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2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Syria

OFFICE TO MONITOR AND COMBAT TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

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Syria (Tier 3)

The Government of Syria does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity, is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore Syria remained on Tier 3. During the reporting period, there was a government policy or pattern of human trafficking and employing or recruiting child soldiers. The government exploited its nationals in forced labor in its compulsory military service by forcing them to serve for indefinite or otherwise arbitrary periods. Officials did not demobilize most individuals from military service after their mandatory period of service; rather, they forced citizens to serve indefinitely under threats of detention, torture, familial reprisal, or death. The government did not hold any traffickers criminally accountable, 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. The pandemic, security situation, and the government's restriction on freedom of movement, press, and internet access limited reporting, including on official complicity on human trafficking and child soldiering crimes. In

previous reporting periods, the government and pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias forcibly recruited and used child soldiers, resulting in children facing extreme violence and retaliation by other warring parties. Despite such reports, the government has never reported efforts to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate child soldiers, nor has it reported investigating, prosecuting, or convicting officials complicit in the recruitment or use of child soldiers. Pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers during the reporting period; 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.

Enforce limits on the length of compulsory military service, demobilize individuals who have exceeded the service limit, and cease the deceptive and coercive recruitment of returning refugees.

Proactively identify victims of all forms of trafficking and provide them with appropriate protection services, including long-term care for demobilized child soldiers from government forces and non-state armed groups.

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.

Given significant concerns that North Korea forces its citizens to work abroad, screen North Korean workers for trafficking indicators and refer them to appropriate services.

PROSECUTION

The government made no discernible anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. Violent conflict continued to amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes occurring within Syria. Decree No. 3 of 2010 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 1 million and 3 million Syrian pounds (\$400 and \$1,190), a penalty that was sufficiently stringent but, with respect to sex trafficking, not commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. The government did not report investigating, prosecuting, or convicting suspected traffickers. During the reporting period, the National Defense Forces (NDF), a pro-regime militia organized by and in close collaboration with the Syrian government, recruited and used children in combat roles. During the reporting period, an international organization reported regime forces recruited or used 43 children at checkpoints but did not report further details. In previous reporting periods, the government and pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias forcibly recruited and used child soldiers, resulting in children facing extreme violence and retaliation by other warring parties. Military service was compulsory for Syrian men between the ages of 18 and 42 for 18 to 21 months; however, the government forced soldiers and reservists to serve an indefinite period of time, and some draftees were not discharged even after nine years of military service. NGOs reported the government, including commanding officers, detained, tortured, and at times killed conscripts if they were suspected to be anti-government, refused an order, or deserted; there were also reports the government harassed, detained, and in some cases, tortured the families of draft evaders and deserters. In addition, there were reports the regime deceived and potentially coerced returning refugees into military service. The government has never reported investigating, prosecuting, or convicting government officials complicit in human trafficking, including child soldiering crimes. 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 crimes that 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 political opponents, armed groups, and terrorist organizations and made no effort to offer these children any protection services. During the reporting period, there continued to be isolated reports of the government detaining women and children—including unaccompanied children—across Syria for suspected family ties to foreign 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. 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 also did not implement measures to prevent children from unlawful recruitment and use as combatants and in support roles by pro- regime militias, armed opposition 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. Conditions in Syria continue to deteriorate amid the ongoing conflict between the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies and non-state armed groups of varying ideologies exerting control over wide

geographic swaths of the country's territory. Military service is compulsory for Syrian men between the ages of 18 and 42 for 18 to 21 months; however, since the start of the conflict in 2011, officials do not demobilize most individuals from military service after their mandatory period of service; rather, they force citizens to serve indefinitely under threats of detention, torture, familial reprisal, or death.

More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million have been displaced; as of September 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported there were 6.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 2.6 million of whom were children, and more than 5.6 million Syrian-registered refugees outside the country. Syrians 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 sexual slavery and forced labor—and children displaced within the country continue to be subjected to forced labor, particularly by organized begging rings. Armed groups, community members, and criminal gangs exploit women, girls, and boys in Syria—particularly underserved populations such as IDPs and individuals with disabilities—in sex trafficking in exchange for food or money. Traffickers subject foreign domestic workers from Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines to forced labor in Syria. In several cases, traffickers fraudulently recruited Filipina domestic workers for employment in the United Arab Emirates before transporting them to Syria where they are exploited in forced labor.

Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS at the beginning of 2019, the group 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, sexual slavery, and other forms of sexual violence. Incidents of human trafficking increased, and trafficking victims were trapped in Syria in 2014 when ISIS consolidated its control of the eastern governorates of Raqqa and Deir al-Zour. ISIS publicly released guidelines on how to capture, forcibly hold, and sexually abuse women and girls as “slaves.” As reported by an international organization, ISIS militants' system of organized sexual slavery and forced marriage is a central element of the terrorist group's ideology and systemic means of oppression. ISIS subjected girls as young as nine years old, including Yezidi girls abducted from Iraq and brought to Syria, to sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence. Although as of

2021, ISIS no longer controlled territory, according to an NGO, approximately 2,700 Yezidi women and girls remain unaccounted for; reports indicate some of these women and girls remain with ISIS in eastern Syria or in Al-Hol camp.

The recruitment and use of children in combat in Syria remains common, 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 Syrian National Army (SNA) and SNA-affiliated groups, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-affiliated groups, ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 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 the NDF, or “shabiha,” forcibly recruit children as young as six years old. During previous reporting periods, there were reports armed groups abducted or recruited children to be used in hostilities outside of Syria, in particular in Libya. ISIS forces continue to deploy children—some as young as eight years old—into hostilities. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS, it continues to target children for indoctrination at schools and camps for IDPs, endangering children and preventing their access to education.

The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) in northwest Syria continue to recruit, train, and use boys and girls as young as 12 years old. Since 2017, international observers reported that YPG and YPJ recruited—at times by force—children from displacement camps in northeast Syria. During the reporting year, the SDF, and by association the YPG and YPJ, continued to implement the UN Security Council resolution-mandated action plan to end the recruitment and use of children and demobilize children within SDF ranks. The SDF identified 908 minors seeking to join its ranks and continued to develop and refine an age screening mechanism in coordination with the UN. According to the UN, the action plan resulted in the disengagement of 150 children from SDF ranks during the year. NGOs allege that some Popular Mobilization Forces-affiliated militias in Iraq recruit boys in Iraq to fight in Syria. As in previous reporting periods, credible sources widely report that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian Basij Resistance Force, and IRGC-supported militias actively recruit and use—including through force or coercive means—Afghan children and adults,

Afghan migrant and refugee men and children living in Iran, Syrian children, and Iranian children to fight in IRGC-led and -funded Shia militias deployed to Syria.

Terrorist groups, including ISIS and HTS, reportedly force, coerce, or fraudulently recruit foreigners—including migrants from Central Asia and women, including Western women—to join them. Central Asian women traveling with men to Syria are also vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labor on arrival; many are reportedly placed alongside other Central Asian family members in makeshift camp communities, where their travel and identity documentation is confiscated and their freedom of movement restricted. Many of these women report having lost their husbands to armed conflict, after which their economic hardships and confinement in the camps make them vulnerable to coercive local marriages that may feature corollary sex trafficking or forced labor indicators. During the reporting period, thousands of foreign women remained in IDP camps across northeastern Syria, and some had suspected family ties to foreign ISIS fighters; some of these individuals may have been unidentified trafficking victims. Some children in IDP camps across northeastern Syria, including Al-Hol, were potential human trafficking victims used in direct hostilities or in support roles by armed groups, including ISIS. In February 2021, an international organization reported that the repatriation of foreign children from camps across northeastern Syria had slowed significantly due to the pandemic. As in previous reporting periods, the Syrian government, NDF, SDF, and SNA detained children, including trafficking victims, for their alleged association with armed groups or terrorist organizations. In July 2020, an NGO reported government officials subjected LGBTQI+ persons in Syria to various forms of sexual violence, including cases amounting to sexual slavery, in military detention centers, prisons, and checkpoints.

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 other forms of sex trafficking in refugee camps, Lebanon, Jordan, and cities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, including Sulaimaniya. Commercial sex 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. An NGO reported Syrian boys, especially unaccompanied and separated boys, were vulnerable to sexual trafficking in exchange for the cost of being smuggled across the border to Turkey and further destinations. 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 adults and children to work in agriculture under harsh conditions, including physical abuse, with little to no pay. LGBTQI+ persons among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon are reportedly vulnerable to sex trafficking. During the previous reporting period, Sudanese authorities identified seven Syrian trafficking victims in Khartoum. North Korean nationals working in Syria may have been forced to work by the North Korean government. Isolated media reporting in 2020 alleged Syrian men were fraudulently recruited to fight in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, believing they were going to Azerbaijan for work opportunities.

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