island that forms the toe of Italy's boot, followed with similar accusations.

In February, a prosecutor in the port city of Catania, Carmelo Zuccaro, announced a task force to examine claims that people smugglers were financing the NGO rescue boats. "Do these NGOs all have the same motivations? And who is financing them?" Zuccaro asked.

As recently as 2014, just 3 percent of Italians considered immigration a major concern. Three years later more than a third of Italians told Ipsos pollsters they were very concerned by immigration. Local elections in June 2017 saw immigration hard-liners rewarded and candidates from the Democratic Party, the largest in Italy's parliament, punished. The issue is expected to dominate the general election early next year.

This febrile atmosphere created political opportunities for those willing to question the



motives of rescuers. Zuccaro gained a national profile when he claimed he had evidence of phone calls between smugglers and activists aboard the rescue ships. The fact that his task force was not a criminal investigation did not stop it being cited by leaders of the two most popular opposition parties, the populist 5-Star Movement and the anti-immigrant Northern League, who have labeled the NGOs “sea taxis” for migrants.

When Zuccaro eventually admitted to a parliamentary committee in May 2017 that he had no evidence of such collusion and had instead merely been expressing a “hypothesis,” it made no headlines.

At those May hearings, Ambrogio Cartosio, a prosecutor from Trapani on the western shore of

African migrants try to reach a rescue boat from the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, after falling from the punctured rubber boat on which they left the coast, in the Mediterranean Sea, about 12 miles north of Sabratha, Libya on Sunday, July 23, 2017. AP PHOTO/SANTI PALACIOS

WHEN ZUCCARO EVENTUALLY ADMITTED TO A PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE IN MAY 2017 THAT HE HAD NO EVIDENCE OF SUCH COLLUSION AND HAD INSTEAD MERELY BEEN EXPRESSING A “HYPOTHESIS,” IT MADE NO HEADLINES.

Sicily, announced a second investigation into possible collusion between charity boats and smugglers.

This probe led to the impounding in August of the *Iuventa*, a charity boat operated by *Jugend Rettet*, which translates into “youth rescue” in German. Investigators also alleged that migrants and smugglers shared the coordinates of their boats with rescuers on the messaging platform WhatsApp.

Court papers related to the case revealed that Italian intelligence services infiltrated the crew of another NGO rescue boat, the *Vos Hestia*. A three-man private security team aboard the commercial vessel – chartered by the U.K.-based charity *Save the Children* – reported not only to the Trapani prosecutor, but also to Italian intelligence services and Matteo Salvini, the outspoken leader of the far-right Northern League, an MEP who played a leading role in stoking public suspicion of the NGOs.

IMI, the security company hired by the *Save the Children* ship, was linked by investigative journalist Andrea Palladino to the far-right activist group *Defend Europe*. When Palladino obtained a list of members of a closed Facebook group for employees of IMI,

he found the name of Gianmarco Concas, a former Italian navy officer and spokesman for Generation Identitaire, the group behind Defend Europe and the C-Star mission. Cristian Ricci, the head of IMI, denied the firm had links to Defend Europe but could not explain Concas' presence in his closed group.

Saving migrants' lives in the Mediterranean has always been political. The first nongovernmental rescue ship to appear in the Mediterranean, in 2004, was the Cap Anamur III – itself the granddaughter of a vessel that sailed to the South China Sea in 1979 to aid Vietnamese refugees. In a sign of things to come, the Cap Anamur III was intercepted off Sicily and impounded, and its crew was charged with abetting the illegal entry into Italy of the migrants aboard. Crew members were acquitted of the charges in 2009.

After the fall of Moammar Gadhafi in 2011, there was a sharp increase in the number of refugees and migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Europe. But there was no concerted European response until October 2013, when 366 lives were lost in a shipwreck off Lampedusa, Italy. The death toll prompted Italy to launch Mare Nostrum, a year-long operation that effectively expanded Italy's search and rescue area to encompass the zones of both Malta and Libya.

The naval mission faced international accusations that it encouraged more migrants to cross. When Italy's request for funding support from its E.U. partners was ignored and the government faced domestic criticism over costs, Mare Nostrum was shut down on October 31, 2014. The next day, Operation Triton began, run by the E.U.'s border agency Frontex,

which focused primarily on “border control and surveillance.” Triton covered a much smaller area, and at \$3.6 million per month its operating budget was one-third of Mare Nostrum’s.

BLAMING THE RESCUERS

Six months later, in April 2015, a succession of shipwrecks culminated in the largest single loss of life in the Mediterranean when a 90ft (27m) boat thought to be carrying nearly 900 people capsized, leaving only 28 survivors. The following month, the military operation EUNAVFOR Med was launched by the E.U., aimed explicitly at disrupting the “business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks.”

But while Triton and EUNAVFOR Med both conducted search and rescue, it was not their primary mission. Instead, privately funded charity boats stepped into the gap left by Mare Nostrum.

The first of a new generation of private search and rescue missions – the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) – appeared in the Mediterranean in August 2014, founded by U.S. businessman Chris Catrambone and his Italian wife, Regina. Other groups soon joined the effort. Some, like Malta-based MOAS, were avowedly nonpolitical, while others, such as the German outfit Sea Watch, openly sought to shame E.U. member states into relaunching a dedicated state-level SAR mission.

The NGO boats and crews were not similarly equipped or trained. Some, like Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) and Save the Children, operated from larger vessels that could transport the refugees and migrants they rescued to Italy. Others, like the German activists

of Sea Eye and Jugend Rettet, had no capacity to transfer those rescued to a safe port. Instead they would stabilize migrant boats where possible, use their own rigs as temporary life boats or get life jackets to those in the water, and call the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome.

This led Sergio Liardo, the head of Italy's MRCC, to contemplate new regulations to assure professional standards aboard the Italian-flagged vessels among the flotilla of charity boats.

"Some NGOs are professionals, others are more militant and just rescue and then launch Mayday calls as they are overburdened," Liardo said in a private meeting in Rome in May 2017. According to people present at the meeting, Liardo also discounted the idea that NGOs were colluding with or being funded by Libyans on shore: "Smugglers have no interest in migrants being rescued," he said.

What began as a dry technical exercise to establish a code of conduct for NGO vessels quickly became political when the code was taken over by Italy's interior ministry under the ambitious Marco Minniti, in office since December 2016. Previously the head of Italy's intelligence services, Minniti was instrumental in a series of moves meant to emphasize the heavy migration burden placed on Italy and exert political pressure on its E.U. partners. On the eve of a July 2 meeting of Europe's interior ministers, Italy threatened to close its ports to charity ships carrying rescued migrants.

"If the only ports refugees are taken to are Italian, something is not working," Minniti said. "We are under enormous pressure."



When the code of conduct was leaked 10 days later it contained several controversial requirements that NGOs claimed were designed to hobble their operations, including proscribing the use of phones and flares. Worst of all, they said, was a ban on transferring those rescued to other ships to be taken to Italy. This would mean less time in the rescue zone and “more drownings,” MSF warned.

The regulations were backed by the threat that organizations who refused to sign would be barred entry to Italian ports. But the code was not supported by the MRCC in Rome and this split was revealed in a public argument between Minniti and the transport

An Italian Navy ship sails past a burning dinghy after evacuating the migrants sailing inside at the Mediterranean sea toward the Italian coasts, about 17 miles north of Sabratha, Libya, Sunday, Aug. 28, 2016. More than seven hundred migrants were rescued Sunday morning from seven boats by members of Proactiva Open Arms NGO before transferring them to the Italian coast guards operating at the zone. AP PHOTO/EMILIO MORENATTI

minister, Graziano Delrio, to whom the coast guard reports.

“It is very simple: We are talking about rescue at sea, which is governed by international law, not by the politics of migration control,” Delrio told the Repubblica newspaper. “Is there anyone who does not consider it right to entrust this assessment to the coast guard?”

The row over the code of conduct also highlighted the E.U.’s emerging relationship with Italy, the member state most directly involved. Senior European Commission officials privately reassured the human rights lobby in Brussels that the draft code would be improved. However, by late August the Italians had ignored a second draft prepared by the commission in favor of negotiating with NGOs on a case-by-case basis.

Half the NGOs signed the code of conduct, and the remainder, including Sea Watch, Proactiva and MSF, refused. The MRCC in Rome continues to arrange the transshipment of refugees and migrants from rescue boats in open defiance of Italy’s interior ministry. And Italian ports remain open to boats carrying rescued migrants despite isolated occurrences such as the delay in accepting the Golfo Azzurro.

On August 10, the Libyan navy further complicated rescue efforts when it claimed to have reasserted its search and rescue zone and warned foreign NGOs not to enter the unspecified zone without permission. Unlike territorial and contiguous waters, search and rescue zones must be claimed, according to the guidelines of the International Maritime Organization. An English-speaking 24-hour MRCC must be staffed and the IMO informed, but these criteria have not

“WE’RE NOT SURPRISED BY THE VIOLENCE AND THREATS. IT’S THE SAME MESSAGE FROM THE C-STAR, THE ITALIAN PROSECUTORS AND FRONTEX. – RICCARDO GATTI, PROACTIVA

been met. The IMO said it received a notification from the Libyan port authority, but due to “technical and editorial reasons” it had not yet been accepted.

One day after Libya’s claim, MSF announced it was suspending rescue operations after “credible threats” against it by the Libyan coast guard. Since April 2016 nine serious incidents of threats or intimidation by the Libyan coast guard against charity boats have been recorded, including the standoff over the Golfo Azzurro.

“We’re not surprised by the violence and threats,” Proactiva’s Gatti said. “It’s the same message from the C-Star, the Italian prosecutors and Frontex. A different level of violence but the message is the same.”

CONFRONTATIONS AT SEA

As NGOs have come closer to Libyan coastal waters their presence has threatened to disrupt the lucrative practice of intercepting migrants put to sea by rival networks and then selling them to detention centers on shore. The last 18 months have seen a spike in the number of threatening incidents involving the Libyan coast guard and rescue charities. While the E.U. trains some elements of the coast guard, U.N. investigators have linked serving officers to networks of armed groups who buy and sell migrants on and off-shore and use the coast guard to snatch boats of migrants from rival smugglers.



APRIL 2016

SEA WATCH BOARDED, SHOTS FIRED

Libyan coast guard fires warning shots and then boards the Sea Watch, a vessel belonging to the German charity of the same name. “They fired shots in the air and entered our ship. They claimed to be looking for illegal fishing,” said Sea Watch’s Ruben Neugebauer.



AUGUST 17, 2016

BOURBON ARGOS FIRED ON

The Bourbon Argos, chartered by medical charity MSF, is fired on by a Libyan coast guard. Shots hit the wheelhouse but luckily no-one is injured. A coast guard spokesman says the clearly marked rescue ship was suspected of oil smuggling: “The guards shot in the air to warn them but because our boat is small and was swaying due to heavy waves there might have been a hit to their boat.”



SEPTEMBER 10, 2016

SEA EYE VESSEL INTERCEPTED AND CREW TAKEN TO LIBYA

A speed boat operated by German charity, Sea-Eye, is intercepted by the Libyan coast guard after warning shots are fired and taken to the Libyan port of Zawiya. The 2 crew members are interrogated for 6 hours before being taken to the coast guard commander's house in a large compound with stables and horses. The pair are well fed and sleep on mattresses on the commander's bedroom floor. They are then released unharmed to a German navy vessel. Their boat, the Speedy was not returned.



OCTOBER 21, 2016

MIGRANTS DROWN AFTER RESCUE OPERATION IS VIOLENTLY INTERRUPTED

A Sea Watch night-time rescue 14 miles off Libya is interrupted by the Libyan coast guard. They board an inflatable with 150 migrants on it and beat them with clubs causing mass panic and damaging the craft which begins to sink, plunging everyone on it into the sea. Sea Watch estimates that as many as 25 people drowned in the confusion. The charity attempts to press charges against the coast guard.



MAY 10, 2017

SEA WATCH NEARLY RAMMED AS COAST GUARD RACES TO BEAT IT TO A MIGRANT BOAT

A Libyan coast guard vessel is caught on film performing a dangerous and illegal maneuver to prevent the Sea Watch reaching a wooden boat with 500 migrants aboard. The vessel, in international waters, is instead intercepted by the coast guard and all those aboard are returned to Libya. A coast guard spokesman accused Sea Watch of trying to "hinder the work of our coastguard ... in a bid to take the migrants, claiming Libya is not safe for migrants."



MAY 23, 2017

RESCUE INTERRUPTED BY COAST GUARD FIRING SHOTS

Libyan coast guard officers open fire on two boats loaded with refugees while a rescue attempt is underway by German charity Jugend Rettet, MSF, Save the Children and SOS Mediterranean. Witnesses said the coast guard's speedboat approached the rescue operation at high speed, creating large waves that made it difficult for the refugees to board rubber dinghies. The coast guard later denies the incident occurred. Footage shows one officer pointing a rifle at migrants and firing two or three shots into the air. It also shows dozens of panicked people jumping into the water.



JUNE 15, 2017

PROACTIVA OPEN ARMS IS HARASSED MID RESCUE BY COAST GUARDS FIRING WEAPONS

Proactiva Open Arms is harassed by the Libyan coast guard firing shots in the air as an act of intimidation while it is rescuing 11 people from a small boat. No one is injured and the migrants are taken on board the humanitarian vessel.



AUGUST 7, 2017

PROACTIVA IS THREATENED IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

The Proactiva Open Arms has warning shots fired near it while 13 miles off Libya. Hailed by the coast guard the vessel is told: "Do not come back or we will shoot you. "Next time you will be [the target], without any other notice." The same day a spokesman for the Libyan coast guard says: "We demanded they leave immediately and head north but they did not obey the instructions." Another spokesman tells CNN: "We are capable of conducting rescue work. Our presence cancels their presence. We are fed up with these organizations."



AUGUST 15, 2017

GOLFO AZZURRO IN 2-HOUR STANDOFF WITH LIBYAN COASTGUARD

Stationed 27 miles off Libya in international waters the Golfo Azzurro, operated by Proactiva, is approached by the Libyan coast guard. It is told to plot a course for Tripoli but refuses. After a 2-hour standoff and threats, the rescue ship is forced to abandon its search and rescue mission and return north.



SEPTEMBER 26, 2017

MISSION LIFELINE BOARDED AND THREATENED

During a rescue operation in international waters the Mission Lifeline NGO boat is approached and threatened by a Libyan coast guard vessel. The coast guards shout threats while handling the mounted heavy machine gun on their patrol boat. They then board the NGO vessel and order it to hand over rescued refugees and migrants. The Lifeline crew refuse and eventually the coast guard retreats.

DROWNING BY NUMBERS

Since its inception, EUNAVFOR Med – which in October 2015 renamed itself Operation Sophia after a Somali girl born aboard one of its vessels – has been beset by unintended consequences. To right-wing anti-migrant critics its search and rescue operations, which have saved 40,000 lives, make it part of the alleged pull factor. For human rights groups it is an inadequate replacement for Mare Nostrum and its mission is responsible for the increasingly dangerous tactics deployed by smugglers.

Operation Sophia boasts of the 110 suspected smugglers and traffickers it has helped capture and the 470 vessels it has neutralized. But the arrests clog Italian courts with minor cases that do not touch the real smugglers. The overwhelming majority are so-called “scafisti” cases against migrants who piloted their own boats. Moreover, the destruction of boats has prompted smugglers to switch from wooden boats with uncertain chances of making the passage to Europe to inflatables that are in distress from the moment they leave the Libyan shore.

This trend toward flimsier craft – which has resulted in larger numbers of drownings – began before the arrival of more charity boats on the 12-mile (19km) line that marks territorial waters. In Operation Sophia’s first two years, from June 2015 to June 2017, the number of sea crossings and deaths in the Mediterranean both increased. Its commander has said in leaked reports that he could do little to disrupt smuggling while stuck outside Libya’s territorial waters.



When it was launched, Operation Sophia was expected to negotiate, through the U.N., a phased entry into Libya's territorial waters. Since it has become clear this would be opposed by U.N. Security Council members, the E.U. has switched to "capacity building" of the Libyan coast guard.

Unable to directly supply Libya with patrol boats because of a U.N. arms embargo, the E.U. has focused on training the Libyans instead. The difficulty of finding coast guard candidates without known links to militias or smuggling networks was underlined when five of the men nominated by authorities in Libya were rejected during a vetting process.

Migrants, mostly from Nigeria, crowd onto a dinghy as they sail fleeing Libya, before being helped by members of a Spanish NGO, during a rescue operation at the Mediterranean sea, about 17 miles north of Sabratah, Libya, Saturday, Aug. 20, 2016. Migrants seemingly prefer to face the dangers of the journey towards Europe, rather than stay at home. AP PHOTO/EMILIO MORENATTI

The training began in October 2016 with an E.U. budget of \$7.2 million as well as military assets and personnel contributed by member states. The Libyans were divided into two groups aboard the Italian vessel San Giorgio and the Dutch ship Rotterdam.

Among the nine translators hired for the mission was Rabhi Bouallegue, who was born in Tunisia but lives in Palermo, Sicily. Bouallegue said trainees told him of routine collusion between the coast guard and smuggling gangs. The Libyans also complained to him that they had not been paid for eight months.

The translator said one member of the Libyan team aboard the Rotterdam requested asylum from the Dutch in return for naming a smuggling kingpin who was also in effective control of the coast guard in the Libyan port city of Sabratha. Operation Sophia officials declined to comment on the claim.

After the first phase, the Libyans were allowed to return home before being collected for more training by the San Giorgio from the Libyan port of Misrata in early December 2016. The amphibious transport ship was delayed for several days as the trainees went on strike; two sources said the personnel were under pressure from their families to demand bonuses equivalent to the bribes they previously received from smugglers.

E.U. officials have declined to comment on whether graduates of the program have been involved in any of the incidents of violence or threats by the coast guard against NGO boats. At the July 17, 2017, meeting of the E.U. Foreign Affairs Council, a new monitoring mechanism for the training program was announced, but three months on, E.U. officials said they had no

TRAINEES TOLD HIM OF ROUTINE COLLUSION BETWEEN THE COAST GUARD AND SMUGGLING GANGS. THE LIBYANS ALSO COMPLAINED TO HIM THAT THEY HAD NOT BEEN PAID FOR EIGHT MONTHS.

details of the remit of the monitor nor a timetable for its activation.

Efforts to clarify with E.U. and Operation Sophia officials whether the Libyan personnel they trained were involved in specific incidents led nowhere, said Aurelie Ponthieu of MSF.

“They use this lack of transparency to avoid responding to our criticism,” Ponthieu said. “If you train the Libyan coast guard and you can’t guarantee that these are not the people you’ve trained, then you have problem.”



CHAPTER 2: The European Agenda

At the Ramada Plaza hotel in Tunis, the descent into lawlessness in neighboring Libya is discussed over pressed white tablecloths, under brass chandeliers, in a cavernous banquet hall. Since the international community's evacuation from Tripoli in 2014, much of the business of government switched to two upscale neighborhoods in the capital of Tunisia.

Embassies and international aid agencies arrived like luxury squatters among their Tunisia counterparts in Berge du Lac, a strip of land reclaimed from the city's lake. The carousel of Libya-related conferences they organize help keep afloat the five-star hotels of

ABOVE E.U. foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, right, and Libya's Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj address the media after talks at E.U. headquarters in Brussels on Thursday, Feb. 2, 2017.
AP PHOTO/GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT

Gammarth, a resort area a half-hour's drive from the center of Tunis.

The failure of these meetings to deliver significant change in Libya has bred cynicism among organizers and delegates alike. After one recent event, an international agency official shared a picture of a human rights training session for bored-looking commanders of Libya's notorious migrant detention centers. It was captioned: "Do you think they're listening?"

On the sidelines of a September 2017 conference on local governance in Libya, Mustfa Albaroni, the mayor of Zintan, a mountain city in western Libya whose fighters were influential in toppling Gadhafi, questioned whether the conference was really the best use of E.U. money.

"This money could be used for the best interests of Libya, on projects in Libya," Albaroni said. He then reeled off a shopping list of alternative ways to spend what he imagines the budget to be, including a garbage compactor for his municipality and water pumps for boreholes.

"I heard the E.U. gave Libya millions but I don't see it," he said.

TRANSFORMING E.U. FOREIGN POLICY

Traditionally, European Union foreign policy has been hard to discern. But the arrival of large numbers of refugees and migrants on European shores has brought rare clarity to E.U. institutions. Arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean slowed dramatically under a controversial deal with Turkey in March 2016 that saw the country contain refugee flows in



return for aid and political concessions. The focus then shifted to the central Mediterranean.

Meal time inside Al Nasr detention center for migrants in Zawiya, Libya. ALESSIO ROMENZI

The mounting urgency was clear in a June 2016 communique from the European Commission: “Europe is currently experiencing unprecedented migratory flows, driven by geopolitical and economic factors that will continue, and maybe intensify. ... Reports suggest that there are tens of thousands of migrants in Libya today, looking for ways to enter the E.U., with the number of arrivals increasing every day.”

The document also gives a sense of the re-gearing of all E.U. institutions to the single purpose of reducing inward migration under its Agenda on Migration: “The message that migration issues are now at the

THE E.U.'S SINGLE-MINDED PURSUIT OF A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF MIGRANTS HAS IMPACTED ON DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS, AND EVEN SECURITY IN FRAGILE AREAS, ARE BEING SIDELINED IN THE SEARCH FOR QUICK FIXES TO STEM ARRIVALS OR STEP UP MIGRANT RETURNS.

– GIULIA LAGANA, OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

top of the E.U.'s external relations priorities has not yet been fully communicated to and appreciated by partners.”

Those “partners” stretch from the Horn of Africa to Nigeria and north through Niger to Libya. Countries willing to contain migration flows and take back their own migrants would get security sector support and development aid from the E.U., regardless of whether they had previously been international pariahs such as Sudan or Eritrea.

Not everyone, however, supports such efforts to stem migration.

“The E.U.'s single-minded pursuit of a reduction in the number of migrants reaching the continent has encroached on a range of policy areas, from foreign affairs to development aid, trade and defense,” said Giulia Lagana, E.U. migration and asylum analyst at the Open Society European Policy Institute. “This has had an impact on relations with countries in

Africa and elsewhere, where development targets, democracy and human rights, and even security in fragile areas, are being sidelined in the search for quick fixes to stem arrivals or step up migrant returns.”

The crossroads of all these efforts is Libya. The departure point for 95 percent of refugees and migrants on the central Mediterranean, it is a country in turmoil and without any legitimate national institutions.

The country has three main centers of power and countless armed groups. The U.N. and the E.U. chose to recognize the Government of National Accord (GNA) in December 2015, preempting the U.N.’s own peace process, according to the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think-tank.

The GNA is led by Fayez al-Serraj, the scion of an influential Tripoli family but a comparative unknown prior to his ascension to the presidential council. A rival parliament and a powerful warlord in the east of Libya, Khalifa Haftar, do not recognize the GNA. Nor does much of the Fezzan, Libya’s sparsely populated south. Serraj himself remains hunkered down in a naval base in Tripoli, a city governed by a shifting cast of armed groups aligned to but not controlled by the GNA.

While returning refugees and migrants to Turkey is questionable, doing so in the current conditions in Libya is illegal, critics point out.

“Any pushback of migrants and refugees to Libya would violate the international legal principle of nonrefoulement, which bars returning anyone to



a place where they face real risk of serious harm,” said Hanan Salah, Libya researcher for Human Rights Watch.

By February of 2017, when E.U. heads of state met in Malta, Libya dominated the agenda. Three broad priorities emerged: a reduction in sea crossings, the improvement of conditions for migrants in Libya and development that provides alternatives to smuggling together with a renewed push to stabilize the country.

Officially the priorities were equal, but conflicts between them quickly emerged. As one E.U. diplomat working on Libya said, lip service is paid to stabilizing Libya, but “migration is the biggest concern of all for E.U. politicians.”

African migrants stand on the deck of the Aquarius vessel of the “sos Mediterranee” and MSF (Doctors Without Borders) NGOs, in the Mediterranean Sea, southwest of Malta, Thursday, Aug. 31, 2017. Over 200 people rescued from the sea during previous days are being transferred to Italy. AP PHOTO/DARKO BANDIC

In Libya itself, faced with a multiparty conflict and economic collapse, Europe's focus on migration can grate. The head of the Libya office at the International Organization for Migration, Othman Belbeisi, put it starkly: "Migration is not even among the top 10 concerns for Libyans."

ALL PRIORITIES ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME PRIORITIES ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

At the center of the E.U.'s insistence that it wants to do more than just trap migrants in Libya is the \$3.5 billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, which includes \$108 million announced in April 2017 for local development projects in Libya and improved protection for refugees and migrants. The funds are meant to compete with Libya's people-smuggling economy that Italian Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino valued at \$390 million per year.

Five months on from its announcement, the money has been divvied up between five agencies – the United Nations children's fund, Unicef; its migration agency, IOM; the refugee agency, UNHCR; the development program, UNDP, and the German aid corporation GIZ – but not a single development project has begun inside the country. European diplomats in Tunis are largely unsurprised by the snail's progress of an E.U. fund disbursed through U.N. agencies.

The E.U., the U.N. and the aid agencies they fund are running their programs via remote control from Tunis. For security reasons, the U.N. agencies are allowed a rotation of between three and five international staff on the ground in Libya each week. Local staff, who are relied on for most of the work, face routine threats and intimidation from armed

FIVE MONTHS ON FROM THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE E.U. TRUST FUND...NOT A SINGLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT HAS BEGUN INSIDE THE COUNTRY.

groups, said a senior U.N. official. “We want to avoid the traps that are at every step in Libya but we can’t do nothing,” said an E.U. diplomat familiar with the trust fund.

With nothing yet to show for its development priority, the E.U. has attempted to show it is making progress on another priority – improving conditions for migrants stuck in Libyan detention.

The lion’s share of the money allocated for that effort, some \$57 million, is going to the IOM, whose main activity is its Assisted Voluntary Return and Repatriation program. The IOM began the year with a target from the E.U. to return 5,000 migrants from Libya to their countries of origin. That target has since risen to 15,000.

IOM officials say they could return more people if sender countries, such as Nigeria or Senegal, had more consular staff on the ground in Tripoli to process travel documents. These complaints come at a time when Italy is the only European country with a permanent diplomatic presence in the Libyan capital.

Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention and does not offer asylum. Under laws passed with Europe’s encouragement during the Gadhafi era, illegal immigration was criminalized. Undocumented migrants are therefore liable for detention. A network



of some 29 detention centers is administered under the department to counter illegal migration (DCIM), which reports to the Serraj government. Most migrants in Libya face a choice between signing up to be sent home by the IOM or indefinite detention.

African migrants gather at the Illegal Immigration Authority in Tripoli on August 17, 2017 ahead of being repatriated to their country of origin under a voluntary program coordinated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). AFP PHOTO/MAHMUD TURKIA

While E.U. statements on detention in Libya routinely stress the role of IOM and UNHCR in improving conditions, the pressure to show progress in Libya has fueled tensions between the U.N.'s refugee and migration agencies. In a tweet in September 2017, UNHCR's special envoy on the central Mediterranean, Vincent Cochetel, appeared to hit back at notions that returns were a panacea for the hellish situation faced by refugees and migrants: "Conditions in #Libya's



jails not improving. Not every1 wants or can go home. Refugees there need resettlement.”

Libya, Zawya: Migrants pray inside Al Nasr detention center for migrants in Zawya. ALESSIO ROMENZI

The U.N. is seeking permission from Libyan authorities to open a secure center for refugees in Tripoli. UNHCR officials insist it would not be a refugee camp but an evacuation center where officials will identify those who qualify for refugee protection before flying them to neighboring Niger to await resettlement in the E.U. However, serious concerns remain over security for such a facility where refugees could wait for six months or more. A detachment of Gurkhas, soldiers from Nepal, are already in Tunisia on standby. U.N. officials said that any security force would have no peacekeeping mandate.

EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS HAVE CHOSEN TO CONTAIN PEOPLE IN THIS SITUATION. PEOPLE CANNOT BE SENT BACK TO LIBYA, NOR SHOULD THEY BE CONTAINED THERE. – JOANNE LIU, MSF

The horrific abuses suffered inside Libya's migrant prisons range from rape and torture to forced labor. The IOM and UNHCR have limited access to the detention centers and must apply in writing before visiting – they cannot conduct spot inspections. The Danish Refugee Council and MSF also monitor conditions but the number of centers they can access has been reduced in the past year.

The prisons where international agencies have greatest access, in and around Tripoli, have seen incremental improvements over the past year with IOM building or renovating toilet blocks as well as providing generators. Access to prisons outside the capital, particularly along the coast to the west, is minimal thanks to militia checkpoints, clashes between armed groups and a thriving kidnap industry.

Inmates at the migrant centers are routinely rented out to local employers, with DCIM officials or local militia profiting. Detainees are also bought and sold by militias who extort ransom payments from their families. The arrival of international funding into the prison system has created additional incentives for armed groups to seize control of DCIM centers in search of money and legitimacy.

In an open letter on September 2017 Joanne Liu, the head of MSF, denounced the detention system in Libya as “rotten to the core.”

She wrote, “It must be named for what it is: a thriving enterprise of kidnapping, torture and extortion,” adding, “European governments have chosen to contain people in this situation. People cannot be sent back to Libya, nor should they be contained there.”

Mohamed Sifaw has a better idea than most what goes on inside the detention centers. He has been a volunteer for the past 13 years with the Libyan Red Crescent in Zawiya, a port city west of Tripoli, which has been one of the key departure points for smuggling networks. The Libyan Red Crescent is the only organization with complete access to the centers.

At the al-Nasr prison in Zawiya, run by a militia linked to smuggling networks but recognized by the DCIM since 2016, inmates survive on one meal a day. “The supplier is asking the government for money and every time the people are asking for more food,” Sifaw said.

Another detention center, one of two near Surman, was closed in August after human traffickers repeatedly entered and seized inmates, Sifaw said. The other Surman center, which is for women only, has no clean water after supplies were contaminated with salt water.

For the past three years, collecting corpses of migrants who have drowned at sea and washed up along the shoreline has been part of Sifaw’s weekly routine. The 32-year-old engineer has picked 385 bodies from the beach in Zawiya. He takes them to an informal



cemetery where they are buried without ceremony. The graves are marked with the date the body was found and a number.

Members of Libya's Red Crescent recover the body of an illegal immigrant that washed ashore in Tajura, a coastal suburb of the Libyan capital Tripoli, on July 2, 2017. AFP PHOTO/MAHMUD TURKIA

Recently Sifaw's routine has been interrupted. Since August not a single body has come ashore. Locals speak of a "strict new force" bringing back migrants from the boats. "The number of security personnel is increasing," he said. "They have new equipment and new people among the coast guards."



CHAPTER 3: Italy and the Parallel Process

Helen's first sight of the Mediterranean came after weeks of clandestine travel. From her home in Eritrea on the horn of Africa, she journeyed to a refugee camp in Ethiopia, across the vastness of Sudan and the deserts of southern Libya. It cost the 23-year-old's family \$4,000, paid to a network of Eritrean and Sudanese smugglers, and another \$2,000 to the Libyans who supplied the rubber boat she was meant to climb into one night in May with another 70 women and children.

The boat did not make it off the beach. A truckload of armed men took the group into custody and delivered them to what appeared to be a prison nearby. At the gates some of the women were told they were being

ABOVE Libya, Zawyia: A Nigerian woman is seen inside Al Nasr detention center for migrants in Zawyia. ALESSIO ROMENZI.

WHEN SOME OF THEM RESISTED EFFORTS TO EXPLOIT THEIR SUFFERING TO EXTORT MORE MONEY FROM THEIR FAMILIES, THEIR CHILDREN WERE TAKEN AWAY UNTIL THEY COOPERATED.

set free while others, including Helen, were ushered into the crowded facility. She would later discover her companions were not freed. They were sold.

About half of the captives were driven to a filthy warehouse. Once inside they were given phones and told it would cost their families \$2,200 to free them. In between frantic calls to relatives, inebriated guards took turns raping some of the women.

Helen's stay at the detention center, meanwhile, was interrupted when she was traded to a Libyan militia who took her to Tripoli. She was held along with other women in an ordinary house in a neighborhood that she thinks was near the city center.

The men holding her took drugs and threatened and sexually abused the women. When some of them resisted efforts to exploit their suffering to extort more money from their families, their children were taken away until they cooperated. While in this house Helen was reunited with some of the group she first traveled with in May and learned what had happened to them.

By August enough money had been paid and most of the women were returned to the care of Eritrean smugglers who took them to a "connection house" in Bani Walid, one of the hubs in Libya's human traffic trade. After a nightmare tour of the miserable options



for migrants in Libya – from official detention centers to illegal warehouses, militia houses and connection houses – Helen is no closer to escape. New forces on the coast have begun to stop all migrant boats from leaving.

Illegal migrants from Africa walk at a naval base in Tripoli after being rescued by Libyan coastguards in the Mediterranean Sea off the Libyan coast on August 29, 2017.
AFP PHOTO/MAHMUD TURKIA

WHERE HAVE THE PEOPLE GONE?

When the number of refugees and migrants entering Italy by sea dropped dramatically this year – from 46,518 in May and June to a little over 15,000 in July and August – the sudden change caught most observers by surprise. While the E.U. was issuing technical updates on its agenda that appeared to have little impact, a covert, parallel process to curtail migration to Europe was underway, led by Italy.

In June, a group of elders in the Libyan coastal city of Sabratha, one of the main departure points for migrants, were called to a meeting with a group they were told were representatives of the Italian government. According to one of the elders present, they were asked to pass a message to the main smugglers: “Tell them the golden age is over.”

Those who heeded the warning would be allowed to keep the illicit fortunes they had made, the visitors told the elders, and would be given the chance to launder their reputations with seemingly legitimate roles in Libya’s security services. Those who did not would be targeted with travel bans and asset seizures, as well as an implicit threat of prosecution by the International Criminal Court – which said in May it was “alarmed by the nature and scale of crimes allegedly committed against migrants” and was looking into jurisdiction.

In early July, Mario Morcone, the chief of staff of Italy’s Interior Minister Marco Minniti, met with officials from the U.N. refugee agency in Rome. According to someone present at the meeting, Morcone told the group the dramatic drop in sea crossings would continue, crediting successful talks with Libyan municipalities and promises of development aid.

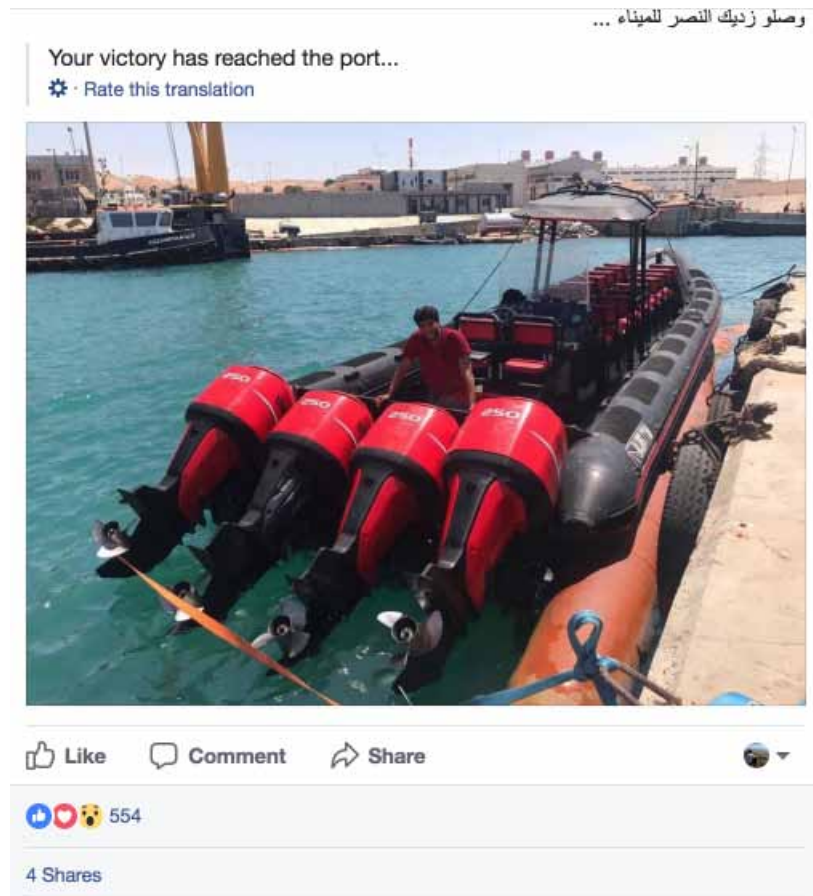
On the ground in Libya, the “municipal strategy” involved a handful of Libya’s smuggling kingpins who are widely known to Europe’s intelligence agencies. Abdurahman al-Milad, the head of the coast guard in Zawiya, was first identified as a main smuggler by Italian investigative reporter Nancy Porsia. A cousin of the Khushlaf brothers – Mohamed and Ibrahim,

ACCORDING TO ONE OF THE ELDERS PRESENT, THEY WERE ASKED TO PASS A MESSAGE TO THE MAIN SMUGGLERS: “TELL THEM THE GOLDEN AGE IS OVER.”

who control the main Zawiya militias, the refinery and the port – the 28-year-old goes by the nom de guerre “al Bija.” He took over the Zawiya coast guard from another officer who was transferred to Tripoli after death threats.

Despite being named in the U.N. panel of experts report in June for involvement in smuggling activities and for firing on migrant and charity boats, al Bija continues to make a show of his wealth. On his Facebook page he recently posted photographs of a new acquisition, a high-end, black and red power boat, mounted with four 250-horsepower engines, bearing the legend “Baltic Pirates” on the side. He also shows off an invitation for a training course hosted by the Swiss government and IOM, billed as “promoting life-saving in maritime operations by the Libyan coast guard.”

The Khushlaf family controls the al-Nasr migrant detention center in Zawiya, which is where al Bija sends migrants when they have been intercepted at sea. Security sources in Zawiya said the prison has been dubbed “Hotel al-Nasr” by inmates as they are subjected to forced labor to pay their way out. In April 2016, 17 migrants were shot dead at al-Nasr after horrendous conditions prompted a mass escape attempt.



Screenshot from the Facebook wall of Al Bija, shows the arrival of an expensive new power boat in Zawiya. The Libyan coast guard commander has been named by U.N. investigators as a people smuggler.

In the neighboring port city of Sabratha, Ahmed Dabbashi is the smuggling kingpin. Also known as “al Ammu” or “uncle,” he was named by the U.N. panel of experts as one of two “main facilitators” of migrant smuggling and human trafficking on the Libyan coast. He and his family are well known to Italian authorities.

The Anas al-Dabbashi brigade, named after Ahmed’s cousin who was killed during the 2011 revolution, was hired in 2015 to provide external security at the Mellitah oil and gas compound, which is co-owned by the Italian oil company ENI and the Libyan



National Oil Corporation. The brigade was brought in two weeks after four Italians working for Bonatti, a company servicing Mellitah, were kidnapped. Two of the four workers were recovered from a group loyal to ISIS after a firefight in March 2016; the remaining two were killed. The ISIS fighters were under the direction of Abdullah al-Dabbashi, another cousin of al Ammu.

The Anas brigade used its income from Mellitah to establish itself as the leading military force in the port city. A Sabratha elder said the Italians' warning was passed to al Ammu in late June 2017. Soon afterward, his brigade took possession of an abandoned prison 1.8 miles (3km) from the oil and gas terminals at

In this Sunday Sept. 11, 2016 photo, a woman and a man from Niger rest aboard a rescue boat from the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, after they fell to the water from the rubber boat in which they were traveling in, with other refugees and migrants, about 18 miles North of Sabratha, Libya. AP PHOTO/SANTI PALACIOS

Mellitah and has since been operating the facility as a migrant detention center.

After the Anas brigade seized the prison, the interior minister from Libya's GNA, Aref al-Khoja, traveled to Sabratha to officially release the facility to the local municipality. It was immediately handed over to Ahmed al-Dabbashi – a formality, as his militia was already in charge. And on August 16, al-Dabbashi was accorded the honor of having his Anas brigade deliver medical supplies flown to Sabratha by the Italian Development Cooperation to the local hospital.

Ahmed's younger brother, Mehemmed al-Dabbashi, runs another militia, Brigade 48, that attracted attention after the sudden drop in migrant crossings. Set up by the defense ministry in Tripoli in January 2017, the brigade was taken over in July by the younger al-Dabbashi, who previously commanded Isam al-Ghur, more of a gang than a militia and known for drug smuggling.

Such murky deals might be preferable to military options, said Hussein al-Thawadi, the mayor of Sabratha. "It was not necessary to use force to get an agreement," he said. "It was a mutual agreement between Italy, the E.U., Serraj and the smugglers themselves."

The mayor said he met with Italian officials twice in August, once in Tripoli and once in Rome, and said \$20 million was promised to fund development projects in the cities affected by smuggling.

Thawadi denies knowledge of any payments to the militias or smugglers by either the GNA or the Italian government. The Italian newspaper *Corriere della*

Serra has reported a \$6 million payment to the Anas brigade, citing unnamed security sources.

But Italy's foreign ministry insists the country does not do deals with traffickers. "The foreign ministry firmly denies that there is an agreement between Libyan traffickers and the Italian government," a spokesman said.

A QUINTESSENTIALLY ITALIAN SOLUTION

At this year's international economic conference in Cernobbio, sometimes dubbed Italy's answer to Davos, Italy's foreign minister, Angelino Alfano, boasted "we implemented a quintessentially Italian solution" to the migrant crisis.

Aref Ali Nayed, who has experienced firsthand the pitfalls of trying to stabilize Libya, is critical of Italy's dealings. After the toppling of Gadhafi in 2011 Nayed led a stabilization team for the Transitional National Council, one of the first of several ill-fated efforts to govern the former dictatorship. He argues that E.U. and Italian actions over migration are making a durable peace harder to find, and said Europe's rush to recognize the Serraj administration had saddled Libya with a government of "questionable legitimacy" in order to combat migration flows.

"Some of the deals we're seeing are tactical deals with smugglers and militias under the rubric of the (Italian) interior ministry," said Nayed, who until recently was Libya's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

Nayed, who is affiliated with the Tobruk parliament, which does not recognize the Serraj administration, said such deals will rebound on Europeans. "What we're seeing is a shifting of Europe's problems to



become Libya's problems," he said. "Europe can do it now because we're weak, but it risks creating real bitterness."

E.U. officials have not questioned Italy's methods, however, and have assigned \$55 million from the emergency trust fund for Africa to Italy's interior ministry in order to manage Libya's borders. The reduction in sea crossings has been greeted with elation in Brussels and other European capitals. In a speech to the European Parliament on September 13, the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, saluted Italy's "tireless and noble" efforts.

"This summer, the Commission again worked closely together with Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and

In this Monday, May 15, 2017 photo, Marco Minniti, Italian interior minister, right, speaks to a Libyan official from the U.N.-backed government in Tripoli as he checks marine boats at the Abosetta base, Libya.
AP PHOTO/MOHAMED BEN KHALIFA

“WHAT WE’RE SEEING IS A SHIFTING OF EUROPE’S PROBLEMS TO BECOME LIBYA’S PROBLEMS. EUROPE CAN DO IT NOW BECAUSE WE’RE WEAK, BUT IT RISKS CREATING REAL BITTERNESS.” – AREF ALI NAYED

his government to improve the situation, notably by training the Libyan coast guard,” Juncker said. “We will continue to offer strong operational and financial support to Italy. Because Italy is saving Europe’s honor in the Mediterranean.”

Wary of accusations of having trapped migrants in Libya, European policymakers are keen to demonstrate that earlier work in transit countries such as Niger is contributing to fewer migrants reaching Libya and therefore fewer sea crossings. But this is not borne out by the numbers. The most in-depth data on migrant flows into and around Libya is located in the Displacement Tracking Matrix, a battery of spreadsheets managed by Dan Salmon at IOM Libya, stationed in Tunis.

The data, meant to be the “reference point” for the humanitarian and policy community, is based on surveys collected from local authorities throughout Libya, as well as local NGOs. It shows roughly 400,000 migrants in Libya, a number unchanged for at least the past year, which includes many non-Libyans who work in the country and have no intention of trying to reach Europe.

“It’s not like counting heads at the border,” Salmon said. “It can only provide the broad stroke and everybody’s looking for the headline.”

A senior official from UNHCR said that it had no indication of reduced inflows into Libya from Niger, Sudan or Chad and only a marginal drop from Egypt.

For Helen, who remains holed up in a smuggler’s connection house, the Europe that Juncker described in Brussels, one that “protects, empowers and defends,” is still far away.

She is not alone. Eritrean smugglers calling in to a radio show run by the exiled activist Meron Estefanos claimed that there are at least 10,000 Eritreans waiting in a network of connection houses to leave Libya. The mayor of Sabratha estimates that there is a bottleneck of 30,000 refugees in and around the ports of northwestern Libya.

By the end of August the Libyan coast guard had intercepted nearly 11,000 migrants at sea during 2017, according to U.N. estimates, and anecdotal evidence and security sources suggest the true number is far higher. Those intercepted are meant to be checked on at disembarkation points managed by the IOM and UNHCR before being moved to detention centers.

But there has been no noticeable increase in the number of people being held in official detention centers in Libya, and a senior U.N. official said many refugees and migrants were being sent to illegal warehouses run by smugglers. He specifically cited Zawiya where international agencies have no access. “The question is, where are the people?” he said.



The answer includes makeshift dungeons where there is no local or international oversight, said Marwa Mohamed, a Libyan researcher with the rights watchdog Amnesty International.

“By focusing solely on detention centers we’re missing the point,” she said. “People are trapped in a country where there is no protection and no way out.”

The bodies of migrants lie on a boat after being recovered by Santa Lucia merchant ship in the Mediterranean Sea, 20 nautic miles from the Libyan coast, on August 1, 2017. The bodies of eight migrants have been found at sea off the coast of Libya by rescuers coming to the aid of four rubber dinghies, the Italian coastguard said on August 1. Some 500 survivors in total were being pulled to safety, the coastguard told AFP. Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, which was taking part in the rescues, said the bodies had been recovered by the Santa Lucia merchant ship. AFP PHOTO/ANGELOS TZORTZINIS



Epilogue

South of Rome, beyond the Aurelian walls, stands a medieval watchtower in the grounds of the Lancellotti estate. The family are “black princes” – aristocrats who remained loyal to the Vatican after the Kingdom of Italy entered Rome and ended the millennia-long reign of the popes.

Their estate, an unheralded right turn off a drab suburban road flanked by boxy industrial units, is a pastoral idyll of rolling lawns, Roman pines and an archery range. Over the past year it has also been a favored hideaway of the leaders of the Tebu and the Awlad Suleiman, two of southern Libya’s most powerful tribes, whose homelands in the Sahel include the main people-smuggling routes.

“I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT INTERNATIONAL POLITICS WAS MORE ORGANIZED THAN THIS,” – NICOLETTA GAIDA, ARA PACIS

The watchtower is the home of Nicoletta Gaida and the headquarters of her peace organization, Ara Pacis. Named after the famous altar to Pax, the Roman god of peace, the group rented the aristocrats' torretta to lend some pathos to their ambitious peace-building efforts.

The former actress waded into the aftermath of the Fezzan conflict in southern Libya where tribal factions fought each other after the fall of Gadhafi. Gaida and her team brokered an unexpected reconciliation between the Awlad Suleiman and the Tebu signed in March 2017, in the presence of the leaders of another tribe, the Tuareg.

The Ara Pacis leader is now pushing a wider settlement among the southern tribes centered on a development plan written by grassroots groups in the Fezzan. It contains practical proposals such as the renovation of the pasta factory and university dorms in Sebha, the southern city through which most of the people-smuggling trade flows.

Gaida, who refers to herself playfully as “some lady in a tower,” said she had been surprised by what seemed to be an international free-for-all over Libya: “I would have thought international politics was more organized than this,” she said.

PEACEMAKERS, PROXIES AND A POWER VACUUM

Ara Pacis, and its watchtower, is only the most baroque of a host of competing peace efforts in Libya, whose foreign sponsors have jockeyed for position with seemingly little regard for stability in the country itself. The greatest obstacle to the stalled U.N. peace process, relaunched at the general assembly in New York in late September, is the abundance of rival initiatives. Egypt is pushing a plan to reorganize the former Libyan army, while Russia and the United Arab Emirates have been accused of supporting the armed militia under the leadership of Haftar, the powerful warlord in eastern Libya.

“The diplomatic vacuum of the last year resulted in too many competing initiatives that have created confusion among Libyan factions, or were exploited by them,” said Claudia Gazzini of the International Crisis Group.

Ghassan Salame, a U.N. special envoy to Libya, found his leadership of peace efforts challenged by the African Union, which convened a mini-summit in early September. Italy and France, rivals for influence and oil in the Sahel, have let their rivalry infect peace talks.

A high-level meeting of Haftar and Serraj, the head of the Government of National Accord, took place in Paris without Italy’s knowledge, according to Italian officials. The French effort followed a July statement from President Emmanuel Macron in which he said France would staff and run “hot spots” – E.U. asylum processing centers – on the ground in Libya before the end of the summer. The statement was retracted later the same day.



A similar lack of consultation occurred before Italy and Germany's interior ministers made a call in May for an E.U. police mission on the border between Niger and Libya. Security analysts said the move would be reckless, and the initiative was shelved. But unilateral actions and unrealistic expectations from E.U. member states have exhausted European and U.N. diplomats working on Libya.

In Sirte, Libya, September 23, 2016.
AP PHOTO/MANU BRABO

"It has reached the stage where embassies are calling each other and saying ignore what this minister or that leader just said, it's never going to happen," said an E.U. diplomat. "It is the professionals inside the institutions that are restraining the politicians from doing the crazy ideas."

The desire among European leaders to be seen to control migration in the short term has overwhelmed a more patient and responsible approach to Libya. Improving conditions for migrants inside Libya has been left to the U.N.'s migration and refugee agencies who are well funded but unable to operate effectively.

Cochetel, the UNHCR special envoy, said his agency was under pressure due to "considerable expectations from the E.U." that take little account of the reality on the ground in Libya.

"Libya is not Turkey; there is no sustainable peace and order and there is no quick fix," he said. "It's not at this stage about putting more resources as some countries believe.

In Brussels senior E.U. officials privately admit that the sharp reduction in sea crossings is "unsustainable." On the ground in Sabratha, the Italian deals have been the catalyst for serious clashes between rival armed groups, that have escalated to the point where they threaten the balance of power in Libya. The recent fighting has pitched the Anas brigade against forces including the Operation Room, originally formed to fight ISIS militants, and the al-Wadi brigade, which runs a rival smuggling network. All sides claim to be legitimate government forces even as heavy weapons have been deployed in civilian neighborhoods and the Libyan Red Crescent has been fired on.

"The new arrangement for migration has been the catalyst for the latest fighting," said Libya analyst Mark Micalleff. "But it is rooted in more complex historical tribal and ideological rivalries."



Many locals are angry at the legitimacy handed by outsiders to people they see as armed thugs. A Sabratha businessman, who asked not to be named, complained that it was “a battle between one militia who got paid and another who wants to get paid.” ■

Libya, Surman: Women are seen inside the overcrowded cell inside Surman detention center. ALESSIO ROMENZI

ABOUT REFUGEES DEEPLY

Refugees Deeply is an independent digital media project dedicated to covering the Refugee crisis. Our team, a mix of journalists and technologists, aims to provide readers and experts with the kind of in-depth information that no other media outlet is able to offer. We hope this, in turn, will lead to deeper understanding, greater clarity and more sustained public engagement on this critical – and quintessentially human – issue.

Refugees Deeply is a part of News Deeply, a media startup and social enterprise based in New York. We are registered as a B Corp, or Benefit Corporation, with the stated mission of advancing foreign policy literacy through public service journalism. We receive no government funding, instead earning our revenues through a mix of foundation grants and digital-design services. Our client partners include the World Economic Forum, Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and the Baker Institute at Rice University.

We want anyone who visits Refugees Deeply to come away better informed and more engaged in this global issue. We welcome your feedback and story ideas through info@newsdeeply.org.

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**THE CENTRAL
MEDITERRANEAN:
European
Priorities,
Libyan
Realities**

DANIEL HOWDEN

October 2017

The first three months of 2017 marked the high point of an extraordinary period during which nongovernmental organizations took on the leading share of responsibility for saving the lives of migrants in the central Mediterranean.

Of the nearly 180,000 people rescued between North Africa and Europe during 2016, 46,796 were saved by NGOs. That was 10,000 more than either the Italian navy or coast guard. The trend continued into this year, with nine main organizations operating as many as 13 search and rescue vessels of varying sizes, plus two spotter planes, in the area.

But their success was met by a powerful backlash. As the scale and impact of NGO operations grew, their role in central Mediterranean migration flows was questioned and challenged as never before.