

2018 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 population's vulnerability to trafficking and it continued to perpetrate human trafficking crimes routinely. 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. The government continued to forcibly recruit and use 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-Syrian regime affiliated 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.

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; proactively identify potential trafficking victims and provide them with appropriate protection services, including appropriate and long-term care for demobilized children; ensure trafficking victims are not punished for crimes committed as a direct result of having been subjected to trafficking; and prosecute and convict perpetrators of trafficking, including officials complicit in the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers.

PROSECUTION

The government made no discernible anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts, and the government and government-affiliated militias remained complicit in child soldiering. The violent civil war continued to directly amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes occurring within Syria. Decree No.3 of 2011 appeared to criminalize some forms of labor and sex trafficking, but did not include a clear definition of human trafficking. This decree prescribed a minimum punishment of seven years imprisonment and a fine between 1 million and 3 million Syrian pounds (\$1,940 to \$5,830), 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 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 made no protection efforts; 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. The government routinely arrested, detained, raped, tortured, and executed children for alleged association with armed groups; the government made no effort to offer these children 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 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 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 approximately 400,000 people 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 2018, more than five million have fled to neighboring countries and, as of November 2017, approximately 6.1 million are internally displaced. Syrians that remain in the country and refugees in neighboring countries are extremely vulnerable to trafficking. 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.

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. In June 2014, ISIS announced the establishment of an Islamic “Caliphate” in Iraq and Syria. 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 that the system of organized sexual slavery and forced marriage by ISIS militants—which can lead to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor—is a central element of the terrorist group’s ideology. While ISIS has lost the majority of the Syrian territory it once controlled, it 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 other forms of 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. While many Yezidi women were rescued in Syria when Coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated ISIS-held territory, thousands remain missing.

The recruitment and use of children in combat in Syria has become commonplace. Syrian government forces, pro-regime militias, and armed non-state actors, 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. Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS have also 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. 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. By forcibly recruiting and using children in combat and support roles on a mass scale, ISIS has engaged in horrific conduct that violated international humanitarian law and may constitute war crimes. Before its liberation in October 2017, ISIS operated at least three child training camps in Raqqa, 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/YPJ) continued to recruit, use, and train boys and girls as young as 12 years old, despite having signed a pledge of commitment with an international organization in June 2014 to demobilize all fighters younger than 18 years old. Sources reported in 2016 and 2017 instances in which Iranian officials and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) actively recruit and use—through threats of arrest and deportation—Afghan immigrant men and children living in Iran to fight in IRGC-organized and commanded militias in Syria. In June 2016, media reports stated Iran recruited some Afghans inside Afghanistan, and Afghans residing in Iran, to fight in Syria in support of the Syrian regime. 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 sex trafficking and forced labor 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, Syrian refugee women and girls are exploited by illicit prostitution rings. 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 Bekaa 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. 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.