

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Tunisia

TUNISIA (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Tunisia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; despite making significant efforts to do so, it did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period. Therefore, Tunisia was downgraded to Tier 2 Watch List. Significant efforts included increasing investigations and prosecutions. The government drafted but had not yet passed a new law to improve oversight of private recruitment agencies. However, the government identified the fewest number of trafficking victims since 2017 and convicted fewer traffickers. The government did not consistently refer identified trafficking victims to shelter and services. Restrictions on civil society organizations, including organizations enumerated in the NRM to provide services to trafficking victims, severely restricted the availability of services for trafficking victims in Tunisia and increased distrust of authorities, hindering victim identification. Due to inadequate screening among vulnerable populations, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. There were increased allegations of official complicity in trafficking crimes, including reports of officials “selling” migrants to Libyan officials and armed groups known to exploit them in labor and sex trafficking; the government did not take adequate law enforcement action against allegedly complicit officials.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consistently use formal procedures for all relevant officials to screen and proactively identify trafficking victims – particularly among vulnerable groups, such as domestic workers, undocumented migrants, homeless children, and persons in commercial sex – and train officials on their use.
- Increase efforts to investigate all credible allegations of official complicity in human trafficking and hold complicit officials criminally accountable through prosecution.
- Fully implement the NRM using a victim-centered approach to ensure officials refer all trafficking victims to appropriate protection services and train law enforcement and judicial authorities on appropriately referring victims to care.
- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Provide adequate protection services to all trafficking victims, including appropriate shelter, psycho-social care, and long-term services tailored specifically to trafficking victims.
- Raise awareness about the existing legal and regulatory environment that allows NGOs and international organizations to provide services to trafficking victims and populations vulnerable to human trafficking and increase collaboration between government and civil society.
- Train and build the capacity of judicial and law enforcement officials on the application of the anti-trafficking law, investigative techniques, evidence collection specific to trafficking cases, witness and victim protection best practices during trial, and alternatives to victim testimony.

PROSECUTION

The government decreased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts and, despite increased reports of official complicity in trafficking, the government did not take adequate law enforcement actions to address these concerns.

Tunisia's anti-trafficking law, Organic Law 2016-61, enacted in July 2016, criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 Tunisian dinars (TND) (\$15,720) for crimes involving adult victims and 15 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000-100,000 TND (\$15,720-\$31,450) for those involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as kidnapping. Article 171 of the penal code criminalized begging and using children to beg and prescribed penalties of six months to two years' imprisonment.

The government frequently charged migrant smugglers under the anti-trafficking law; thus, the government's reporting of trafficking investigation, prosecution, and conviction data conflated with other crimes not involving exploitation through labor trafficking or sex trafficking, such as migrant smuggling. In 2024, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) investigated 361 new suspects in an unknown number of cases, which included 60 suspects of sex trafficking, 33 for "slavery" and forced labor, 196 for forced begging, 52 for "economic exploitation," and 20 for "slavery and practices analogous to slavery." The government also investigated 12 suspects for "exploitation of children in illegal migrant smuggling" and 18 for "exploitation in the production of pornography;" it was possible some of these cases involved crimes beyond the scope of the international definition of trafficking, like production of pornographic material or illegal adoption without the purpose of exploitation. This compared with 241 suspects investigated in 2023.

The National Authority to Combat Trafficking in Persons (National Authority) – the government's lead agency coordinating anti-trafficking efforts – reported the government initiated 278 new prosecutions (78 sex trafficking, 124 "economic exploitation," and 79 unspecified forms of trafficking) in 196 cases, compared with 53 prosecutions initiated under the 2016 anti-trafficking law in 2023. The government reported 69 prosecutions initiated in previous years remained ongoing. Courts convicted 61 traffickers in 28 cases in 2024 (15 sex traffickers, three labor traffickers, and 43 traffickers involved in unspecified forms of trafficking), a decrease compared with 84 traffickers convicted in 2023. Of the 61 convicted traffickers, courts convicted 38 under the anti-trafficking law; the government did not report under which laws it convicted the other 23 traffickers. Forty-nine of the 61 convicted traffickers were Tunisian. The government did not provide sentencing data for convicted traffickers for the second consecutive year.

Corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action during the year. Some parts of the government denied allegations of official complicity in trafficking crimes. NGOs continued to report that, during migrant expulsions at the Tunisia-Libya border, some Tunisian officials colluded to "sell" migrants to Libyan authorities and armed groups, who then sometimes also "sold" them to smugglers and traffickers; reporting and testimonies from survivors indicated migrants were subsequently exploited in sex and labor trafficking. In addition, one observer alleged Tunisian officials exploited migrants held in immigration detention camps in forced labor at security facilities before being moved to the Libya border. Some Tunisian officials allegedly accepted bribes from criminal networks to facilitate trafficking and migrant smuggling, ignore potential trafficking crimes, drop investigations, or facilitate the release of arrested traffickers or smugglers. Observers alleged security forces and law enforcement refused to investigate or intervene in potential trafficking cases involving migrants, which discouraged the reporting of trafficking crimes to authorities. The government reported conducting administrative investigations into officials allegedly complicit in trafficking crimes, but did not report any criminal investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of officials for complicity in trafficking crimes.

The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) designated a judge at each tribunal of first instance, for a total of 28 judges, to serve as focal points to investigate and prosecute human trafficking cases. The MOI's special victims unit included brigades of judicial police and national guard officers throughout the country who specialized in cybercrime and assistance to victims of trafficking and other forms of

violence. The MOJ continued to monitor and maintain statistics on human trafficking cases brought before the judiciary through a specialized office; this office also had the authority to both conduct research and advise the Minister of Justice on the application of the anti-trafficking law. The government – at times in coordination with international and civil society organizations – conducted a wide variety of anti-trafficking trainings for law enforcement and judicial officials, healthcare practitioners, social workers, and other government officials on identifying and assisting trafficking victims, as well as investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases. However, insufficient training of judicial and law enforcement officials continued to hinder investigations and victim identification efforts, and some officials conflated human trafficking and migrant smuggling. The lack of an independent budget and insufficient capacity building hindered the government’s efforts to fully implement the anti-trafficking law. Civil society organizations reported a continued low level of awareness among police and judicial authorities on the application of the anti-trafficking law and handling of trafficking cases. Due to their lack of familiarity with the anti-trafficking law, some judicial officials used other laws with more lenient penalties to prosecute and convict trafficking offenders. Observers reported courts dismissed several potential trafficking cases because of a lack of evidence on the exploitative nature of the crime. Prosecutors continued to rely on victim or witness testimony without seeking corroborating evidence in cases where victims chose not to participate in criminal justice proceedings, inhibiting successful prosecutions and convictions. During the reporting period, the government cooperated with a foreign government on a trafficking investigation and participated in an international law enforcement operation resulting in the identification of 16 victims and arrest of three suspects.

PROTECTION

The government decreased victim protection efforts, identifying the fewest number of victims in six years and referring fewer victims to specialized services.

In 2024, the National Authority identified 524 victims, compared with 532 victims identified in 2023, consistent with a multi-year decrease since 2019. Of the 524 identified victims, traffickers exploited 72 in sex trafficking, 374 in labor trafficking (including 52 forced labor and domestic servitude, 41 victims of economic exploitation, 32 child forced criminality victims, and 249 child forced begging victims), and 27 victims in unspecified forms of trafficking; this figure also included 51 victims of kidnapping and ransom that likely included sex and labor trafficking. The government also identified seven victims of “abandonment and sale of children,” but it is unclear if these cases involved trafficking indicators. The majority of identified victims (414) were children. Of the 524 identified victims, 235 were foreign nationals, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. The government referred 120 victims to government shelters but did not report if it referred the other 404 identified victims to shelter and services; this was a decrease compared to providing direct assistance or referrals to civil society for all 451 identified victims in 2023.

The government continued implementing its NRM, which streamlined all stages of the referral process from victim identification and assistance to civil and criminal proceedings. The government also provided practical guides to security officers and judicial police on victim identification techniques. Frontline responders could grant potential victims “pre-identification” status, which guaranteed access to services until authorities granted official victim status; however, some officials rarely granted this status due to lack of awareness of their role in the victim identification process. The National Authority, the MOI special victims unit, and judges were government entities authorized to officially identify trafficking victims, which entitled victims full access to state-run services and exemptions from exit visas for foreign victims. NGOs reported the limited number of ministries that could legally identify trafficking victims and insufficient resources slowed the process for identification and subsequently for victims to receive care. Civil society organizations also reported the special victims unit did not have sufficient personnel or resources to provide adequate assistance to trafficking victims, nor did personnel have the cultural understanding or training to communicate with vulnerable sub-Saharan migrants, including potential trafficking victims.

Although the government reported screening vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators, such screening was inconsistent and varied in quality, and authorities did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as “prostitution” or immigration violations. The government did not report screening for trafficking indicators before initiating legal proceedings against 27 children for trafficking-related crimes during the reporting period, which resulted in the detention of two children. The government did not report screening for trafficking indicators during expulsions of thousands of sub-Saharan migrants, a population particularly vulnerable to trafficking.

The Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) operated two shelters for children in Tunis and Sidi Bouzid and three shelters for adults in Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax; at least two of the three shelters for adults had designated areas for trafficking victims where victims could enter and exit freely and return on a regular basis for assistance seeking employment. The government reported assisting 120 (67 men and 53 women) trafficking victims in the five MoSA shelters supported in 2024; in 2023, the shelters assisted 123 victims. The MoSA shelters provided psycho-social care, family reintegration, social support, material assistance, professional integration, and health services. The MoSA and National Authority continued to uphold a 2019 agreement for the MoSA to dedicate one room in all social care centers for trafficking and violence victims. However, international organizations reported MoSA staff lacked specialized expertise to assist trafficking victims and reported no shelters were available for male victims. The government’s increased restrictions on civil society, including organizations enumerated in the NRM, decreased the overall availability of services for trafficking victims in Tunisia and resulted in victims being more vulnerable to threats, intimidation, and violence from traffickers during legal proceedings. The government did not report efforts to partner with NGOs providing services to trafficking victims.

The government offered foreign trafficking victims legal alternatives to their removal to countries where they might face hardship or retribution. The anti-trafficking law provided all identified foreign trafficking victims relief from deportation; the government provided temporary relief from deportation for 17 foreign trafficking victims in 2024 and waived consular penalties for 10 victims who requested repatriation to their home countries. Victims had the right to free legal aid to assist them in engaging in civil and criminal proceedings against traffickers, and there were provisions to protect victims’ privacy during court proceedings, such as recorded testimony and physical protection; the government provided legal assistance to 79 victims in 2024. The government allowed trafficking victims a 30-day reflection period, renewable once, while they decided whether to participate in criminal justice proceedings; victim assistance was not dependent on assisting law enforcement. Prosecutors could seek restitution in trafficking cases, and if victims were unable to collect restitution after a final judgement, victims could claim compensation from the government; the government reported restitution was not awarded to any victims during the reporting period and that full application of restitution provisions remained inadequate. Victims could file civil suits against traffickers; however, the government did not report if compensation was awarded in any civil suits in 2024.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts.

The MOJ led the National Authority, which included representatives from 13 ministries and experts from civil society; although the National Authority is an independent government body, it did not have a separate budget from the MOJ and lacked the resources to fully implement its mandate. A 2019 decree established SOPs and guidelines for the National Authority and four specialized commissions to focus on monitoring and evaluation, research, training and development, and tracking the causes of trafficking. The government remained without a NAP to combat trafficking during the reporting period. The government continued drafting a new anti-trafficking national strategy; the new strategy was not approved by the end of the reporting period. The government, both independently and in partnership with an international organization, conducted numerous anti-

trafficking public awareness and information campaigns. The government operated a hotline to report potential trafficking crimes, which was operational five days a week during regular business hours and whose operators spoke Arabic, French, and English; the government also operated a separate toll-free hotline for calls outside of regular business hours. The government did not report how many calls the hotlines received nor if any calls resulted in identified victims, referrals to assistance, or criminal investigations. The government continued the process of acceding to the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings.

Article 4 of Law 2010-2948 on the EPPA prohibited worker-paid recruitment fees. The Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment (MFPE) maintained three resource centers for Tunisian labor migrants to offer support and services before, during, and after traveling abroad for work. In addition, the Directorate General for Immigration continued to coordinate with the Minister of Vocational Training and Employment to combat illegal job recruitment agencies. During the reporting period, the government drafted a law to further regulate private recruitment agencies, and the law was pending approval. The National Agency for Employment and Independent Work (ANETI) maintained a network of 120 approved private recruiting agencies, 1,000 job advisors, and an online platform to improve employment searches in Tunisia and prevent exploitative work contracts. ANETI raised awareness about its work and advised job seekers to avoid communicating with unauthorized recruitment agencies as they may use exploitative contracts. Law No. 37 of 2021 defined the terms of employment for domestic workers and the rights and obligations of the employer and wage earner, as well as monitoring and inspection mechanisms. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Women, Children and Family maintained a partnership agreement to implement Law 37, which included measures such as training courses, establishing a complaint mechanism, and creating a database for domestic workers. The government made efforts to reduce demand for commercial sex acts, including by conducting awareness campaigns targeting purchasers of commercial sex.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Tunisia, and traffickers exploit victims from Tunisia abroad. Some Tunisian children are vulnerable to forced labor and sex trafficking in Tunisia. Traffickers, at times including family members, increasingly exploit children in sex trafficking, including online sexual exploitation and recruit victims through social media. Tunisian girls working in domestic service for wealthy families in Tunis and major coastal cities are highly vulnerable to trafficking, experiencing restrictions on movement, physical and psychological violence, and sexual abuse. Tunisian children who were homeless, using the streets as a source livelihood, or working in agriculture, small workshops, auto mechanic garages, street vending, and domestic service; some of these children are vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking. Organized gangs force homeless children into theft, begging, and drug trafficking. Traffickers reportedly exploit Tunisian women in sex trafficking under false promises of work within the country.

Migrants and refugees are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking, domestic servitude, and other forms of forced labor in Tunisia. Traffickers increasingly exploit women, primarily from West Africa and increasingly from Cote d'Ivoire, in domestic servitude in private homes. International organizations report other migrants force female migrants into sex trafficking in exchange for food, water, basic necessities, or to pay for crossing the Mediterranean. Traffickers force some men from Cote d'Ivoire to work on farms and construction sites. Traffickers reportedly coerce Ivoirians to smuggle cannabis and opioids into Tunisia. Recruiters in Cote d'Ivoire target well-educated and non-skilled individuals in the country with false and fraudulent promises of work in Tunisia. The majority of unaccompanied child migrants in Tunisia experience human rights abuses, including sex trafficking and labor trafficking, such as forced begging, during their journey to and in Tunisia. Reports by international organizations indicate an increase in criminal networks kidnapping migrants at the Algerian and Tunisian borders, holding the migrants in Sfax, and torturing the migrants to extort ransoms; criminal networks may also subject the migrants to sex and labor

trafficking. Humanitarian workers assisting forcibly displaced migrants in border areas report residents coerce some migrant women into performing sex acts in exchange for food, water, and basic services – a form of sex trafficking.

Traffickers reportedly exploit Tunisian women in sex trafficking under false promises of work in the region, such as Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Undocumented Tunisian migrants in Italy are vulnerable to trafficking. Media and NGOs report unscrupulous actors, including Russian officials and illicit recruiters, fraudulently recruited women ages 18-22 from Africa and the Middle East – including Tunisia – South Asia, and South America for vocational training programs and subsequently placed them in military drone production sites. Media report workers at these sites are subjected to hazardous conditions, surveillance, hour and wage violations, contract switching, and worker-paid recruitment fees, all of which are indicators of human trafficking.