

2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Syria

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SYRIA: Tier 3

The Government of Syria does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore Syria remained on Tier 3. The government did not hold any traffickers criminally accountable, including complicit government officials, nor did it identify or protect any trafficking victims. The government's actions directly contributed to the population's vulnerability to trafficking, and it continued to perpetrate human trafficking crimes routinely. During the reporting period, there was a government policy or pattern of recruiting and using child soldiers. The government and pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers, resulting in children facing extreme violence and retaliation by opposition forces; the government also did not protect and prevent children from recruitment and use by armed opposition forces and designated terrorist organizations. The government continued to arrest, detain, and severely abuse trafficking victims, including child soldiers, and punished them for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Criminalize all forms of human trafficking. • Stop the forcible recruitment and use of child soldiers by government forces and pro-government militias. • Proactively identify victims of all forms of trafficking and provide them with appropriate protection services, including long-term care for demobilized child soldiers. • Ensure trafficking victims are not punished for crimes traffickers compelled them to commit, such as child soldiering. • Investigate, prosecute, and convict perpetrators of sex and labor trafficking and the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers, including complicit officials.

PROSECUTION

The government made no discernible anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts, and the government and government-affiliated militias remained complicit in the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers. The violent conflict continued to amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes occurring within Syria. Decree No.3 of 2011 appeared to criminalize some forms of sex trafficking and labor trafficking, but it did not include a clear definition of human trafficking. This decree prescribed a minimum punishment of seven years' imprisonment and a fine between one million and three million Syrian pounds (\$2,300 and \$6,900), a penalty that was sufficiently stringent but, with respect to sex trafficking, not commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Law No.11/2013 criminalized all forms of recruitment and use of children younger than the age of 18 by the Syrian armed forces and armed groups; however, the government made no efforts to prosecute child soldiering crimes

perpetrated by government and pro-regime militias, armed opposition groups, and designated terrorist organizations. The government did not report investigating, prosecuting, or convicting suspected traffickers, nor did it investigate, prosecute, or convict government officials complicit in human trafficking. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for officials.

PROTECTION

The government did not identify or protect trafficking victims. The government did not protect children from forcible recruitment and use as soldiers and in support roles by government forces and pro-government armed groups, armed opposition groups, and terrorist organizations. The government continued to severely punish victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as child soldiering and prostitution. The government routinely arrested, detained, raped, tortured, and executed children for alleged association with armed groups and made no effort to offer these children any protection services. During the reporting period, the government also detained thousands of foreign women and children—including unaccompanied children—across northeastern Syria for suspected family ties to foreign Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters; some of these individuals may have been unidentified trafficking victims. The government neither encouraged trafficking victims to assist in investigations or prosecutions of their traffickers nor provided foreign victims with legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they may face hardship or retribution.

PREVENTION

The government made no effort to prevent human trafficking; the government's actions continued to amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes in the country. The government did not implement measures to prevent children from unlawful recruitment and use as combatants and in support roles by government, pro-regime militias, opposition armed groups, and terrorist organizations. The government did not raise awareness of human trafficking among the general public or officials. The government did not report efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, nor did it prevent child sex tourism by Syrian nationals abroad. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Syria, and traffickers exploit Syrian victims abroad. The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate amid the ongoing conflict with sub-state armed groups of varying ideologies exerting control over wide geographic swathes of the country's territory. As of December 2019, human rights groups and international organizations estimate between 220,000 and 550,000 people have been killed since the beginning of protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime in March 2011. This vast discrepancy is due in large part to the number of missing and disappeared Syrians, whose fates remained unknown. More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million has been displaced; as of February 2019,

more than 5.6 million have fled to neighboring countries and, as of December 2019, approximately 6.62 million are internally displaced. Syrians that remain displaced in the country and those living as refugees in neighboring countries are extremely vulnerable to traffickers. Syrian children are reportedly vulnerable to forced early marriages, including to members of terrorist groups such as ISIS—which can lead to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor—and children displaced within the country continue to be subjected to forced labor, particularly by organized begging rings.

Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS at the beginning of 2019, it continued to force local Syrian girls and women in ISIS-controlled areas into marriages with its fighters, and it routinely subjected women and girls from minority groups into forced marriages, domestic servitude, systematic rape, and other forms of sexual violence. Incidents of human trafficking increased, and trafficking victims were trapped in Syria, particularly when ISIS consolidated its control of the eastern governorates of Raqqa and Deir al-Zour in 2014. In December 2014, ISIS publicly released guidelines on how to capture, forcibly hold, and sexually abuse female slaves. As reported by an international organization in 2015, ISIS militants' system of organized sexual slavery and forced marriage is a central element of the terrorist group's ideology. As of the end of 2019, according to the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, approximately 3,000 Yezidi women and girls remain missing; reports indicate some of these women and girls remained with ISIS in eastern Syria or were held in Al-Hol. In June 2019, international media reported that a group of 21 women and children were rescued from ISIS in Syria and returned to Iraq, as confirmed by the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The recruitment and use of children in combat in Syria remains commonplace, and since the beginning of 2018 international observers reported a continuation in incidents of recruitment and use by armed groups. Syrian government forces, pro-regime militias, and armed non-state actors, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and FSA-affiliated groups, Kurdish forces, ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, al-Qa'ida, and Jabhat al-Nusra—the al-Qa'ida affiliate in Syria—recruit and use boys and girls as child soldiers. Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS also have used children as human shields, suicide bombers, snipers, and executioners. Militants also use children for forced labor and as informants, exposing them to retaliation and extreme punishment. Some armed groups fighting for the Syrian government, such as Hezbollah, and pro-regime militias known as the National Defense Forces (NDF), or “shabiha,” forcibly recruit children as young as six years old. ISIS actively deploys children—some as young as eight years old—in hostilities, including coercing children to behead Syrian government soldiers; the terrorist group has deliberately targeted children for indoctrination and used schools for military purposes, endangering children and preventing their access to education. Before the liberation of Raqqa in October 2017, ISIS operated at least three child training camps in the city, where it forced children to attend indoctrination seminars and promised children salaries, mobile phones, weapons, a martyr's place in paradise, and the “gift” of a wife upon joining the terrorist group. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) in northwest Syria continued to recruit, train, and use boys and girls as young as 12 years old; since 2017, international observers reported that YPG and YPJ recruit—at times by force—children from displacement camps in northeast Syria. In June 2019, the Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF) and by association—the YPG and YPJ—took steps to end the recruitment and use of children and demobilize children within SDF ranks after adopting a UNSCR-mandated action plan. Several credible sources continue to widely report that Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian Basij Resistance Force (Basij) actively recruit and use—through force or coercive means—Afghan children and adults, Afghan migrant and refugee men and children living in Iran, and Iranian children, to fight in IRGC-led and -funded Shia militias deployed to Syria.

The Syrian refugee population is highly vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labor in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. International organizations report a high number of child and early marriages of Syrian girls among refugee populations, which increases their vulnerability to trafficking. Syrian refugee women and girls are also vulnerable to forced or “temporary marriages”—for the purpose of commercial sex and other forms of exploitation—and sex trafficking in refugee camps, Jordan, and cities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), including Sulaimaniya. Illicit prostitution rings in Turkey and Lebanon compel Syrian refugee women and girls into sex trafficking. In Turkey, some female Syrian refugees are reportedly exploited in sex or labor trafficking after accepting fraudulent job offers to work in hair salons, modeling, entertainment, or domestic work. In Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, Syrian refugee children continue to engage in street begging or peddling goods, some of which may be forced or coerced. Syrian children are also observed working in Turkey’s agricultural sector and informally in textile workshops and the service sector, where they experience long working hours, low wages, and poor working conditions; children in these sectors may be vulnerable to forced labor. In Jordan and Lebanon, traffickers force Syrian refugee children to work in agriculture alongside their families; in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, Syrian gangs force refugee men, women, and children to work in agriculture under harsh conditions, including physical abuse, with little to no pay. LGBTI persons among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon are reportedly vulnerable to sex trafficking.