

slavery inc.

the untold  
story of  
international  
sex  
trafficking

lydia cacho

FOREWORD BY ROBERTO SAVIANO

# *Praise for Lydia Cacho and Slavery Inc.*

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‘Cacho is a woman of great strength and courage, who is deeply committed to ethical journalism and the advancement of human rights’

—MARIANNE PEARL

‘Cacho has brought to light information that was previously unavailable and she has exposed herself to enormous risk... The importance of her evidence is universal’

—ROBERTO SAVIANO, AUTHOR OF *GOMORRAH*

‘Cacho inspires, encourages, protects, empowers. She has modelled what investigative journalism should be for generations to come’

—AGNES CALLAMARD, DIRECTOR, ARTICLE 19

‘The work that Lydia Cacho does is as indispensable as the air we breathe’

—ENGLISH PEN

‘Cacho uncovers some of the most harrowing tales from kidnapped sex trafficking victims, those who save and protect them, as well as traffickers themselves’

—*NORTHERN ECHO*

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# SLAVERY INC.

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The Untold Story of  
International Sex Trafficking

Lydia Cacho

Foreword by Roberto Saviano



**SOFT SKULL PRESS**  
An imprint of **COUNTERPOINT**  
**BERKELEY**

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English translation © Elizabeth Boburg, 2014  
Originally published in Spanish as *Esclavas del poder*  
by Random House Mondadori, S.A., 2010  
First published by Portobello Books 2012

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Cover design by Faceout Studio  
Typeset in Bembo by Avon DataSet, Warwickshire

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 978-1-61902-399-4

SOFT SKULL PRESS  
An imprint of COUNTERPOINT  
1919 Fifth Street  
Berkeley, CA 94710  
[www.softskull.com](http://www.softskull.com)

Distributed by Publishers Group West  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my brothers Oscar, José and Alfredo, who have shown that masculinity can be loving, pro-equality  

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and non violent.

*Violence is not good because it hurts and it makes me cry.*

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—Yeana, sex-trafficking victim survivor, ten years o

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## **The Power of Ethics**

*Roberto Saviano*

Lydia Cacho is a model for anyone who wishes to become a journalist. She is a woman of great courage who has endured prison and torture to defend a minority that nobody listened to, to draw people's attention to the wrongs that women and children are subject to in Mexico and in the poorer parts of the world. She has uncovered hitherto unknown information and she has exposed herself to enormous danger by informing against important businessmen and politicians.

I, too, have made accusations against organized crime. I have opened windows that reveal collaboration between organized crime and politics, but I have not explicitly attacked the government of my country. I am threatened by the Camorra but I am defended by the Italian state.

Lydia Cacho has had to serve an unjust term of imprisonment, she has been threatened and tortured to frighten her off, yet it was later discovered that all her accusations were well-founded. The importance of her evidence has universal validity. Wherever government is weak, wherever society accepts criminality, women and children are the first victims. The trafficking and exploitation of human beings is the most primitive of crimes that, in contrast to the trafficking of arms and drugs, provides sky-high profit margins but limited risks.

*Roberto Saviano is an eminent Italian journalist best known for his investigative reporting on the Camorra, the Italian mafia, which he exposed in his book and movie entitled Gomorrah.*



# *Introduction*

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When I was seven years old, every time my sister Sonia and I went out on the street, our mother warned us to stay away from the “child-snatcher,” an old woman, well known in our neighborhood who stole girls. She would entice girls by offering them candy and then she would kidnap them and sell them off to strangers. Of course, the word “kidnapper” refers to the snatching of people of all ages, not just children. Forty years later, I discovered that the lesson of my childhood, which could have been taken from Charles Dickens, has now become one of the most serious problems of the twenty-first century. Society in general tends to consider trafficking in women and children as a throwback to a time when the “white slave trade” was a small-time business run by pirates who kidnapped women to sell them to brothels in faraway countries. We thought that modernization and strong global markets would eradicate this type of slavery and that the abuse of children in the darkest corners of the “underdeveloped” world would simply disappear through contact with Western law and market economies. My research for this book shows the exact opposite. There is a world-wide explosion in organized-crime syndicates that kidnap, buy, and enslave women and children; the same forces that were supposed to eradicate slavery have strengthened it on an unprecedented scale. Across the planet, we are witnessing a culture that considers the kidnapping, disappearance, trade and corruption of young girls and adolescents as normal. They become sexual objects for rent and sale and our global culture celebrates this objectification as an act of freedom and progress. In this dehumanizing market economy, millions of people assume that prostitution is a minor evil. They choose to ignore the fact that what underlies prostitution is exploitation, abuse, and the tremendous power of organized crime, exercised on a small and large scale around the world.

For centuries, mafiosi, politicians, military officers, businessmen, industrialists, religious leaders, bankers, police officers, judges, priests, and ordinary men have participated in global organized-crime networks. The difference between individual offenders or small local gangs and the global criminal syndicates lies in their strategies, codes, and marketing practices. Without a doubt, corruption is what gives the mafia economic and political power in every city where they do business. The search for pleasure is universal and provides a vital link in the chain: while some create the market for human slavery, others protect it, promote it, and feed it, or are in charge of renewing the demand for raw materials.

Organized crime includes mafias, syndicates or cartels that run illegal businesses to generate profits. The individuals who participate in these illegal activities are called gangsters, mafiosos, mobsters, or narcos, and they belong to the so-called “black economy.” They do not pay taxes to legitimate governments but they must negotiate with such governments in order to operate. The deals between organized criminals and governments contribute to the trade in arms, drugs, and human beings. This trade involves crimes such as robbery, fraud, and the illegal transport of goods and people.

In the twenty-first century organized-crime groups have become more professional. The capitalistic rules of free trade have provided the mafia with countless opportunities to create new routes for the trafficking of goods and services between countries and continents. Violence and protection are their main businesses; money, pleasure, and power are their primary goals.

Trafficking in persons, as defined in the Glossary at the end of this book, has been documented

175 nations. It shows the weakness of global capitalism and the disparity created by the most powerful countries' economic rules. Above all, it reveals the normalization of human cruelty and the culture that has encouraged it. Each year, 1.39 million people around the world—mostly women and girls—are subjected to sexual slavery. They are bought, sold, and re-sold like raw materials in any given industry, like social waste, like trophies and gifts.

Over a period of five years I set out to track the small and large international mafia operations by listening to the stories of survivors of sexual exploitation. I found men, women, and children who were victims of labor trafficking or forced marriages. But my main focus was to follow the trail of a criminal phenomenon born in the twentieth century: the sexual trafficking of women and children. The sophistication of the global sex industry has created a market for sex slaves that may soon outnumber the African slaves sold from the 1500s to the 1800s.

Sex has always played a central role in the history of every mafia. Mafias buy, sell, give, kidnap, rent, loan, rape, torture, and kill women and girls. The notion of women as objects of pleasure is always present in the stories of the criminal groups around the world—the Japanese Yakuza, the Chinese Triads, the Italian, Russian, and Albanian mafias, and the Latin American drug cartels. Sexual pleasure feeds economic and political power. According to macho codes, women are valued as objects, not as people; and even the women who participate in criminal organizations adopt attitudes of misogyny and contempt.

Access to sexual pleasure is a great tool of cohesion and negotiation among groups of males in the military and business worlds, to such an extent that the sex trade is the most profitable in the world, even more so than the arms and drug trades. The products are adult women, adolescents, and young girls, regardless of age, as long as they can be controlled, used, and dominated by their owners.

This book explores the male mentality towards women and sexuality. We learn about the so-called “feminist boomerang,” which pushes many men to seek younger and younger women from countries where the culture of feminine submission still prevails. The book also lends a voice to women who work as street prostitutes as well as to those who call themselves “free prostitutes” and create associations to defend prostitution as “just another job” in a capitalist and exploitive world. Without them, we would not be able to explain the complex global debate on sexual slavery and prostitution.

Traveling around the world and investigating the trafficking rings radically changed my perspective on how the mafias are connected. The impunity with which these groups run their businesses is alarming and suspicious, especially at a time when the most powerful countries have put the battle against human trafficking near the top of their national and international agendas. Why are there so many contradictions in migration policies and free-trade agreements? Why are more women than men now becoming migrants? How many countries legally protect labor exploitation in an effort to improve their economies? Why is it that in wealthy countries there is a lack of transparency in the temporary detention of migrants from poor countries? How do border factories operate? How do businesses and governments choose a territory for labor exploitation?

On an emotional level, having to confront the fact that I am a female journalist made this investigation much more complex. The challenge was monumental. Even though I speak four languages, I had to trust interpreters and native stringers who knew the ins and outs of every city and the local mafias' rules. Several international correspondents, all men, recommended chauffeurs, informants and guides to me. None of my colleagues had followed the trail of human traffickers, although some of them had covered the issue as part of other investigations into corruption and organized crime. Without arousing suspicion, many of them were able to enter the brothels and

karaoke bars where young girls and women are trafficked in about twenty countries. They are me and this is their passport to the crime scene.

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In Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and central Asia, I had to adopt various strategies to avoid danger. I encountered enormous frustrations, such as when I had to flee a Cambodian casino run by the Chinese Triads, where girls under the age of ten were being bought and sold.

There were many obstacles. Throughout the tourist destinations of the world, there are taxi drivers, concierges and chauffeurs who provide services to promote prostitution and participate in trafficking rings, which makes it difficult to gauge whether they will betray you. It is highly likely that the person driving you through the streets of Sri Lanka, Miami, or Cuba is also reporting to local crime syndicates that a woman journalist is asking about their services or to be taken to specific neighborhoods where pimps and trafficking victims live.

The ever-present fear I felt was heightened by the fact that I am a woman. It made me take precautions, but it also pushed me to look harder at my sources and be more suspicious of them. It also made me more empathetic with the victims who dared to share their stories, and it reminded me how dangerous it is to be a woman in any patriarchal society.

I interviewed various survivors and experts, but I also had to approach those operating inside the networks and still live to tell the tale. In order to do so, I put into practice the lessons of Gunter Wallraff, a German journalist and author of *The Lowest of the Low*. I met Gunter when he visited Mexico and we had the chance to share our experiences. Following his advice, during my trip from Mexico to central Asia I disguised myself and assumed false identities. As a result, I was able to sit down and have coffee with a Filipino trafficker in Cambodia; dance in a Mexican nightclub with Cuban, Brazilian, and Colombian dancers; enter a brothel of young women in Tokyo where everyone looked like a manga character; and, dressed as a nun, I was able to walk through La Merced, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods, controlled by powerful traffickers, in Mexico City.

Although all forms of human trafficking are rooted in the search for economic power, sex trafficking encourages, creates, and strengthens a culture in which slavery is normalized and considered to be a viable answer for the millions of women, girls, and boys who live in poverty and lack education. The power of the international sex trade lies in turning the human body into a commodity, to be exploited, bought, and sold without the owner's permission. During the 2009 World Sex Fair, I had the opportunity to interview several of the best-known marketers and promoters of the sex trade, and most of them repeated the same phrase as if it were their mantra: "This is all about money, not people." This is the slogan they use to train sex entrepreneurs. The millions that these people invest annually in political lobbying to normalize slavery could save an entire country from starvation.

Before embarking on this journey, a retired Mexican army general told me that an illegal cargo of AK-47s did not need anything more than proper packaging, a buyer, a corrupt government intermediary, and a seller. A human slave, however, must be convinced that her life has no value except to her buyer and seller. The trafficker's power is sustained by eliminating the potential victims' chances of dignity and freedom. Poverty is not only the fertile ground, but the machine that plants the seeds of slavery in the world. Governments' complicity is undeniable.

This book features the full cast of characters who appear in this tragedy: the traffickers; the victims who became victimizers, and those who healed their bodies and minds and transformed their lives; the intermediaries, clients, madams, military officers, public servants—more or less honest or corrupt—in various countries; mothers who offered to sell me their babies; mothers desperate for their daughters who were kidnapped by traffickers; and those who participated in local

sex tourism rings. Their voices, threats, and hopes are in these pages.

~~We cannot understand this criminal business unless we follow the money trail. How do they launder their money and where? The banks and stock-market investors play their part. To understand this phenomenon I had to analyze various countries' stance on human trafficking and prostitution, examine how governments profit from its legalization or regulation, and the cultural value that men and women give to commercial sex. I found profoundly religious nations, such as Turkey, where prostitution is legal and the government runs brothels. Sweden, on the other hand, has criminalized the consumption of commercial sex and has legally protected women who are victims of commercial sexual slavery.~~

Finally, this work would not be complete without the millions of people who have devoted their lives to rescuing and healing victims of trafficking, from China to Brazil, from India to Los Angeles, from Guatemala to Canada and Japan.

This is a map of contemporary slavery; an investigation that answers the essential journalistic questions of who, how, when, where, and why, in the twenty-first century, more people, more arms, and more drugs are being sold. The means to fight this crime lie in the hands of the world's citizens. I hope that every human being can find his or her own path to freedom and hope, regardless of the moral panic that this issue has generated in recent years.

## *Turkey and the Golden Crescent*

I check my passport, ticket, and Turkish visa. I am ready to begin my trip to central Asia. As I study the map, memories of my previous trip come back to me.

Some years ago, I traveled to Finland, and then to St Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev. Later, I flew to Tbilisi, Georgia, where I came to know and respect the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who helped me understand the complexities of the region. I traveled through Azerbaijan and Armenia. I visited Tashkent and Samarkand, once one of the most beautiful cities of the Persian empire. From Uzbekistan, I went to Ashgabat in Turkmenistan. It was October, and I suffered the winter as only a woman from the tropics can, incapable of stoically tolerating temperatures of ten degrees below zero.

This time, it is February, and the cold will not be as cruel. I return to the map and trace my route following the path of the slave traffickers. I will fly from London to Turkey and visit Ankara and Istanbul, the principal cities of that beautiful country.

I have mixed emotions. How many times as a young girl did I dream about traveling the world, admiring civilizations and cultures that were new to me? I imagined myself walking through the underground cities of Cappadocia, an underworld whose giant stones might whisper their secret stories to me. I also remember my mother telling me how much it meant to her to visit the church of Saint Sofia in Istanbul.

I am going to a country that represents a bridge between civilizations. Before leaving Mexico, I read Orhan Pamuk. This time I will not be chasing the voices of the past. I will be visiting a secular republic that plays the important role of connecting Asia and Europe. The country's borders are porous, and I can imagine the surveillance challenges faced by the authorities. In the northeast, Turkey is bordered by Georgia; in the east, by Armenia and Azerbaijan; in the southeast, by Iran; in the north by the Black Sea; and in the west, by Greece, the Aegean Sea, and Bulgaria. Iraq, Syria, and, of course, the Mediterranean Sea lie to the south. The ancient trade routes have not changed much, but my goal is to discover how the pattern of smuggling has evolved to operate in the globalized world of organized crime.

Turkey is a country of seventy-five million inhabitants. Since signing a free-trade agreement with its European neighbors in 1996, Turkey, like the majority of other countries that have opened their borders, has faced the paradox of fostering the growth of the free market while also experiencing the growth of an illicit one. Turkey is an associate member of the European Union, but it has not yet met EU requirements for admission as a full member.

The plane lands in Turkey at night. The beauty of the starry sky painted with violet brushstrokes takes my breath away. Sitting in a taxi, on my way to the hotel, I roll down the window. The smells of Istanbul reach me: the diesel, the spices, and the salty breeze from the sea. Every city has its unique aroma.

The taxi driver, proud of his country, decides to give me a tour. He explains that we are in the area that separates Anatolia and Thrace, encompassing the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles—the area known as the Turkish Straits, which form a boundary between Asia and Europe.

“We are about to be recognized as a member of the European Union,” he informs me in a friendly tone, using touristy English that hints at various accents. “Here everything is good,” he assures me. “Muslims, Jews, Christians, Agnostics, Protestants all live together,” he adds. He speaks as though he is repeating a slogan. I smile and think about the reports coming out of PEN International, an organization that defends freedom of expression, citing the persecution and incarceration of Turkish journalists. However, I remain silent because I know that the world is not black and white and that all countries, just like the people who inhabit them, are diverse, complex, and magnificent at the same time.

The kindness of the people, their smiles, the warmth of the bellhop’s eyes as he greets me at the hotel, and the sweet voice of a receptionist who speaks perfect English, make me feel welcome. These things remind me that one cannot see the darkness without also seeing the light, and that kindness exists everywhere. I suppose that some of the 200,000 women and girls who have been trafficked to this country over the last five years have at one point experienced the kindness of someone who saw them as human beings, someone who made them smile, helping them to feel less alone.

I contact Eugene Schoulgin, an extraordinary writer, novelist, and journalist, born in 1941 of Russian-Norwegian descent. Eugene has lived in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he is now in Istanbul serving as director of PEN International. He helps me to schedule some meetings with political analysts and direct sources. This dear friend affectionately takes care of me, and I intend to keep him informed as to my whereabouts and the people I meet, just in case something happens and he needs to know how and where to find me. I would not have been as successful at getting information on this trip without his security advice.

## **The Informant**

It is Friday in Maslak, a neighborhood known as the “Manhattan of Istanbul.” The skyscrapers in this modern financial district embody the cosmopolitan mix of this jewel of a city, half European and half Asian. The February chill invites people to seek refuge in the bars and cafés that smell of dark tobacco, strong coffee, and, in some cases, of recently cooked lamb. Slim young women, fashionably dressed in Italian or French styles in mini-skirts, leggings, and tall boots, enter the bars as though they own the world. Others walk absorbed in their own thoughts, with their heads covered with fine silk scarves and wearing modest dresses. Young men wear cologne and look very polished in their Hugo Boss suits—some authentic, some fake. They greet each other with a hug and a firm touch of the cheeks—the masculine form of the double kiss, as learned from their grandfathers. The voice of a Turkish pop singer who sounds like Britney Spears fills the air.

I am standing at the bar drinking a beer and waiting for my contact to arrive. After a little while, a tall, handsome, dark-skinned man with close-cropped hair and bushy eyebrows, wearing a brown leather jacket, stops beside me. His nose still red from the icy air outside, he removes his wool scarf and, without even giving me a glance, he says my name and asks for a drink.

He looks at me from the corner of his eye and in halting French mumbles that we cannot speak here: “In five-star hotel. We can meet tomorrow in five-star hotel.” I reach into my purse and retrieve a card from my hotel and give it to him. He looks at it, observes me, and then returns his gaze to the card. “That is the Taya Hatun neighborhood,” he says. “Yes, it’s a small hotel, only tourists,” I insist. “At nine in the morning. Only you, madam,” he adds. He pays for the drink without having touched it. He leaves the bar and jumps on a streetcar, looking over his shoulder.

Mahmut is a police officer—one of the good ones, according to a colleague who is a foreign correspondent. He was trained by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an international

governmental agency based in Geneva, as part of a special group to combat human trafficking in Turkey. The US Department of State has invested seven million dollars in Turkey to fight trafficking. The Norwegians have also invested the same amount. Mahmut is a secular Turk, a remarkably well-educated man. He believes that the fight against the sexual exploitation of women in Turkey and on the Silk Road, which Marco Polo once traveled, is a farce and this is why, after months of negotiations with contacts, he has decided to tell me his story.

I am waiting for him at the small boutique hotel and drinking a delicious, fragrant Turkish coffee. A group of Spanish tourists chat happily in the restaurant. Their tour guide arrives and, as they start up, they ask me if I will be joining them. "No," I answer. A woman from Seville warns me that I will regret not taking this tour. "Absolutely," I reply. I say goodbye, and I think about these tourists going down the avenue that runs parallel to where the Turkish brothels are, unaware that the darkened windows hide slaves from other countries.

I take a seat at the bar. It is an elegant place with a luxurious atmosphere, straight out of a novel. It is furnished with honey-colored armchairs with velvet scatter cushions embroidered in different styles. The place is bright, and soft music is playing. Nothing suggests that someone might have a conversation about the sale and purchase of human beings here. The policeman arrives and the young receptionist barely looks at him as he enters.

He approaches me with such stiffness that the tension between us remains unbroken. I invite him to sit down. He looks around and in a low voice he says, "If they find out that I was the one who gave you the information, I will rot in jail. That is, if they don't kill me first for violation of Article 301 and for treason against my country and against the police code. According to the state, the media is our enemy; we are never to trust it." I know. On the basis of the penal code of this country, thousands of writers and journalists have been prosecuted for daring to give their opinions on the Turkish government. The legal case against Orhan Pamuk, banning his freedom of expression, is perhaps the best known in the West. The authorities maintain that the law has been changed, as required by the European Union, but judges in Turkish courts continue to hear such cases. Pamuk provided evidence of the killing of one million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds in Turkey in 1915. According to the Turkish government, Pamuk's statements insulted Turkish identity and warranted a three-year jail sentence.

We order a large pitcher of an exquisite, fragrant cardamom tea. We smile politely. Suddenly, silently, he points out the cameras on the bar's ceiling. I tell him that we can go up to my room, and he accepts.

He is cautious. The room is small, but it has an armchair and a desk chair. I offer him the armchair. Little by little, he loosens up. He asks me if I know about Turkish corruption and trafficking in women. While I speak, he pays close attention to every word. He asks permission to remove his jacket. I agree with a nod. I freeze at the sight of a gun in his shoulder holster and for a second I lose the thread of my thoughts. With a pen in my hand and a notebook open on my lap, I realize that I am in Turkey, in a hotel room with an armed man, and that we are the only two people who know this. He intuitively senses my anxiety and begins to speak about his wife and about the admirable women he has met at the IOM. With a sigh, we make a silent pact of trust. Without such pacts, we reporters could never survive.

A surprising statistic in Turkey has puzzled experts. Despite an increase in the number of trafficking cases involving women worldwide, the Turkish police have reported a decrease in the number of women trafficked to Turkey from Russia, Moldavia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. How is it possible that in a few years the Turkish police force has been able to lower the incidence of women trafficked from these countries by 50 percent? \* Why are there no statistics on domestic trafficking?

Mahmut delicately picks up the small crystal glass of tea and takes a few sips. He studies his shoes and explains to me that the Turkish government's new strategy to gain EU membership consists of signing all international agreements and accepting a dialogue on human rights. At the same time, the government has strengthened the army and the police force dedicated to national security. However, Mahmut warns me that the police and army bosses see prostitution as a business, and they are their customers themselves.

They believe that North Americans and some Nordic Europeans are the ones who call it sexual slavery, but that's someone else's problem, not ours. It's a question of approach, madam. For example, a lot of Norwegians and Swedes come to Turkey for sex tourism. In their countries, they don't do it, and here they do, because it is legal and nobody recognizes them . . . Today, more than ever, the Albanian and Russian mafias collaborate with the local mafias to transport women who end up in the prostitution business. It has always worked this way. The difference now is that so-called "civilized" countries have decided to fight this crime, making it a better business for everyone: the traffickers, those who make pornography, and those who simply sell a false dream to women. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with all their black-market opportunities, have fueled the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and women. Nobody speaks of this. You will see that in a few years the media will be surprised to learn how much money the terrorists and North American mercenaries have earned from the sale of women in the region. The Yakuza buy amphetamines processed in Iran and take them to Japan, Italy, the United States, and they also buy girls all over the world.

As I write these lines, I stop to look at the photographs I took and to listen to the recordings I made a month after my trip to Turkey. I interviewed a North American and a Colombian woman who were sold to the Yakuza in Tokyo and in Osaka. I also recall the story of a Mexican girl who was murdered by the Yakuza. I realize that the information is there for anyone who chooses to see it. The problem is what governments choose to address or ignore once they become aware of these tales of globalized slavery.

I decide to tell Mahmut about an interview I had with Dr Muhtar Cokar, founder and director of the Human Resource Development Foundation, a Turkish NGO that runs a shelter for female victims of human trafficking. I interviewed him in his office in downtown Istanbul. Cokar, a calm man incapable of looking me straight in the eye, confirmed that many young women from Moldavia, Russia, and other neighboring territories are first forced into prostitution in their own countries before they are brought to Turkey with promises of better work and more money. However, once they arrive in Turkey, they find themselves alone, without work. There is a preconceived notion that Turkish men go crazy for Eastern European women, who are known as *natashas*, especially blondes and redheads with pale skin and long legs. According to Dr Cokar, there are few Turkish prostitutes; Istanbul is a city with solid morals, and it is impossible for a religious family, regardless of their faith, to accept a daughter becoming a prostitute. The current law, which dates back to the 1930s, prohibits prostitutes from marrying or having children.

Foreign women make perfect prostitutes for Turkish and foreign men alike. According to rescue workers, 40 percent of Turkey's sex tourists come from Russia. According to Dr Cokar, many prostitutes work independently. They save money and when the police start harassing or extorting money from them, they usually end up being extradited or, to put it in politically correct terms, repatriated. On average they spend two weeks in a shelter in Istanbul (although some have stayed up to six months). After that they are sent back to their countries, to their families and children and to a life of poverty and hunger. Some attempt to return to Turkey, paying \$15 for a visa at the border; from there they can make their way to Greece or Italy, where the Albanian mafia will take them to England or France. They have to pay for the journey, but, according to the doctor, many of them will do anything in order to send money home.

I was surprised by his calm, clear conviction; the way he spoke of the *natashas* disturbed me—



was almost condescending. When he noticed the surprise in my eyes, he made a strange observation: “Look, Lydia, sometimes foreigners do not understand our customs and they judge without thinking.” He stood up and lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke out of the window. “For example, now there are discussions about whether women should wear the veil in Turkey. You may call it sexist [I never said anything on the subject], but in reality it is a good thing because it allows orthodox women to leave their houses. It is a feminist measure,” he assured me. “These are customs that, if not understood, can never be appreciated properly,” he said to me, as he threw his cigarette out of the window. “There are 3,000 registered sex workers in Turkey. In the government brothel, divided into three buildings, there are 131 adult sex workers. There are foreigners hidden in private houses that operate as illegal brothels.” Dr Cokar described how sex tourism adopts the same rules as in the rest of the world: there are five-star hotels where wealthy clients obtain high-priced “call girls.” Regions with a lot of tourists or military groups always attract and foster prostitution. He said that, according to reliable sources, there are about 100,000 illegal prostitutes in Turkey, although he could not corroborate that figure.

In 2010, Dr Cokar’s shelter assisted 100 women victims of trafficking. According to the doctor, none of them showed signs of “severe physical violence,” but there was evidence of psychological and sexual violence. Traffickers inject the prostitutes with antibiotics once a month to protect clients who, for the most part, refuse to use condoms. This practice, he added, leads to terrible medical problems for the prostitutes, because they build up resistance to stronger antibiotics. “Fifty percent of immigrant women who enter Turkey end up in prostitution rings,” states a report by Dr Cokar. The IOM further reveals that adolescents trafficked from China, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka have been rescued in five regions in Turkey.

The country’s double standard is remarkable. For example, Turkey is notorious for transvestite and transsexual prostitution, which draws its own tourism, but the state considers transvestites and transsexuals to be “sinners,” and any homosexual behaviour in public places is strictly prohibited. However, there are illegal brothels specializing in sex tourism that have 2,000 transvestites; they are so well organized that they even accept credit cards.

I asked Dr Cokar about the fact that prostitution is legal and he told me he did not believe that abolishing prostitution was an option for Turkey. “Our organization considers prostitution a form of sexual violence against women, but conditions are such that it becomes an issue of survival. We support them as human beings, but we do not support the business of prostitution.” Furthermore, Dr Cokar considered that trafficking would increase if prostitution were abolished. He remained silent when I asked him whether he believed that owning and trading in women was culturally acceptable in his country. As an answer, he handed me the brochures of his institution and spoke of a project to prevent AIDS.

Dr Cokar insisted that the women who come to Turkey travel voluntarily, but Mahmut believes the opposite. He says that very few women seek to become prostitutes. Most of them want dignified jobs as waitresses or domestic employees. Mahmut confirms that in reality almost no foreigner operates independently in Turkey, unless she has become the lover of a married man who can financially support her, and such men abound. Local sources maintain that in Turkey, as in most Muslim countries, a double standard on sexuality favors prostitution and infidelity.

According to *The Protection Project Review of The Trafficking in Persons Report* (2009), Turkey is home to 200 identified groups that traffic women and girls. According to the IOM, from 1999 to 2009, 250,000 people have been trafficked through Turkey. The majority are women who came from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Russia, the Ukraine, Montenegro, Uzbekistan, and Moldavia. It should be pointed out that the IOM is the most successful organization at rescuing and identifying victims.

However, Turkish authorities claim that between 2003 and 2008 only 994 people were identified as victims of trafficking.

Twelve Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have recorded a large number of cases of girls who were kidnapped from Romanian orphanages and sold in Turkey. Having been told that a company will send them from Turkey to Germany or the United Kingdom, most women are tricked into traveling to Turkey with a fake employment contract as waitresses, nannies, secretaries, model dancers, or domestic employees. Hundreds of young women are taken by ferry across the Black Sea from Trebizond in Turkey, or from the Albanian port of Vlora to San Foca, Italy.

Mahmut insists that the Turkish government has taken measures to prevent trafficking. For example, the Turkish police have worked with the governments of Moldavia and the Ukraine to produce educational films that warn women and children against the ploys of sex traffickers. On the other hand, he asserts that the problem is that the Turkish government has also legalized prostitution and that the government itself runs brothels. He is well aware of the statistics: 79 percent of trafficking victims are bought and sold for commercial sexual exploitation. Mahmut is vehement as he explains this to me:

Most clients are Turkish and the traffickers are locals and foreigners. The prostitution business is lucrative; it brings in a lot of money, madam. Thousands of tourists come to the coast and to Istanbul looking for pleasure. Of course, they also tour our country's many beautiful historical sites. Unfortunately, there are some who take advantage of young girls. We have found sixteen-year-old girls that were brought here when they were fourteen. They were in the brothels with false papers, and the government looked the other way. When traffickers grow tired of these girls, they simply call the police and turn them in. Or when the raids take place, the traffickers are nowhere to be found. The majority of young prostitutes have real papers but they are here illegally.

This is something I have also seen in the rest of the world: government officials, consular officers, and even some ambassadors are willing to issue authentic passports based on false documents.

Mahmut mentions the difficulties of identifying a sexual slave when immigration documents are legal: if border agents were to decide whether or not to grant entrance to a country based on mere appearance or on suspicion, the borders would become chaotic and diplomatic relations would be irreparably harmed. "This is why, rather than risking making a mistake, officers decide to ignore their suspicions. Furthermore, there are women of certain races that look more like girls, such as Mongolians or Cambodians. I have seen Philippine women who look sixteen when they are really twenty-five. It is simply hard to tell," Mahmut adds, as though he is thinking aloud.

According to the organization End Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT), 16 percent of trafficking victims rescued in Turkey are minors sold for commercial sexual exploitation. Mahmut agrees with me when I quote this statistic. He repeats that sex in this sense is considered to be an industry and not criminal activity. He also agrees with the Save the Children reports stating that many pedophiles seek asylum in areas where prostitution is legalized, thus becoming loyal clients and boosting the market for child sexual exploitation.

Despite the Turkish foreign ministry's major public awareness efforts on this issue, their own statistics do not lie. In 2006, there were 422 recorded arrests; in 2007, there were 308; and in 2008, only 255 men were arrested, mostly clients and, in some cases, victims considered to be accomplices of trafficking. This seems to indicate that the Turkish government, like many others, has partially criminalized sexual exploitation to quiet the demands of countries such as the United States and Sweden, which favor the abolition of prostitution, even though a little in-depth investigation reveals that illegal brothels operate and flourish with the government's permission. Meanwhile, the authorities give fewer permits for legal prostitution in an effort to make the international community

believe they are enforcing the law.

According to some CIA reports, Turkey is taking the same approach with drugs. US agency reports confirm that Turkey continues to be pivotal to the heroin route between Europe and Asia. Forty-one percent of the heroin in the world, produced in Afghanistan and Pakistan, enters Europe through Turkey. Highways and airports are used to transport Afghan morphine to Turkey, where it is converted into heroin in labs in Istanbul or Kyrgyzstan and then distributed in Europe and Russia. The legal cultivation of opium for medicinal purposes in Turkey (but also in India, Australia, France, the United States and the United Kingdom) encourages lax police controls.

The IOM persuaded the Turkish government to set up a telephone hotline (toll free 157) for victims of sex trafficking. Between May 2009 and June 2011, 209 victims were rescued. The task of rescuing and tending to the victims' needs are in the hands of a couple of NGOs and the IOM. But when I speak to some young women from Moldavia and Croatia, the statistics no longer seem so positive. These young women assure me that repatriation is a farce and that all it entails is the deportation of women who have already spent too much time on the job. Only the newest women and girls can be controlled because they cannot yet speak the language. Tourism earns Turkey 21 billion US dollars a year, and one of the most alluring attractions for Europeans is the sex. In this country the increase in male and female sex tourism is obvious. In contrast to female prostitution, the majority of male prostitutes do not have handlers; they just pay a fee for police protection. Young boys—often the preferred choice of pedophiles—are subjected to the same rules, secrecy, and threats faced by sexual enslaved girls.

## **Matilde's Girls**

Matilde Manukyan, of Armenian descent, was born into an aristocratic family in Turkey in 1914. She was educated in the country's best school run by French nuns. She married but later became a widow inheriting a beautiful building in the "red light" district of Karakoy. In time, she became known as the queen of the brothels, controlling thirty-two brothels and owning fourteen buildings that housed legal prostitution rings. On various occasions, she was suspected of sexually exploiting minors but her relationship with the government gave her protection throughout her life. Indeed, the Turkish government gave her an award for being the citizen who paid the most taxes during a five-year period (1990–95), even though her earnings came from the sex trade. In 1975 she survived a bomb attack on her car, and she underwent reconstructive surgery twelve times. Matilde had many enemies among the new mafia traffickers. After 1990 the international mafias began to put pressure on Turkish prostitution syndicates and Matilde, who was accustomed to being the queen bee, refused to pay fees for protection from the criminals, who were in collusion with the police.

In 1996, the public was shown evidence that under-age girls were being sexually exploited in her brothels, and the high society that frequented her establishments stopped doing so. When she was exposed as a sex trafficker, Matilde announced that she had converted to Islam. According to the prophet Mohammed, a person's sins are forgiven upon conversion to Islam. She subsequently built a beautiful mosque using the money she earned from trafficking and even got support from the government, despite the public outcry. Although Allah supposedly pardoned her, a large segment of the Turkish population continues to refer to her as the "trafficker of women and girls." It is widely known that Matilde kept a cozy relationship with the Turkish police until in 2001, when she died and was absolved of her sins due to her religious conversion.

In London, I had the opportunity to interview Ulla, a Syrian woman aged thirty-nine who had been kidnapped and sold to a man in Istanbul who took her to Matilde. Ulla worked in two brothels from

the age of sixteen until she was twenty. She is now married and works in a convenience store. She hides her past from most of her friends and she volunteers as a translator for a London-based organization that defends women's rights. This is an excerpt from Ulla's testimony:

Back then we thought we were being treated right. We heard about other young women who were taken to horrible places and treated like real slaves. The stories terrified us, we were told that the men there were savages and that they paid only a few cents for young girls. We heard that the men had strange diseases and that the women weren't allowed to wash themselves or clean themselves up. Our handlers kept us clean and presentable. They paid us little and sometimes punished us. Some clients were obscene and violent, but that was part of the job. A client bought me—at twenty, I was already considered old—and he took me to London. There I was illegal for some years, and on top of it all I was also an addict. Later on I managed to find help from other women, and I changed my life. Now, I look back and I realize that I was a sex slave, but back then I didn't really understand it. When you have no way out and you're all alone, it is better not to see reality; you just live it and try not to think much. I thought: "What's wrong with selling my body when it's the only thing I have to sell?"

I could not escape, since brothels are legal in Turkey. The police and the politicians were our best clients. They loved the owner so much that they sent their nurses to check on us—we were presumably the most obedient and healthy prostitutes in Turkey.

Ulla admitted that she became addicted to opium after one of the women at the brothel gave her a taste of the drug. It was thanks to the addiction that she was able to withstand the terror of being locked up, used, and raped ten or twelve times a day: "The opium allowed me to fly, not feel, not be me," says Ulla.

For other women, living in the brothels is no great tragedy. Sonya, from Montenegro, arrived in Turkey when she was twenty-four years old, and she is now thirty-five. When she was taken to Turkey she already knew that she would work as a prostitute. In three years she had paid off her debt and could go out on the streets without being bothered. Sonya recalls:

I lived in terror that someone in the system might get annoyed or tired of me and that I would be swept up in one of the police raids that happened every time new girls were brought in. I was terrified that they would take me and return me to my country. They told us that the police had our photographs on file and that, if we did something bad, we would be deported. I did not want to return to the hunger, the violence; I have nothing in my country . . . I no longer have a country. Being a prostitute was not the best, but it was something to live on for the time being.

The story of Matilde Manukyan, the great Turkish madam, shows how some pimps or madams turn into traffickers of sex slaves. Not only do they work within the system, turning the police and the government into their allies, they also operate legal businesses that are recognized and valued by certain social groups, such as the aristocracy and politicians. Once she was legitimately operating within the legalized system of prostitution, Manukyan began trafficking minors. Next, she invested the profits from trafficking in women and girls in real estate. Before her death, she owned three five star hotels, more than 120 apartments in many tourist areas of Turkey, an export company and a business of more than 300 luxury taxis. She had a collection of Rolls-Royces, Mercedes, and BMWs. She built a hotel in Germany and had a luxurious mega-yacht that she used to entertain her powerful friends.

Matilde's case fills me with moral panic, but it also allows me to see the complexity of this debate and the difference between prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation. At what point does a woman involved in legal prostitution decide to enslave adolescents and children? How many madams like Matilde are there in the world right now deciding on the future of a girl under the assumption that "What is good for me is good for all?" What happens when prostitution and trafficking are combined? When the person who handles the prostitutes has economic and political power, the legal system can do nothing to break up the slavery syndicate.

## The Golden Crescent

Mahmut goes on to explain the complicated relationship between Turkey and the Golden Crescent, the opium-producing region of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran:

When the heroin problem in Turkey was beginning to be tackled, in 1998, it was easier for the Turkish government to remain silent, as the Turkish, Albanian, and Kosovar mafias were operating in this country. Turkey has the blessing and curse of belonging to both Europe and Asia, to be the stepping-stone between both worlds. The Balkans route has always been complex. We cannot say that the Turkish authorities are not corrupt; all over the world police officers and politicians can be bought with dollars or euros.

In Turkey, we have the IOM so that the Europeans and the North Americans see us as equals. Nobody speaks of how the agreements among the mafias have adapted. When some countries decide to crack down on arms trafficking, they do so immediately if it poses a threat to national or economic interests. However, trafficking in women, which is now simply called "trafficking," has been a profitable business for the last twenty years for the Russian and Albanian mafias that operate in Macedonia and trade with the Turkish mafia.

While some commentators on international affairs, such as the columnist Moisés Naím, refuse to believe that the most powerful mafias in the world have joined forces, labeling the idea as merely police fantasy, the experts who work on the streets confirm that the globalization of mafia operations is part of international business. A few months after my interview with Mahmut, I came to understand the full significance of his comments when I heard the following news: in Istanbul, the Turkish police department specializing in organized crime arrested four Japanese members of an arm of the Yakuza operating in the region. A group of Iranian drug traffickers who had sold methamphetamines to the Yakuza was also arrested. Two of the Yakuza were arrested with 150,000 pills and their accomplices were detained with 200,000 pills on two different occasions. The drug trafficking routes from Iran to Istanbul are the same as those used for the sale of slaves in the region. Mahmut explained that the traffickers who carry the drugs and those who transport the women and girls are not necessarily the same, but those who control the routes are. He says that he knows Turkish and Iranian colleagues who get angry about drug trafficking, but they accept trafficking in women and girls because they believe that this involves prostitutes exercising their free will.

Mahmut speaks about the big police raids on Albanian and Kosovar mafias in Scandinavia in the 1990s. On February 23, 1993, the Norwegian police dealing with heroin trafficking arrested the so-called "godfather," Princ Dobroshi, a Kosovar born in 1964 who was also wanted in Sweden and Denmark on similar charges. He was sentenced to fourteen years, but he escaped from the Ullersmoen prison in 1997. Even though he underwent plastic surgery several times, the Czech police were able to arrest him in Prague in 1998. According to official reports, Dobroshi admitted that the transport of heroin to European countries had funded the purchase of arms that were later used in the Kosovo war. The investigations revealed, without giving it much importance, that Dobroshi also ran minor businesses involving trafficking in women and selling protection to brothels. Most of the Dobroshi cartel members ended up in Swiss and Czech prisons.

On December 10, 1998, *The Independent* newspaper revealed that the Albanian mafia controlled 70 percent of the heroin market in Eurasia. Mahmut, as well as other sources, states that the new generation of mafia bosses are younger and more sophisticated and that they continue to oversee the business of human trafficking and forced prostitution in the region. Organized-crime syndicates now have better technology and, just like governments, they enter into regional and international agreements. Another significant difference, evident in many countries, is the active participation of women in the trafficking syndicates. Many women who have been victims of trafficking are chosen by syndicate leaders to recruit and train other women and girls. The market and its operators, affirms m

Turkish informant, are as sophisticated as the times require.

People in high places do not seem to learn their lesson. In January 2005 Princ Dobroski, considered a terrorist and one of the cruelest mafiosi in the region, was released on parole by the Norwegians, having been handed over to them by the Czechs. According to NATO, he was released on “good behavior.”

Mahmut looks at his watch. Speaking in French, searching for the words to express his concern over mafia operations, has been exhausting. A Turkish–French dictionary has become our ally.

The man before me has already drunk five cups of black tea. He looks toward the window and falls silent every time he hears voices in the corridor. He suddenly pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and shows me a video of a beautiful, three-year-old girl dancing to some music playing in the background. He speaks aloud, as though to himself: “The people at the IOM asked us during our training: ‘What would you do if your daughter were sold for sexual exploitation?’ This is why I am here,” he says as he puts his cell phone away and clears his throat. Perhaps regretting what could be seen as a sign of male weakness, he simply says that his father educated him to put his moral principles above everything. His French ancestry left him with a desire to learn this language at a time in his life when he was able to study more than the average Turkish policeman. His wife, like the majority of Turkish women, can barely read or write. He wants his daughter to feel safe.

In what I judge to be an unusual confession, he admits that he was once “carnally tempted by the *natashas*,” but he adds that he is not one to go to brothels.

“You told me that you went to England,” he mumbles, lowering his head, looking at me from below those black eyebrows. “What did they tell you about the arrival of women from Turkey and about the famous Albanian-Turkish pimps? Did you see how they get to Italy? You know that we have maritime borders [the Anatolian Peninsula has 8,000 kilometers of coastline]. Go and find out what is inside the containers on those cargo boats.”

Geopolitically, Turkey is a strategic area. It is linked to the Caucasus, central Asia, and the Balkans. Its economic liberalization has led to trade agreements with Japan and South Korea. Its automobile, iron and steel, and construction industries are growing, as is the manufacture of electronic household appliances. But experts say the growing market for military hardware is critical. It is no secret that Turkey has the second most powerfully armed force in NATO, trailing only the United States. This nation has 1,043,550 soldiers ready to go to war, and at Incirlik air base there are nine B-61 nuclear bombs.

Trafficking victims I spoke to told me that soldiers are their best clients in the thousands of legal and illegal brothels in Turkey. The production, sale and re-sale of nuclear and military weapons has also made Turkey an ideal country for organized-crime groups that traffic in arms.

“What would be easier for me to buy, an Asian girl or an AK-47?” I ask Mahmut. He looks at me and smiles, and answers: “An AK-47 is old news. You could buy one tomorrow for \$250, but since you’re a woman,” he says, almost playfully, “it would be better to get an AKM [a much lighter version which you could buy for \$400. It would cost you about the same to buy a weapon or a ‘new’ woman to exploit. Drugs probably wouldn’t be a good idea . . . Of the three, it’s the only one you cannot use and re-sell.” His no-nonsense tone makes me nervous, but I write his words down just as they are uttered. He realizes that he has made his point and concludes with some information about legal and illegal trade and the difficulty of differentiating between the two.

“Is it the same for women?” I ask. “The business of slavery requires the existence of legal prostitution to make it more difficult to distinguish which is which.”

“Exactly, madam,” he assures me, “this is why there are so many people interested in encouraging

the legalization of prostitution.”

With its buoyant economy, Turkey is among the top four countries in the world for the number of boats, yachts and mega-yachts built and sold. In 2008 alone, Turkey imported \$141,800,000 worth of goods and services, while \$204,800,000 worth of products were exported that same year.

“Check out the charters and how the authorities turn a blind eye at the airports. And be careful,” Mahmut says, before bidding me farewell, placing his hand on his heart and bowing slightly.

“Don’t worry,” I respond, inclining my head. “I come from Mexico. Things aren’t so different there for journalists.” Even though he is not religious, Mahmut says goodbye, wishing me Allah’s protection.

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\* The Turkish government’s inter-agency task force reported this to the US research team on human trafficking: *Trafficking Persons (TIP) Report*, 2009, US Department of State, [www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/). During an interview conducted by the author with members of the task force, this official data was confirmed.

## *Israel and Palestine: What the War Hides*

I am sitting facing a woman with huge eyes and poetic wisdom. Her name is Rim Banna, a figure who symbolizes the occupied Palestinian territories, which lie within the state of Israel and comprise the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Rim lives in Nazareth, where she was born in 1966. She is a Palestinian poet and women's rights advocate. She uses music to reveal the reality behind political and media manipulation of events. She has composed and recorded eleven albums, each better than the one before. She and her partner Leonid, also a musician, have a son and a daughter and together they work to promote freedom and peace.

We are seated in a small sitting room with two wooden chairs. I set up my camera and take out my laptop. We begin to talk about life and about the safety of women and girls in the occupied territories of Palestine. After a few minutes, her cell phone rings. Excusing herself, Rim reads a text message and smiles, and her face lights up. She shows me the screen: it is a message from her young daughter Baylasan, telling her mother she has got to school safely. The small girl has even sent a photo of herself smiling. This moves me. Rim proceeds to explain that this is not a game between a mother and her six-year-old daughter. This is how they cope with the bombings, the presence of military forces, the kidnappings, and the illegal arrests. This is how they keep each other calm and informed that they are still alive and free. At least for today.

This singer possesses an emotional intelligence that I have seldom seen in those who risk their lives on a daily basis. She asks me to tell her stories about women and girls from Mexico. Afterward Rim says to me that trafficking in women and girls is similar to the occupation of a town.

The outside world will never understand the real story until it understands that a conflict cannot be resolved when there are such vast inequalities of power, money, arms, and ideas; when one side acts as the patriarchs; when one side gives the orders and the other side is forced to obey, to submit, to prostitute its spirit and accept colonization because they are "the other." I do not support violence; I don't believe in it. This is why my music shows the human side of Palestine, the history of its people, of women and girls, like my daughter. I sing to celebrate the children's strength and their ability to play ball and laugh together, despite knowing that Israeli soldiers are watching them. I sing for the women and girls who maintain and support the whole community, who work, who lose their parents, their spouses, and siblings. I sing for their children who continue to work, believing in life, dreaming of the future and the freedom that will one day dawn . . . Maybe with the morning light, freedom, peace, and understanding will come.

During her concerts, she has sometimes been threatened and called a Muslim extremist. Few people know that Rim is a Christian. "It is difficult to have a dialogue with those who don't want to listen and who reject any sort of criticism. Investigating violence in these circumstances is very difficult," she says. This is why feminist groups that rescue women do their work almost entirely in secret. Resources are for war, not for peace.

Palestine is, in many ways, a mined territory. The Israelis posted at the checkpoints are not the only enemies. There is the ongoing dispute with Lebanon, as well as the deep-rooted conflicts among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The level of contempt, intolerance, and racism among nations that



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