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2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Syria

SYRIA: Tier 3

The Government of Syria does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on the government’s anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Syria remained on Tier 3. During the reporting period, there was a government policy or pattern of employing or recruiting child soldiers. The government did not hold any traffickers criminally accountable, including complicit government officials, 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 government and pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers, resulting in children facing extreme violence and retaliation by opposition forces; 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. • Proactively identify victims of all forms of trafficking and provide them with appropriate protection services, including long-term care for demobilized child soldiers. • 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.

PROSECUTION

The government made no discernible anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts, and the government and government-affiliated militias remained complicit in the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers. The 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 one million and three million Syrian pounds (\$800 and \$2,390), a penalty that was sufficiently stringent but, with respect to sex trafficking, not commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. 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 did not report investigating, prosecuting, or convicting suspected traffickers, nor did it investigate, prosecute, or convict government officials complicit in human trafficking, including child soldiering offenses. 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 unlawful acts 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 armed groups and made no effort to offer these children any protection services. During the reporting period, there were 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; the government’s actions continued to amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes in the country. The government did not implement measures to prevent children from unlawful recruitment and use as combatants and in support roles by government, pro-regime militias, opposition armed 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. The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate amid the ongoing conflict with sub-state armed groups of varying ideologies exerting control over wide geographic swaths of the country’s territory. As of December 2020, human rights groups and international organizations estimate between 220,000 and 550,000 people have been killed since the beginning of protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime in March 2011. This vast discrepancy is due in large part to the number of missing and disappeared Syrians whose fates remained unknown. More than half of Syria’s pre-war population of 23 million has been displaced; as of September 2020, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported there were 6.6 million IDPs, 2.6 million of whom were children, and more than 5.5 million Syrian-registered refugees outside the country. Syrians that remain 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.

Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS at the beginning of 2019, it 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 female 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 ISIS no longer maintains territory inside Syria at the end of 2020, according to an NGO, approximately 2,800 Yezidi women and girls remain missing; reports indicate some of these women and girls remained with ISIS in eastern Syria or were held 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 Free Syrian Army (FSA) and FSA-affiliated groups, Kurdish forces, 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 pro-regime militias known as the National Defense Forces, or “shabiha,” forcibly recruit children as young as six years old. During the reporting period, there were reports armed groups, including the Syrian National Army and Samarqand Brigade, 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 continued to target children for indoctrination at schools and camps for IDPs, endangering children and preventing their access to education. Before the liberation of Raqqa in October 2017, ISIS operated at least three child training camps in the city, where it forced children to attend indoctrination seminars and promised children salaries, mobile phones, weapons, a martyr’s place in paradise, and the “gift” of a wife upon joining the terrorist group. The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) in northwest Syria continued 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. NGOs alleged that some Popular Mobilization Forces-affiliated militias in Iraq recruited boys in Iraq to fight in Syria. As in previous reporting periods, credible sources widely reported that Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian Basij Resistance Force, and IRGC-supported militias actively recruited and used—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 forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited 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 is 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. As of January 2021, an international organization reported 27,000 children, including 8,000 children of foreign terrorist fighters, remained at IDP camps across northeastern Syria, including Al-Hol, managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); humanitarian actors had access to these camps to provide services. A portion of these children 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 the repatriation of foreign children from camps across northeastern Syria had slowed significantly due to the pandemic. During the reporting period, the SDF and Syrian government detained children, including trafficking victims, for their alleged association with armed groups. An international organization verified at least 11 cases of sexual violence against girls in detention by government forces that occurred in previous years.

In June 2019, the SDF, and by association the YPG and YPJ, took steps to end the recruitment and use of children and demobilize children within SDF ranks after adopting a UN Security Council Resolution-mandated action plan. In 2020, the UN confirmed the SDF had demobilized 86 children, including 56 girls, and, working with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (SNES), returned them to their families for community-based reintegration, pursuant to UN requests. The SDF and SNES in August 2020 announced the establishment of the Civil Complaints Mechanism, a key component of the child soldier demobilization initiative, which provides parents a single SNES and SDF point of contact to inquire about, identify, and demobilize children from the SDF. In 2020, the SDF also continued implementing the action plan by facilitating training on it with an international organization and withdrawing from schools it was using for military purposes.

In July 2020, a nongovernmental organization 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. Isolated media reporting alleged Syrian men were fraudulently recruited to fight in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict believing they were going to Azerbaijan for work opportunities. In July 2020, the Indonesian government repatriated 104 Indonesian migrant workers from Syria, some of whom may have been trafficking victims. In January 2021, media reported traffickers fraudulently recruited dozens of Filipino domestic workers to work in the United Arab Emirates but instead transported them to Damascus for forced domestic work; media reported the Government of Philippines repatriated 34 victims in February 2021.

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. Illicit prostitution 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. 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 reporting period, Sudanese authorities identified seven Syrian trafficking victims in Khartoum.

ecoi.net summary:

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