

2017 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 demonstrate any efforts to address human trafficking through prosecution, protection, or prevention measures. The government's actions directly contributed to the vulnerability of the population to trafficking and continued to perpetrate human trafficking crimes routinely. The government maintained its forcible recruitment and use of child soldiers, subjecting children to extreme violence and retaliation by opposition forces; it also did not protect and prevent children from recruitment and use by government and pro-regime militias, armed opposition forces, and designated terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The government continued to arrest, detain, and severely abuse trafficking victims, including child soldiers, and punished them for crimes committed as a direct result of being subjected to human trafficking. The government did not investigate or punish traffickers, including officials complicit in recruiting and using child soldiers, nor did it identify or protect any trafficking victims.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYRIA

Stop the forcible recruitment and use of child soldiers by government forces, pro-government militias, armed opposition forces, and designated terrorist organizations such as ISIS; provide adequate protection services to demobilized children; ensure trafficking victims are not punished for crimes committed as a direct result of having been subjected to trafficking, particularly children forcibly recruited as soldiers by the regime and other armed groups; implement the anti-trafficking law through investigations and prosecutions of traffickers, including officials complicit in the recruitment and use of child soldiers; and proactively identify potential trafficking victims and provide them with appropriate protection services.

PROSECUTION

The government did not report any anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts, and the government and government-affiliated militias remained complicit in trafficking crimes, including child soldiering. The violent civil war continued to directly amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes occurring within Syria and affecting displaced Syrians. Decree No. 3 of 2011 provides a legal foundation for prosecuting trafficking offenses and protecting victims, but it does not include a clear definition of human trafficking. This decree prescribes a minimum punishment of seven years imprisonment, a penalty that is sufficiently stringent but not commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. The government adopted Law No. 11/2013 in June

2013, which criminalizes all forms of recruitment and use of children younger than the age of 18 by armed forces and armed groups; however, the government made no efforts to prosecute child soldiering crimes perpetrated by government and government-affiliated 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, including officials who forcibly recruited and used child soldiers in combat and support roles. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for officials.

PROTECTION

The government made no efforts to identify or protect trafficking victims; instead, it directly punished victims for crimes committed as a direct result of being subjected to human trafficking. The government did not protect children from forcible recruitment and use as soldiers, human shields, and in support roles by government forces and pro-government armed groups, armed opposition groups, and terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the government arrested, detained, raped, tortured, and executed children for alleged association with armed groups; the government made no efforts to exempt these children from punishment or to offer them any protection services. 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 efforts to prevent human trafficking; the government's actions continued to amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes. The government did not implement measures to prevent children from recruitment and use as combatants and in support roles by government, government-affiliated 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 or forced labor, 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, Syria is a source and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate amid the ongoing civil war with sub-state armed groups of varying ideologies exerting control over wide geographic swathes of the country's territory. Human rights groups and international organizations estimate more than 400,000 persons have been killed since the beginning of protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime in March 2011. More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million has been displaced; as of March 2017, five million have fled to neighboring countries and,

as of December 2016, roughly 6.3 million are internally displaced. Syrians, both those that remain in the country and refugees in neighboring countries, continue to be highly vulnerable to trafficking.

Incidents of human trafficking continue to increase and trafficking victims remain trapped in Syria, particularly as ISIS consolidated its control of the eastern governorates of Raqqa and Deir al-Zour. Syrian children are reportedly vulnerable to forced early marriages—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. In March 2016, the media reported that women from Nepal and Bangladesh were forced to work in domestic servitude or the sex industry in Syria. In June 2014, ISIS announced the establishment of an Islamic “Caliphate” in Iraq and Syria, and during 2015, ISIS seized control of areas in southern Syria in and around Palmyra, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo. In December 2014, ISIS publicly released guidelines on how to capture, forcibly hold, and sexually abuse female slaves. In April 2015, an international organization reported the system of organized sexual slavery and forced marriage—which can lead to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor—by ISIS militants is a central element of the terrorist group’s ideology. ISIS continues to force local Syrian girls and women in ISIS-controlled areas into marriages with its fighters, and it routinely subjects women and girls from minority groups to forced marriage, domestic servitude, systematic rape, and sexual violence. ISIS routinely forces Syrian girls to undergo virginity tests before trading them in “slave bazaars” and sending them to various Syrian provinces and other countries for sexual slavery. In 2016, ISIS began moving thousands of abducted women and girls, from the Yezidi minority group in Iraq, into Syria ahead of Iraqi government forces’ push to drive ISIS out of Mosul, Iraq. Additionally, following the February 2015 ISIS incursion into Assyrian villages in the northeastern province of al-Hasaka, it captured as many as 30 Assyrian Christian women and forced them into sexual slavery.

As reported by an international organization in June 2015, the recruitment and use of children in combat in Syria has become “commonplace”, and documented cases of child soldiers continued to increase in 2016. Syrian government forces, pro-regime militias, and armed groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and FSA-affiliated groups, Kurdish forces, ISIS, and Jabhat al-Nusra—the al-Qa’ida affiliate in Syria—continue to recruit and use boys and girls as soldiers, human shields, suicide bombers, and executioners, as well as in support roles. 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. Militants also use children for forced labor and as informants, exposing them to retaliation and extreme punishment. In the first documented incident by an international organization of the re-recruitment of children, 15 boys who were recruited and trained by ISIS in 2013 were re-recruited by the FSA in 2014 and subsequently used in combat in 2016. 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. ISIS operates at least three child training camps in

Raqqa; forces children to attend indoctrination seminars; and promises children salaries, mobile phones, weapons, a martyr's place in paradise, and the "gift" of a wife upon joining the terrorist group. By forcibly recruiting and using children in combat and support roles, ISIS has violated international humanitarian law and perpetrated war crimes on a mass scale. Despite having signed a pledge of commitment with an international organization in June 2014 to demobilize all fighters younger than 18 years old, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) recruited and trained children as young as 12 years old in 2016. An NGO reported in January 2016 instances in which Iran forcibly recruited or coerced male Afghan refugees and migrants, including children, living in Iran to fight in Syria. In June 2016, the media reported Iran recruited some Afghans inside Afghanistan to fight in Syria as well. Some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia, are reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited to join extremist fighters, including ISIS.

The Syrian refugee population is highly vulnerable to trafficking in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. In 2015, an international organization reported a high number of child marriages of Syrian girls among refugee populations. Syrian refugee women and girls are vulnerable to forced or "temporary marriages"—for the purpose of prostitution and other forms of exploitation—and sex trafficking in refugee camps, Jordan, and cities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), including Sulaimaniya. In Baghdad, Basrah, and other cities in southern Iraq, reports from 2015 indicated some Syrian refugee women were forced into prostitution by a trafficking network in hotels and brothels after agents of the network promised to resettle them from the IKR; the women's children were forced to beg on the street. In Turkey and Lebanon, reports continue of illicit prostitution rings of Syrian refugee women and girls, which are administered by local men, while the Lebanese police issued reports in 2014 detailing the sale of Syrian refugee women by local men. In Turkey, some female Syrian refugees are reportedly exploited after accepting fraudulent job offers to work in hair salons. In Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, Syrian refugee children continue to engage in street begging, 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 Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, Syrian gangs force refugee men, women, and children to work in agriculture, where victims are forced to work under harsh conditions with little to no pay and some are subject to physical abuse. LGBTI persons among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon are reportedly vulnerable to sex trafficking by Lebanese pimps. In Qatar and Kuwait, Syrian adults are reportedly subjected to forced labor as low-skilled workers. In 2014, an international organization reported Syrian nationals temporarily residing in Sudan sought to travel through Libya en route to Italy with the use of smugglers; these Syrians could be at risk of trafficking along this route. Throughout 2016, displaced Syrians continued to seek illegal passage to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea through the use of smugglers; these Syrians may be at risk of trafficking.