

The Secret Mass Graves of the Refugee Crisis

Looking for 243 people who disappeared crossing the Mediterranean, we uncovered the shocking reality of what happens to those who perish at sea.



Fanus, a young Eritrean woman, crossed from Libya to Italy on a boat with more than 500 people on board in October 2013. She was asleep, packed with hundreds of others into the hull of the ship, when it started to sink.

"I remember waking up in water not knowing what was happening, and I tried to swim but I couldn't. I started paddling like a dog. The more I paddled, the more I felt I was sinking," she said.

"I didn't see anyone moving; all I saw was lots of bodies floating and none of them moved. I then saw a young man grabbing me hard on my neck. I then understood that we are sinking, both of us, and I had no choice but to fight him to let me go. I looked back and couldn't see him."

"Everywhere I looked I saw dead people or people drowning in front of my eyes. Some were screaming, some praying, some saying their names, who their families are, where in Eritrea they were from, messages to their loved ones. I kept hearing the noises; the

sound of screaming and crying, the shouting, the screaming went on and on again. I could see mothers holding up their children till they couldn't hold them anymore. I cried, looking at the bodies of the people I knew... The worst scene I can remember from that time is the floating bodies of infants, children."

"Confused, desperate, I started praying for a miracle. The noises suddenly started disappearing, the voices went fewer and fewer. The sea was quieter, less movement. I could not see anything, and for first time in my life I felt lonely. I thought I was the only one left in the sea. I decided not to look at the dead bodies: By that time, I understood the reason for the quietness was that most had died."

Fanus was eventually rescued by the Italian coast guard. She was one of just over 150 people who survived: more than 350 other passengers died. The incident became known as the Lampedusa tragedy— an event so large and so visible that it suddenly created the political will to launch an organized search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean.

The bodies from Lampedusa were eventually recovered, like most of the tragedies we hear about. But not every sinking can be retold by people who survived, like Fanus, or by rescue teams who document what happened. And that means there are incidents not accounted for; bodies that wash up on beaches around the Mediterranean; evidence of stories that aren't being told. What happens to them?



Salah Eddine Bchareg and his crew watch the sea as they set out from the port of Zarzis, Tunisia.

"They can't just disappear like this," Yafet said to me the first time I spoke with him. "They're human, they have to float."

His voice was straining with emotion: He was talking about the possibility that [the boat supposed to carry his wife Segen](#) and their young daughter Abigail across the Mediterranean sank. Could all of the passengers on board—at least 243 of them—really drown and leave no trace, no evidence to tell their families what happened?

"It's hard to accept something like this," he said.

"The same week that they left there were two accidents on the sea, but those people are known. There are some survivors, some people drowned. There was one other boat that was without survivors, but there were bodies floating in the water, and the families can know that. But if we say that these people have disappeared, if they drowned also, they can't just disappear like this."

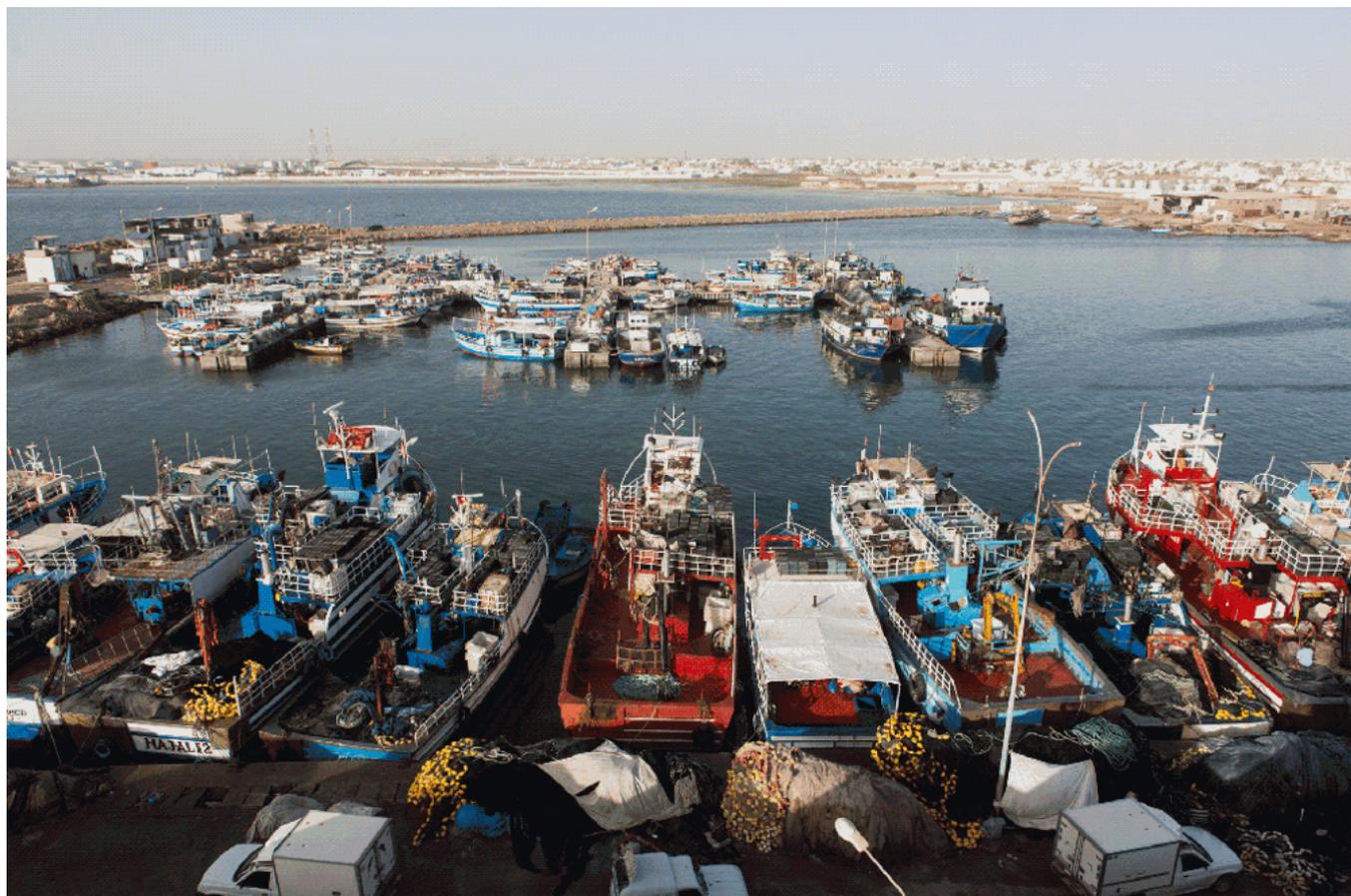
He is right. Boats *do* sink in the Mediterranean and their passengers *do* drown. In fact, more than 20,000 people have died in the sea since undocumented migration across the Mediterranean first escalated to crisis levels in the mid-1990s.

Despite search and rescue operations such as Mare Nostrum—the effort the Italian Navy launched after Lampedusa—or its successor, Triton, there continue to be thousands of deaths.

In 2014, the year the Ghost Boat disappeared, an estimated 3,000 people drowned in the waters between North Africa and Europe. This year, the number has broken 3,000 already.

But all of these tragedies usually leave something behind, even if it's not survivors: there are bodies, debris, reports, witnesses. In August of this year, for example, a fishing trawler carrying around 400 people capsized one kilometer off the Libyan coast. The bodies of about 200 people washed ashore over the next couple days, including 40 that had been trapped in the hull of the boat.

Identifying the bodies from shipwrecks is a major challenge. Refugees usually travel without documentation of any kind and the corpses are often disfigured from the time they have spent in the sea. But if there are bodies, traces, would it be possible to check against forensic information from the passengers of the Ghost Boat? Could this help us find out what happened?



For two decades the fishermen in the southern Tunisian port of Zarzis, about 50 miles

from the border with Libya, have been observing the movement of people across this stretch of water. Spotting boats packed with refugees passing in the distance—sometimes up to 1,000 people over the course of a couple days—is a regular occurrence for those working in the waters.

It's not uncommon for the fishermen to come across a boat in distress. In those cases they call the Tunisian or Italian authorities and assist with the rescue where they can.

Sometimes, though, it's not boats that the fishermen find. They know when a floating corpse is near because the stink of death covers the water.



Houcine Mlich, a fisherman in the port of Zarzis, Tunisia.

“You can smell the dead bodies from 900 or 800 meters away,” Salaheddine Bchareg, a round, sun-baked boat captain with graying stubble, told me while we sat with a group of fishermen at a bare-bones cafe in Zarsis’ port.

In the past—before Lampedusa, before the recent wave of migrants and refugees—there were no search and rescue operations. Fewer people were dying, but more bodies were floating in the Mediterranean because nobody was paying attention.

“The period until [2003] was actually the peak of seeing corpses floating in the water. The amount of corpses we were seeing and the smell, it was horrible... I can’t describe the smell. I’ve never actually smelled something so repulsive,” Bchareg said.



Salah Eddine Bchareg, president of the Fishermen Association of Zarzis.

At one point, the fishermen stopped working in one area of the sea where the bodies were concentrated. When the search and rescue operations started in 2013, the situation improved. The closer the search and rescue operations work to Libya, the fewer bodies there are.

But they are still there, the corpses floating in the sea—bloated, discolored, decaying with fingers, arms, even sometimes heads missing. One by one, or in groups, they wash up on the shores in Tunisia and Libya, or fishermen come across them floating in open water.

In Tunisia, the beaches north and south of Zarzis are the most common places for bodies to appear. Between June and early July this year, more than 70 corpses were recovered from the water or found on the shore. The situation has been like this for years.

Maybe some of the unaccounted-for corpses that arrived in Tunisia in 2014 could provide a clue as to what happened to the Ghost Boat and its passengers. I headed to Zarzis to find out.



Fouad Gamoudi, project coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, set up a search and rescue training program for the fishermen of Zarzis.

The night I arrived, I met with Fouad Gammoudi, the head of the Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) mission for Tunisia and Libya. MSF runs programs that teach fishermen, coast guards, and others how to conduct and assist with rescues and manage corpses.

Sitting at a table on the patio of MSF's operations base, Gammoudi pulled up some videos on his laptop. In one there are several bodies on a beach. The faces are skeletal where the skin had decayed. The scene switches. Civil protection workers unfold a deflated rubber zodiac boat that washed ashore. Inside, a body lays on its inflated stomach next to a bag of personal items.

In another video, a Tunisian coast guard vessel pulls into the dock with a bloated, decaying body strapped to a running board on the back. The skin color is so distorted that it is impossible to tell if the person was black, brown, or white. The sweatpants on the body, however, are still electric blue and the white lettering down the side is clearly legible.

"Something as small as what's written on the pants, any sign if it's a man or a woman, can sometimes identify a person," Gammoudi said, pointing at the screen. An image of

teeth or a bag of personal belongings can also provide essential information.

Were authorities in Zarzis—or anywhere else in Tunisia or Libya—keeping records on the corpses recovered from the sea that could help identify the bodies?

“In 2014 there was nothing, really nothing about identification or any body management,” Gammoudi said.

So what was being done with the hundreds of bodies that have washed ashore in Zarzis?

“By law you should put a corpse in an ambulance, but the government does not give authorization and the people do not want to let you use it,” Mohammed Trabelsi, a volunteer with the Tunisian Red Crescent body management committee, told me.

State authorities are not interested in taking responsibility for handling the bodies, so the task falls to the local authorities.

A sense of fear and revulsion surrounds the whole process. People do not want the bodies kept in the same morgue as their relatives, and even if they did, the morgue in Zarzis only has the capacity to hold six cadavers. Sometimes, as many as 30 bodies wash up at a time.



The morgue at the General Hospital in Zarzis has the capacity for six corpses. Usually bodies that wash ashore are taken directly to a mass grave on the outskirts of town.

If they are brought to the hospital, the smell and fear of disease angers local citizens. They do not want the bodies buried in the town's cemeteries.

Without access to an ambulance, or storage, or a recognized place to bury them, the corpses are dumped into a municipal garbage truck and taken directly to a plot of unused land about five miles outside of Zarzis, designated as a burial ground by the local authorities.

"The bodies are buried in piles. They just dig and put them in the ground," Trabelsi said.

Legally, a report has to be submitted to the attorney general's office when a corpse is found. But one doctor who inspects the bodies told me there are only three pieces of information deemed important: whether there are signs of violence on the body, the cause of death, and when it happened. The inspection either takes place where the body is found, or en route to the burial ground. There are no pictures taken and no information recorded about physical details that may help with body identification later on.



The burial ground outside of Zarzis is a barren, dusty patch of land littered with garbage and surrounded by low dirt walls. Two stone pillars stand at the entrance. There are no physical indications—no tombstones or grave markers—signifying that this is a place where the dead are buried.

Another plot of land holding mass graves lays in the distance. It was used until 2011, when briny water started to seep into the dry earth, making it impossible to inter bodies there. “There are hundreds of people buried in that one,” Shemseddine Marzouk, another TRC volunteer who brought us to the cemetery, told me.

In the newer burial ground, Marzouk pointed to fresh tractor marks in the dirt. A headless corpse that washed ashore less than a week ago was buried there.

He continued pointing to indistinguishable patches and mounds of earth. In one place, he tells me, 14 people are buried. In another, there are two—or maybe four. Slight indentations in the ground where the dirt has sagged around the bodies are the only distinguishable sign of the graves.

The Tunisian Red Crescent, with the support of the International Committee for the Red Cross, is working on plans to change this system. They want to build individual graves, buy equipment to properly handle and inspect the bodies, and record the necessary information for body identification. But none of this was in place when the Ghost Boat disappeared, and none of it is in place now.

Trabelsi is skeptical that a better system will be brought in anytime soon because there is no will from the authorities. The situation frustrates him.

“For me, these corpses are people who have human rights. They should be treated with respect. After all, we never know how our lives can change at some point and we can become those people.”

Walking over the nondescript ground, I was imagining the bodies buried in piles under my feet. Those corpses had an identity—they were people. And those people had families, friends, loved ones, maybe children, who, like the Ghost Boat families, are in limbo: suspended by nagging questions.

If the Ghost Boat sank, maybe one or more of the passengers were interred here in this desolate place—or in another unknown refugee cemetery like this along the Tunisian and Libyan coasts.

While speaking to the fishermen at the port earlier, one of them said to me: “The bodies that we are collecting now from time to time, they might be the bodies of the people you are looking for. Probably they can be. These bodies, obviously, they’ve been in the water for a while.”

Given the expanse of the sea between Libya, Tunisia, and Italy and the volume of people crossing—and dying—it feels like a remote possibility. But without any record of forensic information, how would it be possible to ever know? How could there be any hope of bringing closure?

In Libya, the situation is even worse. Many more corpses wash ashore there than in Tunisia. Armed conflict and the dissolution of central political authority make it even harder to keep track of numbers, document forensic evidence, and inter bodies with any kind of system. In 2013 and 2014, there was only one person in the whole country inspecting the bodies of people who drowned at sea—and he was a veterinarian, Gammoudi, from MSF, told me. This year, no one is doing the work.

In Italy, the Mare Nostrum program no longer operates—Triton, its replacement, is more limited in scope—but there are efforts to follow forensic trails. A lab at the University of Milan is building a database of DNA and other evidence from incidents in the Mediterranean with the aim of tracking down and identifying missing people. But things are progressing slowly: They have yet to officially identify almost 200 of those who died in the shipwreck off Lampedusa two years ago.

Contemplating the situation, I started thinking of Segen and Abigail again. A picture that Yafet sent me came to my mind. His two daughters were sitting in a small tub. Shalom, the older, was washing Abi with a bubbly sponge. Abi’s eyes were fixed on the camera. A smile, revealing small white teeth, spread across her face. Yafet’s words were echoing in my mind: “They can’t just disappear like this. They’re human, they have to float.”

Given the absence of forensic records, I thought, where can we turn now to look for evidence of what happened to the Ghost Boat? Was the happy little girl in the picture still alive?