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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Iraq

IRAQ (Tier 2)

The Government of Iraq does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore Iraq was upgraded to Tier 2. These efforts included investigating and prosecuting significantly more trafficking crimes, convicting more traffickers, assigning specialized judges to preside over trafficking cases, and increasing personnel for the Ministry of Interior (MOI)'s anti-trafficking department, including female police officers. The government also drafted, finalized, and disseminated official SOPs for victim identification and referral to care for law enforcement and first responders and trained officials, including investigative judges – who remain the sole official able to officially identify a victim – on their use. The government identified significantly more victims and opened a specialized trafficking shelter for male victims in Baghdad and an additional shelter for adult female victims in Diwaniyah. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) reported law enforcement data for the first time in five years and identified more victims compared with the last two reporting periods. Finally, the government drafted and enacted implementing regulations for the anti-trafficking law, which provided relevant member ministries of the Central Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (CCCHT) detailed roles and responsibilities to enforce the law. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not report efforts to address reports of official complicity, including officials who allegedly exploited children with alleged affiliation to ISIS and their families in sex trafficking in exchange for civil documentation required to receive government services. Despite increased training, investigative judges – some with limited knowledge of trafficking – retained sole authority to formally identify and refer victims to care via court order, which may have prevented some victims from receiving

government assistance. In some cases, authorities did not proactively identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, which resulted in the inappropriate penalization of some victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as immigration and “prostitution” violations. The government also lacked adequate protection services for victims of all forms of trafficking and did not have any dedicated shelters for children or LGBTQI+ victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Officially allow all relevant authorities, not solely investigative judges via a court order, to formally identify potential trafficking victims and refer them to care, including shelter. * Ensure trafficking victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as “prostitution” and immigration violations. * Continue to train all relevant officials on new proactive victim identification guidelines, including investigative judges, labor inspectors, and Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) staff. * Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms, and report sentencing details. Investigate and prosecute complicit government officials, particularly those involved in issuing civil documentation to vulnerable populations. * Ensure victim identification and protection measures are provided independent of the prosecution of a trafficker. * Increase unhindered access to adequate protection services for all trafficking victims and their children, including counseling, medical care, short-term shelter, long-term housing, legal aid, translation and interpretation services, reintegration services, employment training, and financial assistance. * Establish a legal framework, either by amending the law or through a ministerial declaration, for NGOs to operate shelters for victims, and provide financial resources, facilities, and trained personnel to such organizations. * Amend the anti-trafficking law to ensure that a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion is not required to constitute a child sex trafficking offense, in accordance with the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

PROSECUTION

The Iraqi government increased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. Iraq’s 2012 anti-trafficking law criminalized labor trafficking and some forms of sex trafficking. It prescribed penalties of up to 15 years’ imprisonment and a fine for trafficking offenses involving adult male victims, and up to life imprisonment and a fine for offenses involving adult females or child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent, and with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. Inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, the anti-trafficking law required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense and therefore did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. Article 399 of the penal code criminalized “the prostitution of a

child” and provided a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment, which was sufficiently stringent, although not commensurate with the penalties prescribed for rape. The CCCHT drafted amendments to the 2012 law to remove the requirement of a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion in child sex trafficking crimes; the amendments remained pending approval by the Council of Representatives. In June 2023, the government drafted and enacted implementing regulations for the anti-trafficking law, which provided relevant member ministries of the CCCHT detailed roles and responsibilities to enforce the law. The KRG did not report whether it developed the regulatory and enforcement framework required to fully implement the 2012 Iraqi anti-trafficking law, which the Iraqi Kurdistan Region’s (IKR) regional parliament approved in 2018.

The MOI’s anti-trafficking department initiated investigations of 1,698 individuals in an unknown number of cases, including 202 alleged sex traffickers and 1,496 alleged labor traffickers, of which 1,232 were for forced begging crimes. This was a significant increase compared with initiating investigations of 166 individuals in 221 cases in the previous reporting period. The government reported 132 sex trafficking investigations initiated in previous reporting periods remained ongoing. Authorities initiated prosecution of 1,270 individuals, including 210 for sex trafficking and 1,060 for labor trafficking, of which 976 were for forced begging. This was a significant increase compared with initiating 90 prosecutions in the previous reporting period. The government reported 11 prosecutions initiated in previous reporting periods remained ongoing. The government convicted 295 traffickers, including 74 sex traffickers and 221 labor traffickers; courts convicted 174 individuals under the 2012 anti-trafficking law and 121 individuals using other laws, such as the penal code and residency law, some in addition to the trafficking law. This was an increased compared with 121 convictions in the previous reporting period. The government did not report sentencing details. For the first time in five years, the KRG reported prosecution data. KRG officials investigated 18 alleged trafficking cases, including 12 for sex trafficking and six for forced labor; KRG officials also reported two forced labor investigations initiated in the previous reporting period remained ongoing. The KRG did not initiate any new prosecutions; however, it reported nine prosecutions initiated in the previous reporting period remained ongoing. Courts convicted eight traffickers in 2023, but the KRG did not provide details on the type of trafficking or sentencing details.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement during the year. An international organization reported officials exploited families – including children – allegedly associated with ISIS and following their release from detention, in sex trafficking by coercing them to perform sex acts to obtain security clearances or access civil documentation required

to receive governmental services. Observers previously alleged some traffickers operated massage centers in five-star hotels, some of which were state-owned, and therefore, less likely to receive scrutiny from authorities. The government did not report efforts to investigate or prosecute previously reported allegations that security and management personnel in IDP camps were complicit in the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls, particularly those with alleged ties to ISIS members.

The MOI transferred the anti-trafficking directorate to its intelligence branch and allocated additional resources and staffing to the specialized trafficking department. The anti-trafficking department hired and trained more than 450 employees in 2023, including 20 female officers and 48 female staff for the first time. In addition, CCCHT newly assigned 36 trafficking-specialized judges to courts across the country, in addition to previously employed judges, totaling 50 in the country (three in each province and eight in Baghdad). The government reported such judges solely handled trafficking cases and were responsible for issuing judgements, prosecuting criminals, and officially identifying and referring victims to care. The KRG maintained anti-trafficking police units in all four governates and two independent administrations in the IKR and reported establishing anti-trafficking police units in two of the remaining four independent administrations – Soran and Zakho. The unit in Soran was staffed and fully active during the year, while the unit in Zakho received limited staff and remained inactive at the close of the reporting period. In the IKR, trafficking cases were initially heard in the Investigation Court, where a judge determined whether to refer the case to criminal, civil, or juvenile court. Observers noted some judges did not refer trafficking cases for police investigation due to lack of knowledge of the trafficking law. At other times, victims without legal representation were unable to provide sufficient evidence that a trafficking crime occurred, so judges did not refer the case for further investigation and instead permanently or temporarily closed the case until new evidence was presented.

The government, both independently and in partnership with an NGO, conducted anti-trafficking training for specialized investigative judges, law enforcement, CCCHT training officials, security sector officers, specialized staff from MOLSA, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), High Commission for Human Rights, and the Iraqi Correctional Department on various topics, including victim identification and assistance, victim-centered investigation and interviewing techniques, proactive identification, applying the Witness Protection Law, providing case management and referral for victims, victim-centered interviewing, and best practices in prosecuting trafficking cases. In addition, the government conducted workshops on newly enacted SOPs for victim identification and referral for investigative judges, security services personnel, Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and Ministry of Transportation officials, immigration and border guards, social workers, and health care

personnel. The government cooperated with INTERPOL and the Government of Uganda on trafficking investigations, which resulted in the arrest of alleged traffickers and the identification of victims. Observers reported the KRG and Iraqi central government continued to strengthen cooperation on trafficking issues; for example, KRG law enforcement actors shared resources and investigatory tools with the central government to create standard procedures for investigating trafficking cases.

PROTECTION

The government increased victim protection efforts. The MOI reported identifying 335 trafficking victims, a significant increase compared with 32 victims identified in the previous reporting period. Of the 335 victims identified, 61 were female sex trafficking victims (including 25 girls) and 274 were labor trafficking victims, including 86 foreign national female victims, 36 Iraqi female victims, 108 child forced begging victims and 27 persons with disabilities exploited in forced begging. Foreign victims were nationals of Bangladesh, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, and Uganda. The KRG reported identifying 121 victims, including 40 adult female sex trafficking victims (three Iraqi nationals and 37 foreign nationals), 11 child sex trafficking victims (four boys and seven girls), and 70 labor trafficking victims (three Iraqi nationals and 60 foreign nationals), including seven forced begging victims. The government drafted, finalized, and disseminated formal SOPs, including a screening questionnaire, to assist officials in proactive victim identification and their subsequent referral to care. Investigative judges remained the only officials legally authorized to officially identify and refer a trafficking victim to protection services via a court order, including the government-run shelter in Baghdad. The government reported the new SOPs assisted law enforcement and first responders to proactively identify potential victims and refer them to an investigative judge to make a final determination and subsequent referral to care. Officials utilized the SOP's screening questionnaire as evidence for an investigative judge's consideration. Although witnesses were not required to testify in court, their testimony was a prerequisite to initiate a criminal investigation. If victims did not provide testimony, or judges determined there was insufficient evidence, an individual could be denied status as a trafficking victim, which would then deny access to protection services. The KRG reported victims could be identified through management offices at refugee and IDP camps, hotlines, foreign embassies, and the public, and then referred to the appropriate law enforcement agency, including the specialized anti-trafficking police in IKR who referred cases to an investigative court. The KRG reported it used an investigation questionnaire, available in three languages, for officials to identify potential trafficking victims. As in federal Iraq, investigative judges in the IKR retained sole authority to refer victims to government-run shelters via a court order, and IKR observers reported similar concerns that some victims may have been unable to receive access to the shelter and protective services if they were not recognized

as a victim by a judge; if a victim sought assistance directly from non-government run shelters, a court order was not required. Nonetheless, observers noted improved capacity of investigative judges to identify victims, particularly of sex trafficking, and subsequently refer them to care.

The government referred 67 identified victims to care and provided healthcare, shelter, and legal assistance; it referred an additional 70 victims to NGOs for services or other government shelters outside of Baghdad. The government reported offering services to 238 victims who chose not to accept, and instead desired to be repatriated or sought assistance through NGOs or foreign embassies. The KRG reported of the 121 victims identified, it referred 97 to an NGO shelter; the KRG did not report if the remaining 24 were referred to care or received services. The KRG did not report victim identification or protection data in the previous reporting period.

MOLSA continued to operate a shelter in Baghdad that could accommodate 80 adult female victims and children of victims. In October 2023, the government opened a shelter in Baghdad specifically available for male victims under the management of MOLSA; the male shelter in Baghdad could accommodate 50 adult male trafficking victims and provided services to nine victims since its opening. Additionally, given the limited availability of protection services for male victims, the government sometimes held potential victims in detention facilities. For example, prior to the shelter's opening, 45 adult male victims of forced labor identified by an NGO between July and September were reportedly kept in a detention center due to the lack of shelter for men. Separately, in August 2023 the government opened an additional shelter in Diwaniyah for female trafficking victims that could accommodate 75 victims. There were no trafficking-specific shelters available for children or LGBTQI+ victims. Orphanages remained available for child victims below the age of six; any child victim older than six was referred to shelters for persons experiencing homelessness. Iraqi law prohibited NGOs from operating shelters, although international organizations and NGOs could refer identified victims to government shelters. Government shelters only allowed victims to enter or leave a shelter with a judge's order, and officials often limited victims' ability to communicate with anyone outside of the shelters. MOLSA allocated 150,000,000 Iraqi Dinar (IQD) (\$114,680) for its shelter in Baghdad, while provinces outside the capital allocated 65,000,000 IQD (\$46,690) annually for specialized assistance for trafficking victims. MOLSA – in coordination with the Ministry of Health (MOH) – reported providing victims at the shelter with psycho-social, trauma, and reintegration services, medical care, and long-term shelter; MOH reported dedicating two doctors for trafficking victims at the shelter. Observers reported overall services fulfilled victims' basic physical needs, but a lack of resources, staffing, and case management training limited shelter staff's ability to provide specialized psycho-social and medical care and

vocational training for trafficking victims; others noted a change in shelter management during the year increased the quality and standard of available services. Although it did not report the extent to which the case management system was utilized, MOLSA reported providing 30 victims vocational training at the shelter. An international organization reported MOLSA shelter staff referred cases to other organizations for specific protection needs. The law entitled foreign trafficking victims to the same benefits as Iraqi victims, but in practice, officials frequently referred foreign victims to an international organization for assistance, including shelter and facilitating repatriation to the victims' countries of origin, rather than providing them services at government-run shelters. An international organization reported foreign victims could not easily access services outside of the shelter while they awaited repatriation; instead, foreign victims often relied on their embassies for support.

During a previous reporting period, an NGO alleged staff and guards at the Iraqi government-operated shelter abused trafficking victims. Subsequently, the government installed a monitoring system at the shelter which remained operational. During the year, the government assigned an all-female unit to provide security to the MOLSA shelter. The Iraqi government did not provide specialized care for rape victims, including trafficking victims who were also victims of rape. The family members of some sex trafficking victims attempted to convince them to leave the MOLSA shelter and drop any charges to avoid stigma. For such cases, the government continued to operate 16 Family Protection Units across federal Iraq focused on family reconciliation for trafficking victims or other crimes. NGOs continued to report the lack of specialized trafficking shelters in the country remained a significant gap. The Iraqi government did not report providing funding or in-kind assistance to NGOs that provided victim care; however, NGOs and international organizations reported the government fully cooperated with civil society actors, especially regarding victim services for foreign trafficking victims. The Iraqi government did not report providing protection or reintegration services to demobilized child soldiers of ISIS.

The KRG continued to operate five domestic violence shelters in the IKR for women, which could provide some services to female trafficking victims; however, shelter space was limited. Officials required victims to obtain a court order to leave the shelters, which significantly restricted their movement. The KRG did not report how many trafficking victims received services at these shelters. The KRG continued to allow an Erbil-based NGO to operate the first and only trafficking shelter in the IKR; the NGO shelter provided comprehensive case management and legal, health, and mental health services. The shelter could house as many as 38 victims at one time and was almost always at capacity. The KRG continued to facilitate the release of Yezidis held captive by ISIS, most of whom were likely trafficking victims, and reported it coordinated with NGOs and an

international organization to provide essential psycho-social and protective services to these victims.

While the government finalized and disseminated victim identification SOPs during the year and reported it screened vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators – including undocumented migrants – observers reported instances when authorities penalized potential labor trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked – including immigration violations – and subsequently deported some unidentified victims. Despite these concerns, NGOs noted significant improvement in officials’ overall understanding of the crime and capacity to identify individuals as trafficking victims regardless of other crimes committed as a direct result of being trafficked, particularly for sex trafficking victims who the government previously prosecuted for “prostitution” offenses. Nonetheless, foreign migrant workers, including foreign labor trafficking victims, faced regular discrimination in the criminal justice process, re-victimization, and retaliation from traffickers. Although employers were legally responsible to pay immigration fees or expenses related to foreign worker recruitment under Iraq’s sponsorship system, in previous reporting periods, some authorities penalized workers, including identified and unidentified trafficking victims, for failing to pay. Observers continued to report officials sometimes waived residency fines, but the decision-making process appeared arbitrary and highly dependent on the individual official. In 2020, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) advised its judges to waive all fines for trafficking victims in violation of Iraq’s residency laws; the government reported waiving fines for approximately 300 foreign trafficking victims since this policy was implemented, but did not specify how many victims had fines waived. Within the IKR, KRG authorities improved the process for waiving fines trafficking victims would otherwise be subject to for working in Kurdistan without legal documentation; however, as this process was informal, some trafficking victims may not have received this benefit. In addition, Iraqi and KRG authorities continued to inappropriately detain and prosecute, without legal representation, children allegedly affiliated with ISIS – some of whom were victims of forcible recruitment or use, forced and child marriage victims, and sex trafficking victims – and reportedly used abusive interrogation techniques and torture to obtain confessions. The Iraqi government did not report screening these children as potential trafficking victims or referring them to protection services. More than 1,400 children were detained for alleged association with armed groups, including ISIS.

The government and KRG provided some protections to victims or witnesses participating in criminal justice proceedings. The government reported 27 identified victims voluntarily assisted law enforcement authorities during the investigation and prosecution of traffickers following initial confirmation of a victim by an investigative judge. The government did not require victims to participate in criminal justice

proceedings to access protection services, only a court order issued by an investigative judge. Civil society organizations reported providing free attorneys to represent foreign workers, including trafficking victims, in court proceedings and MOLSA reported providing legal assistance to victims. The Iraqi government allowed trafficking victims to work, move freely, and leave the country during trials, unless victims resided in government shelters, in which a court order was required to leave the shelter. The MOI reported any foreign or Iraqi trafficking victim could file a civil lawsuit against a trafficker but did not report if any victims filed such cases. In the IKR, at least five victims received restitution after successful legal proceedings against accused recruitment agencies during the year. The government reported it provided translation and interpretation services for foreign trafficking victims; during the year, the government coordinated with the Embassy of Burma in Egypt to translate court documents and provide interpretation for Burmese victims during investigation and trial proceedings. Labor and criminal courts in the IKR did not provide translation and interpretation services for foreign workers, including foreign labor trafficking victims; observers reported victims could receive interpretation support from NGOs. Iraq's anti-trafficking law allowed the government to provide special residency status benefits to foreign trafficking victims; the MOI reported providing residency waivers to 20 identified victims. The KRG did not offer special residency status to victims, but it reportedly continued to refrain from deporting victims. The Iraqi government and the KRG could provide foreign victims relief from deportation or offer legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they may have faced hardship or retribution. During the year, the KRG waived overstay fines for 15 Afghan trafficking victims who were resettled into third countries in coordination with an NGO and an international organization. The Iraqi government repatriated 53 victims and the KRG repatriated 89 victims.

PREVENTION

The government increased efforts to prevent human trafficking. The MOI continued to lead the CCCHT comprising representatives from the MOH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Displacement and Migration, MOLSA, MOJ, the SJC, the Council of Ministers General Secretariat, Iraq's Independent High Commission for Human Rights, and three representatives from the KRG; the committee met nine times. Subcommittees, chaired by each respective governor, met in each province six times, while the CCCHT's security agencies met 22 times. The KRG's anti-trafficking committee, led by the KRG Ministry of Interior (KMOI) and comprising 19 government ministries and an international organization as an observer, met once as a whole committee, while the governorates and independent administration subcommittees met 17 times. The government finalized its 2023-2026 NAP and created a specific implementation plan for 2023.

The government conducted various awareness campaigns on trafficking indicators and reporting mechanisms, primarily targeted toward trafficking-specialized government officials, foreign workers, and the general public. The government also organized a workshop with labor unions to educate the organizations on vulnerabilities of foreign workers to labor trafficking. The Ministry of Transportation prepared brochures and signage at airports, border crossings, ports, and railways in several languages to enable workers to detect and report trafficking cases and raise awareness of the crime. In commemoration of World Day Against Trafficking in Persons in July 2023, the government held a symposium to discuss the crime with the public, university professors, leaders of security services, and trafficking-specialized staff within government ministries. In the IKR, the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (DCOC)'s anti-trafficking unit conducted awareness campaigns in partnership with an NGO targeting community members and foreign workers on trafficking trends and vulnerabilities. The MOI continued to operate a 24-hour anti-trafficking hotline and maintained a public email address to receive trafficking tips; the government reported it identified potential trafficking cases from 180 calls received during the year. The hotline was only available in Arabic, which limited its accessibility for foreign trafficking victims and Kurdish speakers. The KRG did not have a hotline for reporting trafficking cases, but the phone numbers for DCOC TIP police units were publicly available. An Erbil-based NGO also operated a general service line, available for victims of trafficking and gender-based violence and other vulnerable populations. Observers reported the lack of a government hotline or service line inhibited victims' access to available government protections services.

The Iraqi government and the KRG continued to cooperate with each other to maintain an online visa system to track migrant workers and their sponsoring companies to prevent employers from committing labor abuses; the government reported the system could automatically block any single individual or company from sponsoring more than 50 foreign laborers. The KRG reported challenges tracking migrant workers hired by employers and companies that used fake or fraudulent registrations and by others who acted as agents, sponsoring foreign labor visas before ultimately hiring the workers to third party companies for profit. However, in an effort to improve tracking of sponsors of migrant workers, KRG continued to require such entities to submit a deposit to KMOI to be used for any fines incurred for non-compliance with labor laws. Although the KRG prohibited "pre-payment employment," recruitment agencies were able to deduct up to 25 percent of a worker's first paycheck as a service fee for facilitating employment; which may have increased the vulnerability of workers to trafficking. Observers noted the KRG's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (KMOLSA)'s regulation on foreign labor conflicted with its 2018 anti-trafficking law, particularly in the case of workers who may be potential trafficking victims and, although they may be recognized as victims under the anti-trafficking law, they could be

punished for having an irregular status under the foreign worker regulations in the IKR. An NGO reported the KRG revised its labor law to reportedly include provisions to improve protection of Iraqi and foreign workers; the law remained pending approval by the KRG's Parliament at the close of the reporting period. Moreover, a separate revision on current regulations that governed migrant workers was under review at the close of the reporting period; the revised regulations reportedly increase protections for migrant workers and increase oversight on recruitment agencies. KMOLSA maintained a team of labor instructors and utilized an e-Visa system to monitor labor recruitment. During the year, KMOLSA restarted its labor inspection units within the Labor Directorates across the IKR with a specific focus on foreign workers; the KRG appointed 16 new inspectors in 2023 and coordinated with an NGO to provide inspectors training, including on identifying trafficking indicators.

The government regulated labor recruitment and placement of foreign workers through MOI's Residency Office and MOLSA. Recruitment agents or private citizens working as lawyers licensed by the government could sponsor workers, though observers noted some employment agencies operated outside of the government's control, often because they were affiliated with political parties or militias. Migrant workers could not change employers prior to completing two years of work with a sponsor except in documented cases of poor treatment or abuse. However, even in cases where an employee had a legitimate complaint, NGOs and an international organization reported recruitment agents often relocated the employee to a new employer, and authorities rarely held the abusive employer accountable. An international organization also reported agencies that the government blacklisted changed names frequently to enable them to continue to operate, and in cases when the government punished an employer for labor abuse, it was common for officials to penalize a single perpetrator, rather than agency. In 2023, the MOI and MOLSA established a joint committee to conduct inspections for unlicensed recruitment agencies in an effort to provide additional oversight and accountability for non-compliant agents; 27 agencies were closed as a result of such inspections.

The government reported it made efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts by conducting campaigns at locations known for commercial sex, including coffee shops, massage parlors, night clubs, and marriage offices run by clerics offering "temporary marriages." The campaigns provided information on the illegality of commercial sex, including the penalties for purchasing commercial sex or forcing a child into an early marriage for the purpose of commercial sex. In the IKR, KMOI and Asayish security forces continued to monitor massage centers, cafes, bars, and hotels – locations often used for commercial sex – and the government reported it conducted awareness campaigns to discourage the purchase of commercial sex.

Iraqi law prohibited compulsory or voluntary recruitment of any person younger than age 18 into the governmental armed forces, including governmental paramilitary forces, militia groups, or other armed groups. There were no reports the Iraqi military or KRG security forces unlawfully recruited or used children in combat or support roles. The government previously developed an action plan in coordination with an international organization to address the recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in armed conflict, but did not report whether the plan had been implemented.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Iraq, and traffickers exploit victims from Iraq abroad. Insecurity throughout the country increased vulnerability to trafficking among the population. Between 2017 and January 2024, approximately 4.8 million IDPs returned to their areas of origin across Iraq. As of January 2024, 1.1 million Iraqis remain displaced throughout the country. As of January 2024, approximately 175,000 of those IDPs were living in 23 formal camp locations in the IKR; no formal IDP camps remain in federal Iraq. As of January 2024, there were more than 300,000 refugees and asylum-seekers – including 270,000 Syrian refugees – displaced in Iraq, the vast majority in the IKR. Refugees and IDPs face heightened risk of forced labor and sex trafficking due to their economic and social vulnerability, lack of security and protections, and alleged affiliation with extremist groups. Women and girls in IDP camps whose family members have alleged ties to ISIS may continue to be exposed to a complex system of potential sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and abuse by security and military officials. Criminal gangs continue to reportedly exploit women in sex trafficking and boys and girls in forced begging. Observers previously noted internally displaced and refugee children and children with disabilities, primarily in urban areas, were at high risk for forced begging in IKR. Observers continue to report an increase in the use of children 8-15 years old by criminal gangs to distribute narcotics. Civil society organizations also report traffickers force children, including internally displaced children, to work in chemical factories in Erbil and shops in Sinjar. In October 2020, the Iraqi government announced its decision to close all IDP camps in federal Iraq. Following the closure of those IDP camps in previous reporting periods, NGOs reported camp residents experienced challenges obtaining civil documentation and security clearance to travel to other parts of the country, resulting in secondary displacement, preventing freedom of movement, and exacerbating this population's already high risk of trafficking. An international organization reported following the sudden closure of such camps, some families forced their children to work upon leaving the camps as a source of livelihood. An international organization previously reported tens of thousands of IDP children lacked civil documentation, particularly those born or formerly residing in areas under ISIS control,

and could not access basic services, including enrolling in school. Additionally, an international organization reported approximately one million displaced Iraqis lacked civil documentation. Some officials reportedly exploit families allegedly associated with ISIS – including children – in sex trafficking following their release from detention; in February 2024, an international organization reported officials coerced family members of formally detained children into performing sex acts in order to obtain security clearances or access civil documentation required to receive governmental services. Observers noted traffickers often exploit internally displaced Iraqi children, as well as Syrian refugee children, between the ages of 10-18 in forced labor in street-selling, hospitality, and domestic servitude.

Between 2014 and 2018, ISIS militants kidnapped and held captive thousands of women and children from a wide range of ethnic and religious groups, especially Yazidis, and “sold” them to ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS fighters exploited them in forced marriage, sexual slavery, rape, and domestic servitude, both within Iraq and in neighboring countries. IKR-based civil society organizations also reported in 2018 that ISIS members and supporters kidnapped Yazidi children for exploitation in Türkiye. Throughout 2015-2019, thousands of women and children escaped ISIS captivity – many of whom were pregnant as a result of rape, forced marriage, and sex trafficking. These women and girls, including IDPs among this population, remain highly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including re-trafficking. As of October 2023, a rights group reported 2,763 Yazidis – including adults and children – remain missing and vulnerable to trafficking. Rights groups and activists estimate several hundred Yazidis remain in al-Hol displacement camp in northeastern Syria, while others remain in detention facilities and off-camp locations. Some of these Yazidis remain trapped in exploitive conditions, including trafficking.

Children remain vulnerable to forcible recruitment or use by multiple armed groups operating in Iraq, including ISIS, tribal forces, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and non-PMF Iran-aligned militia groups. The last credible report of recruitment of soldiers younger than the age of 18 by the PMF occurred in 2019. In the previous reporting period, the PKK and the People’s Defense Forces (HPG) recruited and used child soldiers. In past reporting periods an international organization reported ISIS abducted and forcibly recruited and used children in combat and support roles, including as human shields, informants, bomb makers, executioners, and suicide bombers; some of these children were as young as eight years old and some were children with intellectual disabilities.

Iraqi and Syrian women and girls, as well as LGBTQI+ persons in the IKR and federal Iraq, are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. LGBTQI+ persons across all ethnic and religious groups remained at risk of sex trafficking primarily because of cultural stigmas. Observers reported girls

between 14-18 years old who worked in coffee shops were subjected to sex trafficking by customers and owners; criminal groups exploited girls in sex trafficking and forced criminality, including drug trafficking. Traditional practices, including “fasliya” – the exchange of family members to settle tribal disputes – and forced child marriages, place women and girls at increased risk of trafficking within the country. Women and girls are also exploited in sex trafficking through “temporary” marriages. Observers noted Saudis and Kuwaitis exploited children in sex trafficking during hunting trips in areas inhabited by Kawalyah, nomadic tribesmen without civil documentation. Observers previously alleged some traffickers operated massage centers in five-star hotels, some of which were state-owned, and therefore, less likely to receive scrutiny from the authorities. Massage parlors, coffee shops, bars, and nightclubs remain common locations for sex trafficking. Traffickers use social media to operate their networks and recruit victims, such as by advertising fake job offers.

Traffickers subject migrants, both documented and undocumented, from throughout Asia and Africa to forced labor as construction workers, security guards, cleaners, handymen, and domestic workers in Iraq. Observers note an increasing number of Ghanaian domestic workers identified as trafficking victims. In addition, NGOs previously noted an increase in Indonesian trafficking victims being transported through Turkey to the IKR, then working in Turkey for approximately one month, before being told to renew their work permits in Kurdistan and forcibly made to remain and work. NGOs report some employers and recruitment agents exploit workers’ undocumented status by withholding salaries, confiscating passports, and subjecting workers to substandard living conditions through threats of deportation or arrest. Traffickers fraudulently recruit some foreign migrants for work in other countries in the region, but subsequently force or coerce them into working in federal Iraq and the IKR. NGOs report migrants in the IKR receive harsher treatment than local employees by their employers, including physical and emotional abuse, and continue to be vulnerable to nonpayment or under-payment of wages and food deprivation.

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