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INSIDE THE NEW YORKER



How a reporter obtained personal testimonies and video footage of a brutal detention system sponsored by the E.U.

By Ian Urbina

It was a long-shot idea: fly a drone over the open courtyard of Libya's most infamous migrant prison, in the heart of Tripoli, the country's capital. Libya's longtime strongman, Muammar Qaddafi, had been toppled and killed in an insurrection, in 2011, and Libya had since been plunged into a decade of violence. The country had competing governments and was run in large part by an assortment of violent militias. The U.S. State Department lists Libya among the most dangerous countries in the world. The migrant jail that I wanted to get a look at—and that I **wrote about** in this week's issue of *The New Yorker*—was operated by men associated with the powerful militias from Zintan, in western Libya, and I knew that they wouldn't want me snooping around. Risk assessment is one of the toughest parts of reporting in conflict zones, and I didn't want to be reckless. But no reporters are known to have been allowed inside the prison, known as Al Mabani, or The Buildings, and it seemed urgent that the world see what the facility looked like, if only from the sky.



The Secretive Prisons That Keep Migrants Out of Europe

By Ian Urbina

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I run a nonprofit news organization called the Outlaw Ocean Project, which reports on human-rights and environmental issues at sea, and I had long been interested in investigating the secretive system of migrant detention that the European Union has helped set up in Libya. Migrants have been pouring into Europe since around 2010, spurred by violence and the effects of climate change in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Many came through Libya and then crossed the Mediterranean Sea, in rubber rafts, to Italy—a trend that only accelerated after Qaddafi’s fall. Desperate to stem the tide, Italy, backed by the E.U., partnered in 2017 with Libya, by then a failed state, to capture migrants headed to Europe. The E.U. had helped train and equip the Libyan Coast Guard, a quasi-military organization with links to militias, to patrol the Mediterranean, intercept migrants before they were rescued by humanitarian groups, and bring them back to Libya. As the Coast Guard stepped up its efforts—firing on and capsizing migrant boats and threatening aid groups—the Mediterranean became both a battleground and a graveyard. The E.U. succeeded in slowing arrivals, but the deaths of those attempting to cross the sea have continued.



A Libyan Coast Guard vessel attempts to ram a boat carrying migrants.

The partnership also gave rise to a brutal system of migrant prisons in Libya, where the captured were held indefinitely and subjected to a litany of abuses: rape, torture, extortion, forced labor. Tens of thousands of migrants have been held in a network of a dozen or so such prisons since 2017; Al Mabani, the largest, is overcrowded, a breeding ground for disease, and the scene of routine violence. This past April, I learned of a killing at the prison. Aliou Candé, a twenty-eight-year-old migrant from Guinea-Bissau, had been shot dead by one of the facility's guards. Calls for investigations seem to have been ignored, just as others have been for years. I set off with three colleagues to look into his death, and to tell the story of the detention center where it happened.

My primary goal was to get inside Al Mabani. With the help of an aid agency, we gained rare visas to Libya. Libyan officials initially indicated that they would let us tour the jail, but, from the moment we got to Tripoli, the situation felt fraught. After landing at the airport, a battered airfield with hulking carcasses of old airliners parked here and there, we were taken to a hotel different from the one where we had been told we would stay. We were assigned a security team of several men who worked for a Libyan company. The men clearly meant to keep us safe,



Aliou Candé.

but it seemed obvious that they were also there to monitor our activities, and perhaps to limit our movements.

During our first week in Tripoli, we achieved some extraordinary breakthroughs. We obtained from family members audio of Candé's last communication by phone from Al Mabani, a desperate voice message to his brothers requesting help. One of Candé's cellmates in Al Mabani, an older Cameroonian man named Tokam Martin Luther, shared with us a journal in which he had recorded his days, in longhand, with a mix of alarm and determination. Using records, photographs, and eyewitness testimony, we were able to establish that the Coast Guard boat that captured Candé and others on his raft had been refurbished with money from the European Union. But, in the course of our time in Tripoli, it became increasingly apparent that the promised trip to Al Mabani was not going to happen. Two members of our team—Pierre Kattar, a photographer, and Mea Dols de Jong, a filmmaker—managed to make their way, unattended, to scout the prison. It had been built on a converted manufacturing site just off a busy highway in the Ghout al-Shaal area. It didn't look like a formal jail, but it was well guarded, and getting close seemed impossible.

One day, early in our stay, our security team proposed a kind of sightseeing tour. Tripoli, once a prosperous city on the Mediterranean, now had the look of a washed-up boxer, nicked and scarred. After years of civil war, its tourist sites were restricted. Near the end of our tour, the security team took us to a strip of public beach. It was evening, and there were families with their feet in the water, children playing with water guns, amusement-park rides. Kattar had brought his drone and decided to test it. He got the drone into the air and sent it sweeping over Tripoli, as easily as a boy flying a kite. Our security team seemed more amused than concerned. It felt like a success: the video was lovely, and we hadn't been arrested.



We began to wonder: Could we repeat our success over Al Mabani? One afternoon, we set out in our security team's van. We told our minders that we wanted to head to the area where Al Mabani stands, a gritty section of the city full of auto-repair shops and abandoned warehouses. Members of the militia control not just the detention facility but much of the neighborhood surrounding it. We had identified a café near the jail—across the highway but within the drone's range—as a potential launching place. The idea was that we would order a coffee and sit outside while Pierre discreetly found a spot down the block where he could put the drone in the air. No sooner were we out of the van, though, than our security team ushered us back in. There were young men all around the café, and the security team feared that any one of them might have been with the militia.

For an hour, we crisscrossed the neighborhood, looking for a better location. "Not safe," a security guard said, when we picked an alley. At last, we found a hidden spot. You could not see Al Mabani, but it was within reach of the drone. Kattar got out of the van, crouched low to the ground, with the open passenger-side door blocking him from view, and launched. The drone made it to the facility unnoticed, and we used it to capture close-ups of the prison's open courtyard. We then drove away, unsure of exactly what we had captured.

Two hours later, back at our hotel, Kattar sent an edited version of what we had filmed. The prison's courtyard was divided in two: on one side, women and children were walking about. On the other, something mysterious and haunting was going on: some sixty-five men were huddled together, their

heads facing down. When one tried to look up, he was smacked by a guard. We later learned that we had captured one of the grim routines of Al Mabani: an afternoon feeding. Migrants were forbidden from talking or raising their heads. Bowls of food were put in front of groups to share. Afterward, detainees were forced to huddle in preparation to be returned to their cells. The effort had paid off: where before we had only painful testimonials about life at Al Mabani, we now had a haunting look inside.

[Read the Story and See Al Mabani](#)



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