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2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: West Bank and Gaza

WEST BANK AND GAZA (Tier 2)**

** This section of the report covers the West Bank and Gaza, and East Jerusalem territories that Israel occupied during the June 1967 war. The United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017 and Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in 2019. Language in this report is not meant to convey a position on any final status issues to be negotiated between the parties to the conflict, including the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the borders between Israel and any future Palestinian state.

Residents of the West Bank and Gaza were subject to the exercise of authority or control by separate entities. The Palestinian Authority (PA) exercised varying degrees of authority in areas of the West Bank, and Hamas had established and exercised de facto control in Gaza prior to the October 7, 2023, attack and ensuing conflict.

Civil affairs in Areas A and B of the West Bank and Gaza are governed by a complicated network of Palestinian Basic Law and decrees as well as Jordanian and Egyptian laws and laws from the British Mandate and Ottoman eras. Area C of the West Bank is administered solely by Israeli military law. This network of laws does not fully criminalize sex and labor trafficking in the West Bank and Gaza. Article 310 of the Jordanian Penal Code of 1960 criminalized some forms of child sex trafficking in the West Bank and prescribed penalties of three months to three years imprisonment and a fine of five to 50 Jordanian dinars (\$7-\$70). Article

311 of the same law criminalized some forms of adult sex trafficking in the West Bank and prescribed penalties of one to three years' imprisonment. However, both provisions only applied to offenses involving female victims and did not apply to offenses where the victim was considered a "common prostitute or of known immoral character," thereby wrongfully excluding individuals from protection. Article 317 of the same law separately criminalized detaining a woman for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and prescribed penalties of two months to two years imprisonment. None of the penalties prescribed under these provisions were sufficiently stringent nor commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. The 2004 PA Minister of Labor Decree No. 1 on Hazardous Work prohibited the "sale and trafficking of children" and forced or compulsory labor of children in the West Bank and Gaza but did not specify penalties. The Children's Law, as amended, criminalized child sex and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five to 15 years' imprisonment and a fine. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. Article 261 of the 1936 Penal Code 74 for the British Mandate High Commissioner for Palestine criminalized some forms of labor trafficking in Gaza and prescribed penalties up to one year imprisonment. These penalties were not sufficiently stringent. An international organization reported supporting the PA to draft a comprehensive anti-trafficking law; at the end of the reporting period, the draft law had undergone two of the three Cabinet of Ministers reviews and was awaiting the President's signature for the second consecutive year.

Neither the PA nor Hamas comprehensively collected data on trafficking cases. According to an international organization, the PA preliminarily identified cases involving human trafficking such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, and forced begging arising from cases related to violence against women and girls or labor violations. The PA reported investigating 13 potential trafficking cases (10 sex trafficking, two labor trafficking, and one unspecified form of trafficking), compared with six labor trafficking investigations in 2023; Hamas in Gaza did not report any trafficking investigations. The PA reported prosecuting 20 alleged traffickers (10 for sex trafficking, five for labor trafficking, and five for unspecified forms of trafficking), compared with zero prosecutions in 2023; there were no prosecutions in Gaza. Courts in the West Bank convicted four traffickers (three sex traffickers, one labor trafficker), compared with zero convictions in 2023; there was no functional court system in Gaza during the reporting period.

The PA organized, at times in collaboration with foreign donors, NGOs, and international organizations, anti-trafficking trainings for officials. The PA did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of allegedly complicit officials; in previous reporting periods, there were unconfirmed reports staff at PA-operated shelters blackmailed and exploited women in trafficking. PA officials generally had minimal

understanding and awareness of trafficking issues but also noted when they did suspect potential trafficking cases, they were frequently unable to fully investigate due to lack of access and authority in Israeli settlements and Area C, which is under Israeli military and civil jurisdiction. The lack of coordination between the PA and Israeli authorities allowed perpetrators to exploit judicial gaps and evade accountability.

The PA did not have standard procedures to identify victims nor mechanisms to refer trafficking victims to care; international organizations and NGOs were the only entities with the limited capacity to identify and refer potential trafficking victims inside Gaza. The PA reported identifying 347 potential labor trafficking victims (288 adults and 59 children), compared with zero victims identified in 2023; the PA did not report if it referred these potential victims to assistance. Hamas did not report identifying any trafficking victims or referring any potential victims to assistance. The PA Ministry of Social Development operated three centers (two for boys in Ramallah and one for girls in Bethlehem) for vulnerable children, including child trafficking victims, which provided shelter, psycho-social care, and reintegration assistance. However, one of the centers may also operate as a detention center for juvenile offenders. The PA also operated four centers in the West Bank for female victims of violence that could assist trafficking victims. Prior to the October 7, 2023, attack and ensuing conflict, there were two shelters for female victims of violence in Gaza that could assist trafficking victims – one operated by an NGO and one operated by Hamas’ de facto authorities; these centers were not in operation during the reporting period. Aside from these centers, there were no appropriate services available for trafficking victims in the West Bank and Gaza beyond limited services from NGOs and international organizations.

Neither the PA nor de facto authorities in Gaza had a designated lead official, agency, or coordinating body to address trafficking nor efforts to prevent trafficking. The PA did not report any policies to prevent the exploitation of Palestinian workers in Israel or Palestinian migrant workers abroad; the de facto authorities in Gaza were not functioning during the reporting period. Security measures in the West Bank resulting from the October 7, 2023, attack and ensuing conflict, including movement restrictions, severely impeded the PA’s ability to perform labor inspections, including identifying potential labor trafficking crimes.

Human traffickers exploit Palestinian victims in the West Bank and Gaza, and traffickers exploit Palestinian victims abroad. Palestinian women and child domestic workers are vulnerable to forced labor in the West Bank and Gaza. In some cases, husbands coerced their wives into commercial sex in Gaza, at times amounting to sex trafficking. Palestinian workers, including Palestinians working illegally in Israel, are vulnerable to labor trafficking in Israel. Traffickers fraudulently recruit Palestinian children for

work in agriculture in Israeli settlements in the West Bank; children initially work voluntarily but receive less pay, perform more strenuous work than advertised, and work in coercive environments – all indicators of forced labor. Traffickers also exploit children, including children under 10 years old, in forced labor as street vendors. Children, prior to October 7, 2023, in Gaza worked in exploitative conditions that may amount to labor trafficking collecting scrap metal, street vending, or with other hazardous conditions; deteriorating economic and social conditions increased the vulnerability of children in Gaza during the reporting period, and international organizations and NGOs reported increased trash picking and scavenging for basic necessities. Ethiopian recruitment agencies fraudulently recruit women for domestic work in Jordan where they experience conditions amounting to forced labor before being “sold” to other employers in the West Bank where they experienced further exploitation before seeking assistance in Israel.

Traffickers, sometimes through organized networks, exploit Palestinian children in forced begging and other forms of labor trafficking such as washing windshields and vending in Israel and the West Bank. In some cases, family members arrange for Palestinian children to go to Israel where they stay by themselves or with older children to beg; these children stay for weeks before “rotating” out or Israeli authorities arrest them and return them to the PA. NGOs report traffickers increasingly coerce Palestinian children to engage in criminal acts in Israel such as auto theft.

Palestinian children are vulnerable to recruitment or use as child soldiers. Prior to October 7, 2023, some Palestinian armed groups organized regular camps for children that involved firearm instruction and military training that served as recruitment events; armed wings of Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas allegedly recruit and use child soldiers. As of March 2025, an estimated 1.9 million people were displaced in Gaza; Gazans have extremely limited access to water, food, hygiene and sanitation facilities, medical care, etc.; this population remains extremely vulnerable to trafficking. Palestinians and foreign nationals attempting to flee the conflict in Gaza are vulnerable to trafficking; reports indicate Egyptian authorities, independent brokers and fixers, and Hamas charged exorbitant fees for exit permits to leave through Rafah crossing, which closed in May 2024, leaving these populations vulnerable to trafficking through debt bondage and other exploitative practices. As of May 14, 2025, limited medical evacuations were the only way to depart Gaza.

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