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Syria

OFFICE TO MONITOR AND COMBAT TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

2016 Trafficking in Persons Report

Report



SYRIA: TIER 3

Syria is a source and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate amid the ongoing civil war with sub-state armed groups of varying ideologies exerting control over wide geographic swathes of the country's territory. Human rights groups and international organizations estimate more than 250,000 persons have been killed since the beginning of protests against the Bashar al Asad regime in March 2011. Incidents of human trafficking continue to increase and trafficking victims remain trapped in Syria, particularly as the designated terrorist organization, Da'esh—also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State (IS)—consolidated control of the eastern governorates of Raqqa. In June 2014, Da'esh announced the establishment of an Islamic "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, and during 2015, Da'esh seized control of areas in southern Syria in and around Palmyra, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo. More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million has been displaced; over 4.5 million have fled to neighboring countries and roughly 6.5 million are internally displaced. Syrians, both those that remain in the country and refugees in neighboring countries, continue to be highly vulnerable to trafficking.

Da'esh continues to target women and girls for sexual slavery and forced labor. In December 2014, Da'esh publicly released guidelines on how to capture, forcibly hold, and sexually abuse female slaves. In April 2015, an international organization reported the system of organized sexual slavery and forced marriage—which can lead to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor—by Da'esh militants is a central element of the terrorist group's ideology. Da'esh continues to force local Syrian girls and women in Da'esh-controlled areas into marriages with its fighters, and it routinely subjects women and girls from minority groups to sexual slavery. In 2014 and 2015, Da'esh abducted thousands of women and girls from the Yezidi and other minority groups in Iraq and sold them in Syria in human trafficking rings or to provide to fighters where they experience forced marriage, domestic servitude, systematic rape, and sexual violence. Da'esh routinely forces Iraqi and Syrian girls to undergo virginity tests before trading them in "slave bazaars" and sending them to various Syrian provinces and other countries for sexual slavery. Additionally, following the February 2015 Da'esh incursion into Assyrian villages in the northeastern province of Hasaka, it captured as many as 30 Assyrian Christian women and forced them into sexual slavery.

In June 2015, an international organization reported the recruitment and use of children in combat in Syria has become "commonplace." Syrian government forces, pro-regime militias, armed opposition forces, and designated terrorist organizations recruit and use children as soldiers, human shields, suicide bombers, and executioners, as well as in support roles. In November 2014, children were among the civilians forced at gunpoint to shield Syrian government forces' tanks entering the town of al-Sheikh Meskin in Dar'a to secure the Dar'a-Damascus highway. Militants also use children for forced labor and as informants, exposing them to retaliation and extreme punishment. An international organization verified hundreds of cases of boys and some girls who have been recruited and used by the Syrian government and armed groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and FSA-affiliated groups, Kurdish forces, Da'esh,

and al-Nusra Front (ANF). Some armed groups fighting with the Syrian government, such as Hezbollah and pro-regime militias known as the National Defense Forces (NDF) or “shabiha,” forcibly recruit children, some as young as 6 years old. Reports of the recruitment and use of boys by Da’esh and ANF increased significantly in 2015. Da’esh actively deploys children—some as young as 8 years old—in hostilities, including coercing children to behead Syrian regime soldiers; the terrorist group has deliberately targeted children for indoctrination and used schools for military purposes, endangering children and preventing their access to education. Da’esh operates at least three child training camps in Raqqa; forces children to attend indoctrination seminars; and promises children salaries, mobile phones, weapons, a martyr’s place in paradise, and the “gift” of a wife upon joining the terrorist group. By forcibly recruiting and using children in combat and support roles, Da’esh has violated international humanitarian law and perpetrated war crimes on a mass scale.

The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) continued to recruit and use boys and girls, including children younger than 15 years old, reportedly taking them to indoctrination and training camps, despite signing a pledge of commitment with an international organization in June 2014 to demobilize all fighters younger than 18 years old. In May 2015, the YPG and the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) announced compulsory “self-defence duty” for all those aged 18 and older in the Kurdish canton of Afrin in the northern part of the Aleppo Governorate; however, in April 2015, a 16-year-old girl in Aleppo was allegedly recruited by the YPJ against the wishes of her family. An NGO reported in January 2016 instances in which the Iranian government forcibly recruited or coerced male Afghan refugees and migrants, including children, living in Iran to fight in Syria. Some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia, children, and western women, are reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited to join extremist fighters, including Da’esh.

Syrian children are reportedly vulnerable to forced early marriages—which can lead to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor—and children displaced within the country continue to be subjected to forced labor, particularly by organized begging rings. In 2015, there were credible reports of South Asian women fraudulently recruited to Syria as domestic servants or forced into prostitution, including hundreds of Nepalese women who transited India, Oman, and United Arab Emirates to Syria under false pretenses of employment. According to the media, some Bangladeshi women migrate to Lebanon or Jordan for domestic work with the help of Bangladeshi recruitment agencies but are sold and transported to Syria, where they are subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking.

The Syrian refugee population is highly vulnerable to trafficking in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In 2015, an international organization reported a high number of child marriages among Syrian girls among refugee populations, which can lead to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. In previous years, there were isolated reports of Syrian refugees forced into “temporary” marriages—for the purpose of prostitution and other forms of exploitation—by men from Jordan and the Gulf states. Arab men reportedly visit refugee camps in Jordan in search of Syrian brides; most reports, however, remain second-hand and very few have been documented and corroborated by the Jordanian government or international organizations working with Syrian refugees. Reports continue of illicit prostitution rings of Syrian refugee women and girls, which are administered by local men, in Turkey and Lebanon, while the Lebanese police issued reports in 2014 detailing the sale of Syrian refugee women by local men. Syrian refugee children continue to engage in street begging in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, some of which may be forced; Syrian women and children begging in the streets in Yemen are highly vulnerable to forced labor and sex trafficking. Syrian gangs inside Lebanon force refugee men, women, and children to work in agriculture in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley, where victims are forced to work under harsh conditions with little to no pay and some are subject to physical abuse. LGBTI persons among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon are reportedly vulnerable to sex trafficking by Lebanese pimps. Syrian adults are reportedly subjected to forced labor as low-skilled workers in Qatar and Kuwait. In 2014, an international

organization reported Syrian nationals temporarily residing in Sudan preferred to travel through Libya en route to Italy with the use of smugglers; these Syrians could be at risk of trafficking along this route. Likewise, displaced Syrians seeking illegal sea passage to Europe through the use of smugglers may be at risk of trafficking.

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. The government's actions directly contributed to the vulnerability of the population to trafficking and continued to perpetrate human trafficking crimes routinely. As the conflict continued, the government maintained its forcible recruitment and use of child soldiers, subjecting children to extreme violence and retaliation by opposition forces; it also failed to protect and prevent children from recruitment and use by government and pro-regime militias, armed opposition forces, and designated terrorist organizations such as Da'esh. The government continued to arrest, detain, and severely abuse trafficking victims, including child soldiers, and punished them for crimes committed as a direct result of being subjected to human trafficking. The government did not investigate or punish traffickers, including officials complicit in recruiting and using child soldiers, nor did it identify or protect any trafficking victims.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYRIA:

Stop the forcible recruitment and use of child soldiers by government forces, pro-regime militias, and—to the extent possible in a civil war—armed opposition forces and designated terrorist organizations such as Da'esh; provide adequate protection services to demobilized children; ensure trafficking victims are not punished for crimes committed as a direct result of having been subjected to trafficking, particularly children forcibly recruited as soldiers by the regime and armed opposition and extremist groups; implement the anti-trafficking law through increased investigations and prosecutions of traffickers, including officials complicit in the recruitment and use of child soldiers; and proactively identify potential trafficking victims and provide them with appropriate protection services.

PROSECUTION

The government did not report any anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts, and the government and government-affiliated militias remained complicit in trafficking crimes, including child soldiering. The increasingly violent civil war continued to directly amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes occurring within Syria and affecting displaced Syrians. Decree No. 3 of 2011 provides a legal foundation for prosecuting trafficking offenses and protecting victims, but it does not include a clear definition of human trafficking. This decree prescribes a minimum punishment of seven years' imprisonment, a penalty that is sufficiently stringent, though not commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. The government adopted Law No. 11/2013 in June 2013, which criminalizes all forms of recruitment and use of children younger than the age of 18 by armed forces and armed groups; however, the government made no efforts to prosecute child soldiering crimes perpetrated by government and government-affiliated militias, armed opposition groups, and designated terrorists 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 officials who forcibly recruited and used child soldiers in combat and support roles. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for officials.

PROTECTION

The government did not identify or protect trafficking victims. The government failed to protect children from forcible recruitment and use as soldiers, human shields, and in support roles by government forces and pro-government armed groups, armed opposition groups, and terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the government arrested, detained, raped,

tortured, and executed children, whom opposition groups forcibly recruited and used; the government made no efforts to exempt these children from punishment or to offer them any protection services. 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 did not prevent human trafficking; the government's actions continued to amplify the magnitude of human trafficking crimes. The government failed to implement measures to prevent children from recruitment and use as combatants and in support roles by government, government-affiliated 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 or forced labor, nor did it prevent child sex tourism by Syrian nationals abroad. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

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