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Trafficking in Persons Report 2015 - Country Narratives - Syria

SYRIA: Tier 3

The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate as the civil war continues and sub-state armed groups of varying ideologies control wide swathes of the country's territory. Incidents of human trafficking have increased and trafficking victims remain trapped in Syria, particularly as the designated terrorist organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), or *Daesh* in Arabic—took control of the eastern governorates of Raqqa and Dayr al-Zawr. Approximately half of Syria's pre-war population has been displaced; nearly four million have fled to neighboring countries and roughly 7.6 million are internally displaced. Syrians, including those that remain in the country and refugees in neighboring countries, remain highly vulnerable to trafficking.

Syria is a source and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. Syrian children displaced within the country continue to be subjected to forced labor, particularly by organized begging rings. Multiple sources report ISIL continues to force local Syrian girls and women in ISIL-controlled areas into marriages with its fighters. ISIL has also abducted thousands of Yezidi women and girls from Iraq and forcibly brought them to Syria to sell in human trafficking rings or to provide to fighters where they experience forced marriage, domestic servitude, systematic rape, and sexual violence. Following the February 2015 ISIL incursion into Assyrian villages in the northwestern province of Hasaka, ISIL captured up to 30 Assyrian Christian women and forced them into sexual slavery. In December 2014, ISIL publicly released guidelines on how to capture, forcibly hold, and sexually abuse female slaves, including girls. Pro-government forces, armed opposition groups, and ISIL continue to forcibly recruit and use Syrian children as soldiers, human shields, and executioners, as well as in support roles. The Syrian army and its pro-regime militias forcibly recruit boys, some as young as 6 years old; in Aleppo, government forces used children as part of coordinated military operations to locate armed groups prior to attacks; children are paid to act as informants, exposing them to retaliation and extreme punishment. ISIL actively deploys children in hostilities, including coercing children to behead Syrian regime soldiers and using them in combat roles during the assault on Kobane in late 2014; it has deliberately targeted children for indoctrination and used schools for military purposes, endangering children and preventing their access to education. ISIL has established training camps where it instructs children, nicknamed "Cubs of the Caliphate," to operate weapons and be deployed as suicide bombers. Armed groups, including Ahrar Al-Sham and Jabhat Al-Nusra, have targeted women and children to be taken as hostages for use in prisoner exchanges. Kurdish Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG) forces are reported to have abducted children and accepted them into its ranks to be used in active hostilities, despite an international commitment to the contrary. Kurdish Democratic Union Party (or PYD, using its popular acronym) -affiliated Kurdish "asayish" security forces reportedly captured unknown numbers of men and women between the ages of 18 and 30 at checkpoints and from residences in Darbasiyah and other Kurdish areas and

compelled them to fight for the YPG, and all female YPJ forces, under duress. The media reported instances in which the Iranian government recruited primarily Shia men from the Afghan expatriate community in Iran to fight in Syria, ostensibly to defend Shia shrines, in exchange for \$500 a month, Iranian residency, and in some cases, dismissal of criminal sentences in Iran. Migrant workers and undocumented migrants in Iran are often subject to harsh treatment with few or no legal remedies, which can make them vulnerable to trafficking. Some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia, children, and western women, are reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited to join extremist fighters, including ISIL in Syria; some of these foreigners may willingly join militants but are subsequently forced to remain in Syria against their will.

The Syrian refugee population is highly vulnerable to trafficking in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. There have been reports of Syrian refugees forced into “temporary” marriages—for the purpose of prostitution and other forms of exploitation—by men from Jordan and the Gulf states. For example, in December 2014, Jordanian government officials investigated and referred for prosecution six individuals for forcing a 17-year-old Syrian female refugee into 21 “temporary” marriages—for the purpose of prostitution—to various foreign men over a two-year time period; she was also forced to undergo seven hymen reconstruction surgeries. Arab men reportedly visit refugee camps in Jordan in search of Syrian brides; most reports, however, remain second-hand and very few have been documented and corroborated by the Jordanian government or international organizations working with Syrian refugees. According to the media, prostitution rings of Syrian refugee women and girls have developed in Turkey and Lebanon, while the Lebanese police issued reports in 2014 detailing the sale of Syrian refugee women by local men. Syrian refugee children are increasingly engaged in street begging in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, some of which may be forced; Syrian women and children begging in the streets in Yemen are highly vulnerable to forced labor and sex trafficking. Syrian gangs inside Lebanon force refugee men, women, and children to work in the agricultural sector in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley. Syrian adults are reportedly subjected to forced labor as low-skilled workers in Qatar and Kuwait. In 2014, an international organization reported Syrian nationals temporarily residing in Sudan preferred to travel through Libya *en route* to Italy with the use of smugglers; these Syrians could be at risk of trafficking along this route.

The Government of Syria does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so. The government continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers; it also failed to protect and prevent children from recruitment and use by government, armed opposition forces and designated terrorist organizations such as ISIL. The government failed to ensure trafficking victims, including child soldiers, were not arrested, detained, and severely abused as a result of being subjected to human trafficking. The government did not investigate or punish trafficking offenders, 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, government-associated militia, and—to the extent possible in a civil war—armed opposition forces, and designated terrorist organizations such as ISIL, and provide adequate protection services to demobilized children; ensure victims of trafficking, especially women and children, 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, armed opposition and extremist groups; implement the anti-trafficking law through increased investigations and prosecutions of trafficking offenders, including officials complicit in the recruitment and use of child soldiers; proactively identify potential trafficking victims and provide them with appropriate protection services; provide training on human trafficking to all relevant officials; designate an official coordinating body or mechanism to facilitate anti-trafficking coordination among relevant ministries, international organizations, and NGOs; and accede to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

PROSECUTION

The government did not report any anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The increasingly violent civil war continued to cause exacerbated, and contributed directly to human trafficking crimes to flourish throughout the country. 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, though 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 under the age of 18 by armed forces and armed groups. The government made no efforts to prosecute this crime. The government did not report investigating, prosecuting, or convicting suspected trafficking offenders, nor did it investigate, prosecute, or convict government officials complicit in human trafficking, including officials that forcibly recruited and used child soldiers in combat and support roles. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for officials.

PROTECTION

The government did not identify or protect trafficking victims. The government failed to protect children from being forcibly recruited and used as soldiers, human shields, and in support roles by government forces and pro-government groups, armed groups, and terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the government subjected children, who were forcibly recruited and used by opposition groups, to arrest, detention, rape, torture, and execution for affiliation with these 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 did not prevent human trafficking; rather, the government's actions continued to result in human trafficking crimes. The government failed to implement measures to prevent children from being recruited and used as combatants and in support roles by government, government-affiliated armed groups, and by opposition 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 abroad. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training or guidance for its diplomatic personnel. Syria is not a party to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

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