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### 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Iran

#### IRAN (Tier 3)

The Government of Iran does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore Iran remained on Tier 3. Despite the lack of significant efforts, the government took some steps to address trafficking, including training police officers on human trafficking. However, during the reporting period there was a government policy or pattern of employing or recruiting child soldiers and human trafficking. Officials continued to perpetrate and condone trafficking crimes with impunity, both in Iran and abroad, and did not report law enforcement efforts to address the crime. In addition, the government continued to pursue and secure spurious trafficking convictions against LGBTQI+ activists, undercutting the government's efforts to hold sex and labor traffickers criminally accountable. The government forced or coerced children to join Iranian security and anti-riot forces to suppress ongoing political protests in the country. As in previous reporting periods, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian Basij Resistance Force (Basij), a paramilitary force subordinate to the IRGC, recruited and used child soldiers; the government was also complicit with non-state armed groups' recruitment and use of child soldiers, including the Houthis in Yemen. The government has never reported efforts to proactively provide appropriate protections to child soldiers, including child trafficking victims or reported investigating, prosecuting, or convicting officials complicit in the recruitment or use of child soldiers. The government failed to identify and protect trafficking victims and continued to deport or detain Afghan adults and children without screening this highly vulnerable population for trafficking indicators.

#### PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Cease the forcible and unlawful recruitment or use of child soldiers by government forces and paramilitary groups. \* Cease coordination with and support to non-state armed groups recruiting or using child soldiers. \* Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. \* Amend the 2004 law to bring the definition of trafficking in line with international law. \* Cease targeting of non-traffickers through spurious, politically motivated trafficking charges. \* Investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers – particularly complicit government officials – and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, involving significant prison terms, as appropriate. \* Hold complicit officials criminally accountable, including officials complicit in the recruitment or use of child soldiers and forcible conscription of Afghan migrants. \* Institute nationwide procedures to proactively identify trafficking victims, particularly among vulnerable populations such as persons in commercial sex, children recruited or used by security forces and non-state armed groups, children who experienced homelessness or used the streets as a source of livelihood, and undocumented migrants, including children. \* Offer specialized protection services to victims of all forms of trafficking, including shelter, medical and psycho-social care, and legal assistance. \* Allow for the registration and functional operation of civil society and international organizations to combat trafficking and to help provide essential protection services to victims. \* Increase transparency of anti-trafficking policies and activities. \* Accede to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol. \* Screen any North Korean workers for signs of trafficking and refer them to appropriate services, in a manner consistent with obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 2397.

## PROSECUTION

The government did not report anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts, and officials continued to perpetrate trafficking crimes with impunity, including the coerced recruitment and use of children and adults in armed conflict in the region. Iranian law did not criminalize all forms of trafficking. A 2004 law criminalized trafficking in persons by means of threat or use of force, coercion, abuse of power, or abuse of a victim's position of vulnerability for purposes of prostitution, slavery, or forced marriage. Inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, the law required movement to constitute a trafficking crime and required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion in child sex trafficking cases. The law did not encompass all forms of labor trafficking. The prescribed penalty under this law included up to 10 years' imprisonment if the trafficking crime involved an adult victim and a penalty of 10 years' imprisonment if the crime involved a child victim. Both penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with the penalties prescribed for kidnapping. The 2002 Law to Protect Children and Adolescents criminalized buying, selling, and exploiting children; the punishments for such crimes were six months to one year of imprisonment and a fine, which were neither sufficiently

stringent nor commensurate with other grave crimes, such as kidnapping. The labor code criminalized forced labor and debt bondage, but the prescribed penalty of a fine and up to one year of imprisonment was not sufficiently stringent. In 2021, the government reported drafting an amendment to the 2004 anti-trafficking law and submitting the legislation to Parliament for adoption; the amendment reportedly focused on the definition of trafficking and included aggravating punishments for crimes against women and children. The amendment remained pending Parliament approval at the end of the reporting period.

The government did not report any statistics on investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of traffickers. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) provided some anti-trafficking trainings to police; however, the trainings did not include information on victim identification or assistance. Officials continued to conflate human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and efforts to address sex and labor trafficking were either nonexistent or not widely publicized. Courts accorded legal testimony by women half the weight accorded to the testimony by men, thereby restricting female trafficking victims' access to justice. Observers expressed concern the government arbitrarily detained, ill-treated and prosecuted people on the discriminatory basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The government previously convicted and sentenced two LGBTQI+ female activists to death on charges of human trafficking and "corruption on earth;" according to media and human rights organizations, the latter term is often used to describe attempts to undermine the Iranian government. Although the Supreme Court of Iran overturned their death sentences, it sentenced one activist to a three-year prison sentence, while the other activist escaped to an undisclosed country. Iranian state media reported the government executed an Iranian national on charges of "corruption on earth" for involvement in the facilitation of commercial sex. Media also reported extraditing from Türkiye and arresting an Iranian national on ambiguous trafficking charges related to fraud, money laundering, "corruption on earth," and "enticement of a minor" without providing specific evidence of trafficking. The government's politically motivated use of human trafficking charges to target non-traffickers undercut the government's efforts to hold sex and labor traffickers criminally accountable.

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 action during the year. The IRGC and its Basij affiliate continued to recruit and use children younger than the age of 15 as security and anti-riot forces in several cities and provinces. In addition, the government provided material support to the Houthis, a non-state armed group in Yemen that recruited and used child soldiers. Despite such reports, the government has never reported investigating, prosecuting, or convicting officials

complicit in the recruitment or use of child soldiers. Neither the government nor media reported if the government had taken any action on past allegations of official complicity in condoning and facilitating sex trafficking involving both adults and children or allegations of official complicity in the coercive recruitment of adults into Iranian-led and supported militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In the previous reporting period, observers reported IRGC and Basij forces actively recruited – through coercion and deception – Afghan migrants and refugees for combat in IRGC-led and commanded militias in Syria, a practice that likely continued during the reporting period. In previous years, the government allegedly coerced former Afghan Special Forces members to fight for the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen to keep their legal residency status in the country after they sought visa extensions to remain in Iran.

## PROTECTION

The government did not report any victim protection efforts. The government did not report any efforts to identify trafficking victims or provide protection services for trafficking victims, nor did it report having formal procedures to proactively identify and refer trafficking victims to care. Official government involvement in trafficking crimes and authorities' abuse of trafficking victims continued unabated. The government reportedly continued to punish sex and labor trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as commercial sex offenses and immigration violations. Female victims of sex crimes, including sex trafficking, faced prosecution for adultery, defined as sexual relations outside of marriage and punishable by death. As in previous years, the government continued a pattern of human rights abuses of punishing potential adult and child sex trafficking victims through lashings, public shaming, forced confessions, imprisonment, and the death penalty. Iranian officials and media confirmed a ban on Afghan refugees and migrants from living in, traveling to, or seeking employment in 16 of the nation's provinces, increasing refugees' vulnerability to trafficking. Media reported Iranian authorities detained and deported more than 345,000 Afghans in late 2023; the government did not make efforts to screen for or identify trafficking victims among this highly vulnerable population. Iranian authorities continued to arrest both documented and undocumented Afghans in Iran. While in government custody, some of those detained Afghans – including children – experienced severe physical abuse, lack of food and water for extended periods of time and were denied access to medical care, including to care for gunshot wounds sustained from Iranian authorities at the border.

Iran's state welfare system did not adequately protect most vulnerable populations in the country, including children and individuals in commercial sex. Foreign trafficking victims were unable to access assistance from the welfare system. The government did not report providing support to or partnering with NGOs that offered limited services

to populations vulnerable to trafficking. The government did not provide foreign trafficking victims legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they may face hardship or retribution.

## PREVENTION

The government maintained inadequate efforts to prevent trafficking. The government's persistent lack of efforts to prevent official complicity in trafficking crimes further exacerbated trafficking in the country and the region. The government previously reported the MOI established an anti-trafficking commission to lead development of policies, strategies, and programs while monitoring activities related to trafficking; however, the government did not report any action taken by the commission for the third consecutive year. The government did not report dedicating resources to address human trafficking or the provision of anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel. The government did not improve transparency on its anti-trafficking policies or activities, nor did it organize anti-trafficking awareness campaigns. Hardline elements within the regime routinely stymied efforts to amend relevant existing laws or introduce new measures to improve the government's ability to prevent or address the country's pervasive trafficking problems. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

The government did not report efforts to prevent the IRGC or Basij's recruitment or use of child soldiers. The government has never reported efforts to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate child soldiers. Media reported Iranian authorities repeatedly forcibly returned vulnerable Afghans during the year – including by opening fire on adults and children attempting to cross the border into the country. The government previously allowed 2.6 million individuals who participated in a “headcount exercise” to receive temporary protection against deportation, originally through October 2022 but extended to April 2023, possibly preventing some exploitation of this vulnerable population, including trafficking. In March 2023, the government mandated all individuals who participated in the exercise to register and obtain employment identification, or face losing legal status in Iran and deportation. Additionally, the government reported undocumented Afghans who did not participate in the exercise due to lack of awareness or because they arrived in Iran after the exercise ended were subject to immediate deportation.

Children of undocumented Afghans and other ethnic minorities continued to have difficulty obtaining legal documentation, which increased this population's vulnerability to trafficking. The law stated Iranian women married to foreign men were able to transmit citizenship to their children; this was not automatic, however, as it required the mother to submit an application on behalf of her children. Observers expressed concern the nationality law required the Intelligence Ministry and the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC to certify no “security problem” existed before

approving citizenship for children born to Iranian mothers with non-Iranian fathers; this vaguely-defined security provision could be used to arbitrarily disqualify applicants if they or their parents were seen as critical of the government, further increasing this population's vulnerability to trafficking due to lack of citizenship documentation. Since the nationality law's implementation, the government reported more than 80,000 applications had been filed; of those applications, 14,000 children obtained nationality as of September 2022, allowing them to enroll in school and access basic services. Observers noted inadequate government implementation and oversight of school enrollment for undocumented and refugee Afghan children contributed to persistent obstacles, such as lack of information, administrative challenges, and lack of capacity in schools. Despite these limited efforts, an international organization and media reported the number of child laborers continued to increase due to lack of education and a decline in the economic welfare of Afghan families in Iran. Iran was not a party to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

### TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Iran, and traffickers exploit victims from Iran abroad. The continuing decline of the Iranian economy, as well as serious and ongoing environmental degradation, significantly exacerbates Iran's human trafficking problem, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized communities such as ethnic and religious minority groups, refugee and migrant populations, LGBTQI+ persons, women, and children. Iranian and some foreign women and girls, as well as some men and LGBTQI+ persons, are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking in Iran. Traffickers increasingly rely on social media, particularly Telegram, to recruit and exploit potential trafficking victims. Although Iranian law prohibits commercial sex, commercial sex and sex trafficking are endemic throughout the country. The government reportedly condones and, in some cases, directly facilitates sex trafficking of adults and children throughout the country; continued media reporting indicates Iranian police, IRGC, Basij, and religious clerics are allegedly involved in or ignore sex trafficking crimes. Commercial sex reportedly occurs in large urban centers, including the major pilgrimage sites of Qom and Mashhad; reportedly Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi, Bahraini, and Lebanese women in these locations are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Poverty and declining economic opportunities lead some Iranian women to engage in commercial sex, where traffickers subsequently force or coerce these women in sex trafficking. Some Iranian women who seek employment abroad to support their families, as well as young Iranian women and girls who run away from their homes, are vulnerable to sex trafficking. Observers report LGBTQI+ persons increasingly feel pressure to engage in commercial sex due to isolation from family, inability to find employment, and lack of legal protections. A September 2023 research study found 80 percent of transgender women in Tehran engaged in



commercial sex, typically due to economic hardship and the collapse of family support networks; this population was vulnerable to sex trafficking. “Temporary” or “short-term” marriages – often for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation known as “sigheh” – lasting from one hour to one week are reportedly widespread in Iran and take place in so-called “chastity houses,” massage parlors, and private homes. These arrangements are reportedly tightly controlled, condoned by the state, and facilitate sexual exploitation of female and male Iranians, as well as PRC national, Thai, and other victims, including children. Afghan girls are vulnerable to forced marriage with men living in Iran, which frequently leads to subsequent exploitation in sex trafficking and forced labor, including domestic servitude. Child marriage of Iranian and some foreign girls continues to increase and is most widespread among communities in lower-income areas of large cities, often with the consent of parents; girls in these marriages may be at risk of sex trafficking or domestic servitude. The most recent available report noted 25,900 marriages of girls and 15 marriages of boys younger than 15 years of age were registered in Iran from March 2022 to March 2023. Iranian women, boys, and girls are vulnerable to sex trafficking abroad, including in Afghanistan, Armenia, Georgia, Iraq (including the Iraqi Kurdistan Region), Pakistan, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Traffickers confiscate sex trafficking victims’ passports and threaten them with violence or execution if they return to Iran. Some reports also suggest collusion between traffickers in Dubai and Iranian police, the IRGC, and the Basij. Nationals from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar reportedly purchase sex from Iranian women in Dubai, including trafficking victims. Traffickers reportedly use Shiraz as a transit point to bring ethnic Azeri girls from Azerbaijan to the UAE and exploit them in sex trafficking.

Iranian and Afghan children experiencing homelessness in Iran are highly vulnerable to forced labor, and experts suggest child trafficking has increased in recent years. Official Iranian statistics indicate there are three million children working in Iran, but media suggest there are approximately seven million children “sold,” “rented,” or sent to work in Iran. Most of these children are reportedly between the ages of 10-15 years old, and the majority are undocumented foreigners. The number of children working in transport, garbage and waste disposal, “dumpster diving,” car washing, brick factories, construction, and the carpet industry reportedly continues to increase; these children experience abuse, withholding of wages, and potential exposure to infectious diseases – all indicators of forced labor. In March 2024, an academic source reported organized gangs in Tehran operated waste, recycling, and disposal centers and exploited Afghan and Iranian children; these children, locally known as “scavenger children” are subject to unsanitary working conditions, withheld wages, and reportedly forced to live in garbage separation centers. Media and international organizations reported an increase in the number of overall child laborers in Iran, particularly “scavenger children.” Undocumented and unaccompanied Afghan children from



Herat close to the Iranian-Afghanistan border, make up the majority of “scavenger children;” these children are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Traffickers exploit Afghan children, mainly boys, in forced labor, including domestic servitude. Media reports rampant exploitation of workers, including indicators of forced labor, in the state-owned energy sector of Iran, citing deadly working conditions, wage theft, and violent retaliation by security forces in the event of strikes.

Criminal groups kidnap or purchase and force Iranian and migrant children, especially undocumented Afghan children, to work as beggars and street vendors in cities, including Tehran. Traffickers routinely subject these children, who may be as young as three years old, to physical and sexual abuse and drug addiction as a means of coercion. Orphaned children are vulnerable to criminal begging rings that maim or seriously injure the children to gain sympathy from those passing on the street. Traffickers, including criminal groups and family members, exploit children, some as young as five years old, in forced begging, forced labor, or sex trafficking. Reports indicate organized gangs force some children, including Afghan children, to engage in crimes such as drug trafficking and smuggling of fuel and tobacco. Some Afghan children, between the ages of 14-17, use smugglers to transport them from Afghanistan to Iran in search of work; once in Iran, smugglers turn the children over to employers who subject them to forced labor. The population of Afghans entering Iran following the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021 likely includes a greater number of unaccompanied and undocumented Afghan children seeking employment in Iran, which may increase their vulnerability to trafficking.

As of January 2023, the government reported three million Afghans live in Iran; as of February 2023, the UN reported there were 750,000 Afghans registered as refugees in Iran. In addition to registered refugees, the government hosts 627,000 Afghans who hold Afghan passports and Iranian visas, 2.6 million Afghans who participated in a headcount exercise and received temporary status, and an estimated 500,000 undocumented Afghans. Undocumented Afghans face increased vulnerability to trafficking due to social hardships and lack of economic opportunity. Afghans not registered as refugees who had arrived during previous decades of conflict in their home country continue to be denied access to an asylum system or to registering as a refugee in Iran; this population continues to face extreme restrictions in access to employment, education, and healthcare and continues to live under the threat of deportation, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers subject Afghan migrants, including children, to forced labor in construction and agriculture in Iran. Organized trafficking groups subject Pakistani men and women in low-skilled employment to forced labor using debt-based coercion, restriction of movement, non-payment of wages, and physical or sexual abuse. Employers continue to seek adjustable work contracts for registered foreign workers where employers deny workers their benefits

and coerce them to work overtime, increasing the workers' vulnerability to forced labor. North Korean nationals working in Iran may be operating under exploitative working conditions and display multiple indicators of forced labor.

Iranian authorities continue to force and coerce Afghans, including children, as well as some Pakistani migrants and Syrian nationals and Iranian children, into armed groups in the region. Several credible sources continue to widely report the IRGC and Basij coerce Afghan men residing in Iran to fight in the Iranian-led and funded Fatemiyoun Brigade deployed to Syria. Recruiters target Afghans, especially Shia Muslims, in prisons and factories with promises of annulled prison sentences, stable residency status in Iran, and financial support. However, Afghans who return from war are refused residency in Iran and remain undocumented or return to Afghanistan, where they fear persecution by the Taliban for alleged association with the Fatemiyoun Brigade. In the previous reporting period, the government also allegedly coerced former Afghan Special Forces members to fight for the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen to keep their legal residency status in the country after they sought visa extensions to remain in Iran.

In previous reporting periods, observers reported IRGC and the Basij recruited and used migrant and refugee children, as well as Iranian children, for combat in IRGC-led and commanded militias in Syria. The IRGC and the Basij continue to recruit and use children as security and anti-riot forces in several domestic cities and provinces. According to a January 2024 report, the IRGC continues to facilitate the recruitment and training of Syrian children from Dayr az Zawr at training centers located in Al Mayadin to fight in IRGC and affiliated militias in Syria. The Iranian government also provides material support to the Houthis, a non-state armed group in Yemen that recruits and uses child soldiers.

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