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Book Review - *Merchants of Men: How Jihadists and ISIS Turned Kidnapping and Refugee Trafficking into a Multi-Billion Dollar Business* by Loretta Napoleoni

A Book Review by Karen Jacobsen

Merchants of Men:

How Jihadists and ISIS Turned Kidnapping and Refugee

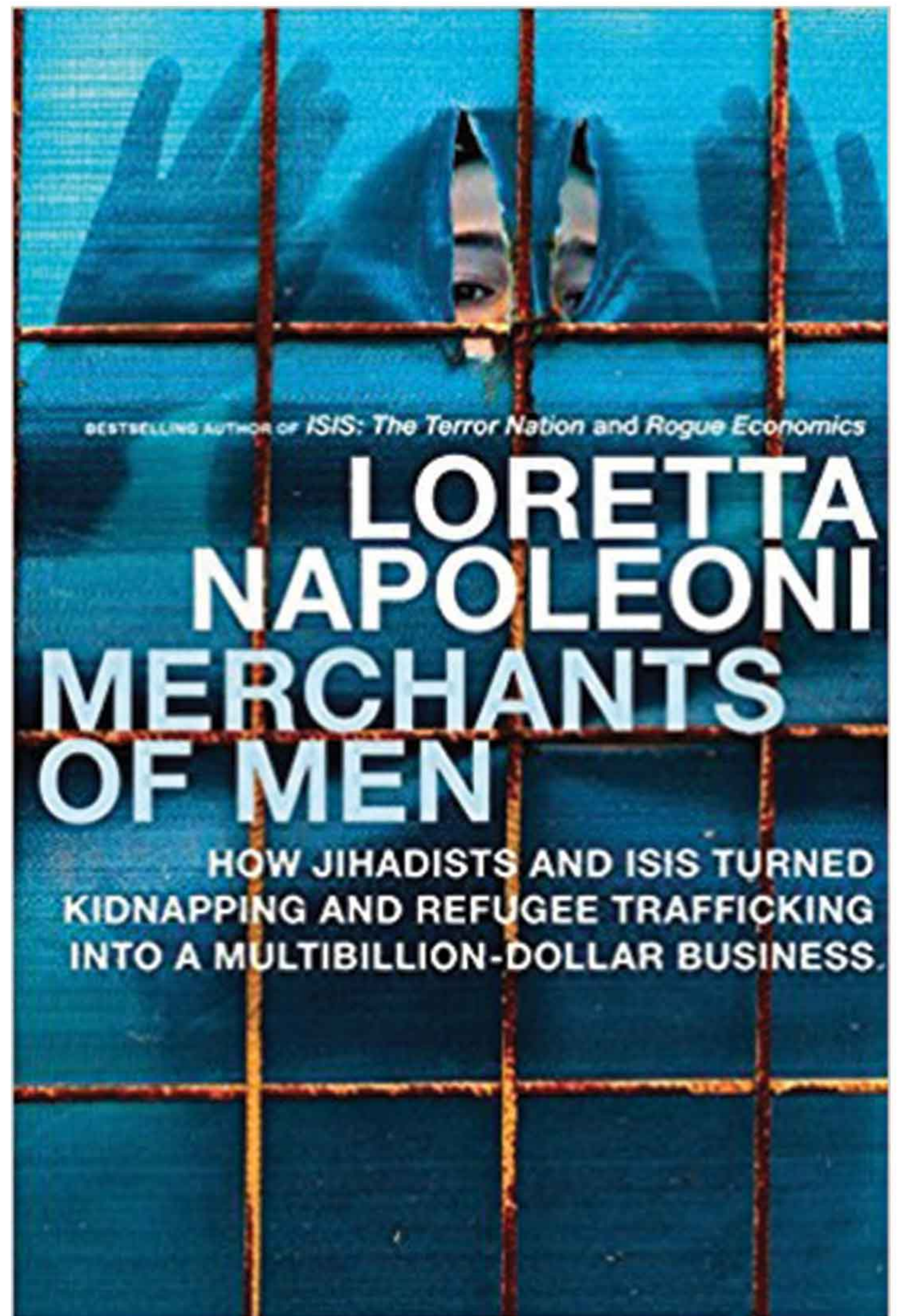
Trafficking into a Multi-Billion Dollar Business by Loretta Napoleoni

Karen Jacobsen

This book is a lively journalistic read, filled with stories and details of encounters between jihadists, smugglers, organized crime, drug smuggling across the Sahara, kidnapping of rich tourists, and European ransoms. The author, an Italian journalist, describes herself as a ‘chronicler of the dark side of the economics of globalization’ and has written several books on ISIS, terrorist financing, and money laundering.

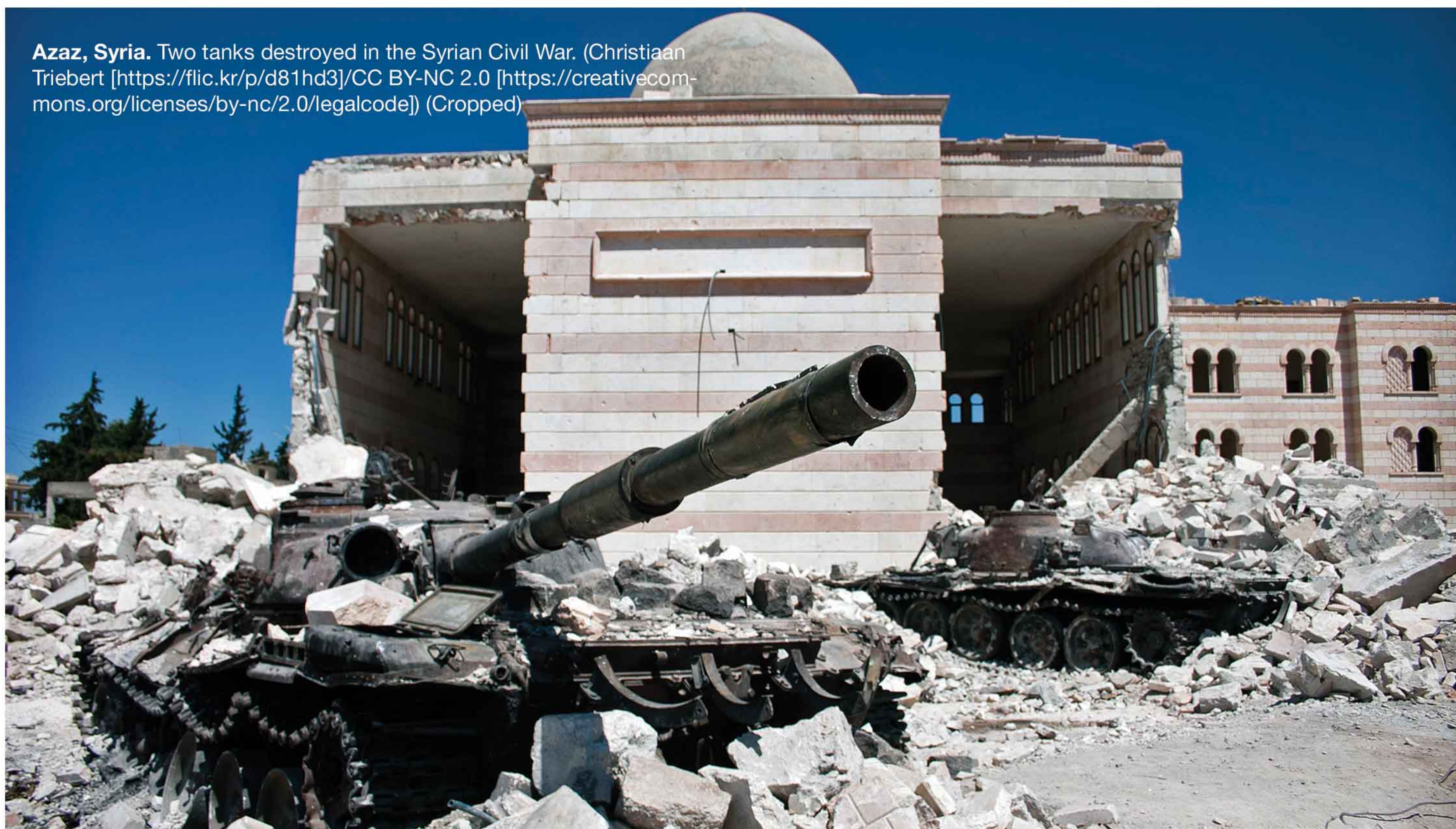
In *Merchants of Men*, Napoleoni argues that the proliferation of failed states and the breakdown of law and order in regions like the Sahel, accelerated by the burgeoning cocaine business in the region, have enabled a rapid increase in trafficking and kidnapping. The profits of these merchants of men have flourished, aided by the secrecy of European governments surrounding the ransoming of their citizens (notably, the U.S. does not, publicly at least, pay ransoms). Napoleoni raises these and a number of intriguing issues in the preface. She points to the “false sense of security about the globalized world” that allows both “young, inexperienced members of the First Nations Club” and humanitarian aid workers to explore the world and bring aid to conflict zones — and become the primary target of kidnapers. She gives (unsourced) statistics about the growth of the kidnapping industry and its mirror, private security companies, and asks whether “the economics of kidnapping are immune from the laws of economics,” because as competition has increased between kidnapers and private security firms, prices have gone up instead of down. She argues that when the migrant crisis erupted in Europe in 2015, the business of hostage taking — already set up with “a sophisticated organizational structure in place and plenty of money from trading hostages” — switched to trafficking in migrants and refugees. The profits of these merchants of men have continued to increase since then.

This is an interesting and well-founded argument and worthy of a book. Napoleoni handles her topic with brio, weaving the stories and experiences of individuals and business ventures into each chapter. In Part One, she guides the reader through the evolution of global



trafficking since the implementation of the USA PATRIOT Act a month after 9/11. She traces the interlocking themes of the Colombian drug cartels, drug smuggling in the Sahel, the rise of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the kidnapping and ransoming of foreigners in Iraq, and how aid agencies and different governments responded (when both Italian and Japanese citizens were kidnapped on different occasions in Iraq in 2004, the responses of Italy and Japan were very different). One chapter focuses on the 2003 Libya–Italy “dirty deal” with Qadhafi to control African migration from Libya, a deal that “benefitted traffickers, turned migrants into hostages and slave labor, and diverted

Azaz, Syria. Two tanks destroyed in the Syrian Civil War. (Christiaan Triebert [<https://flic.kr/p/d81hd3>]/CC BY-NC 2.0 [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/legalcode>]) (Cropped)



large sums of Italian taxpayer money into Gaddafi’s pockets.” It is notable that this year, Italy is again discussing a deal with Libya to control migration from the latter’s shores. Subsequent chapters focus on the economics of Somali piracy, and then the book turns to the Syrian civil war and ways in which “ransoms turned out to be one of the main sources of funding for the Assad regime.”

In Part Two, Napoleoni turns to the mechanics of kidnapping, with each chapter focused on different aspects: the Negotiator (the chapter is simply a monologue by a private kidnapping negotiator), the ransom, what happens if a kidnapping isn’t quickly resolved, what happens to hostages, and so forth. The writing is

lively and fast paced, closely tied to the stories of the people involved. Part Three brings us into the present with a discussion of ISIS, and refugee stories about making the journey to Europe. It ends with a speculative epilogue on what Brexit might mean for migrants.

The book pulls off a brisk recent history of the intersection between trafficking, kidnapping, and migration, providing the reader with fascinating insights into kidnapping negotiations of all kinds. It is not an academic book, and at times the reader might wish for more sources and cross-checking. Nonetheless it is a terrific read, shining a bright light on the huge global problem of trafficking — a problem whose solution is nowhere in sight.

Karen Jacobsen

Karen Jacobsen is the Henry J. Leir Professor of Global Migration at the Fletcher School, and directs the Refugees and Forced Migration Program at the Feinstein International Center. Professor Jacobsen’s current research explores urban displacement and global migration systems, with a focus on the livelihoods and financial resilience of migrants and refugees. In 2013-2014 she was on leave from Tufts, leading the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) in Geneva. From 2000–2005, she directed the Alchemy Project, which explored the use of microfinance as a way to support people in refugee camps and other displacement settings. Professor Jacobsen’s publications include *A View from Below: Conducting Research in Conflict Zones* (with Mazurana and Gale), and *The Economic Life of Refugees* (2005), which is widely used in courses on forced migration. She is a citizen of both South Africa and the United States, and lives in Brookline with her son and two dogs.