

## IRAQ (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Iraq does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included convicting more traffickers and improving oversight of recruitment agencies in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). It also implemented an action plan to address recruitment or use of children in armed conflict and developed a second action plan to specifically prevent recruitment or use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity. The government reported identifying fewer trafficking victims and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) did not report law enforcement or victim identification data. Deficiencies in identification and referral procedures, coupled with some authorities' limited understanding of trafficking, continued to prevent some victims from receiving appropriate protection services. In some cases, authorities did not proactively identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, which resulted in continuing to inappropriately punish some victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as immigration and "prostitution" violations. The government also lacked adequate protection services for victims of all forms of trafficking and did not have any shelter for adult males or LGBTQI+ victims. Therefore Iraq was downgraded to Tier 2 Watch List.

**PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:** Ensure trafficking victims are not punished for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as "prostitution" and immigration violations. \* Develop and institute guidelines for proactive victim identification and referral to protection services for all relevant officials, and train officials on these procedures. \* Officially allow all relevant authorities to identify potential trafficking victims and refer them to care and/or shelter, not solely investigative judges via a court order. \* Ensure victim identification and protection measures are provided independent of the prosecution of a trafficker. \* Significantly increase unhindered access to adequate protection services for victims of all

forms of trafficking and their children, including trauma and psycho-social counseling, medical care, long-term shelter, legal aid and support, translation and interpretation services, reintegration services, employment training, and financial assistance. \* Increase efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers, including complicit government officials and staff and guards at government-run shelters, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms, even when victims do not participate in legal proceedings against their trafficker(s). \* Establish a legal framework, either by amending the law or through a ministerial declaration, for NGOs to operate shelters for victims, and provide financial resources, facilities, and trained personnel to such organizations. \* Amend the anti-trafficking law to ensure that a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion is not required to constitute a child sex trafficking offense, in accordance with the 2000 UN TIP Protocol. \* Finalize regulations to enable full implementation of the anti-trafficking law.

## **PROSECUTION**

The Iraqi government made mixed law enforcement efforts. Iraq's 2012 anti-trafficking law criminalized forced labor and some forms of sex trafficking. Inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, the anti-trafficking law required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense and therefore did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The anti-trafficking law prescribed penalties of up to 15 years' imprisonment and a fine for trafficking offenses involving adult male victims, and up to life imprisonment and a fine if the offense involved an adult female or child victim. These penalties were sufficiently stringent, and with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Article 399 of the penal code criminalized "the prostitution of a child" and provided a penalty of up to 10 years' imprisonment, which was sufficiently stringent, although not commensurate with the penalties prescribed for rape.

The government continued to lack implementing regulations for the anti-trafficking law, hindering its ability to enforce the law, bring traffickers to

justice, and protect victims. The KRG has not yet developed the regulatory and enforcement framework required to fully implement the 2012 Iraqi anti-trafficking law, which the IKR's regional parliament approved in 2018.

The MOI's anti-trafficking unit initiated investigations of 221 cases involving 166 individuals, including 99 sex trafficking cases and 122 cases of unspecified forms of trafficking. This compared with initiating investigations of 183 individuals the previous reporting period. The anti-trafficking unit continued investigations from previous years of 105 cases involving 129 individuals, including 10 sex trafficking cases, five forced labor cases, and 91 cases of unspecified forms of trafficking. Authorities initiated prosecution of 80 cases involving 90 individuals, including seven cases for sex trafficking, four for forced labor, and 69 for unspecified forms of trafficking. This compared with initiating prosecutions of 184 individuals in the previous reporting period. The government continued prosecution of 18 cases involving 18 defendants initiated in the previous reporting period. The government convicted 121 traffickers, 48 for sex trafficking who were convicted under trafficking laws and 73 convicted of other forms of trafficking using other laws. This compared with convicting 83 traffickers the previous reporting period. The government did not report sentencing details. As in the previous reporting period, the KRG did not report prosecution data.

Some concerns of alleged official complicity in trafficking crimes remained. In the previous reporting period, the government investigated 12 cases in which members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), specifically MOI police officers, were alleged to be involved in sex trafficking; in 2022, the government reported the cases were closed and resulted in criminal penalties, including prison time, loss of rank, and other disciplinary action short of termination. Observers alleged that some traffickers operated massage centers in five-star hotels, some of which were owned by state entities, and therefore, less likely to receive scrutiny from the authorities. In a case from the previous reporting period involving at least one government official from KRG Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' (KMOLSA) Directorate of Labor who was allegedly bribed to authorize the establishment and

licensing of recruitment agencies and companies to bring in foreign workers to the IKR and authorize work permits for individual workers was reportedly removed from his position during the year following an investigation by the KRG but was not ultimately prosecuted for the alleged crimes. The companies and recruitment agencies that bribed the alleged complicit official allegedly exploited foreign workers by refusing to issue valid residency documents, threatening workers and their families in cases where a worker filed a complaint against the company or raised issues about work conditions and prevented workers from obtaining legal counsel in disputes. The KMOLSA official allegedly helped previously blacklisted companies re-open under new names and took action to prevent the companies from financial penalties. The government did not report efforts to investigate or prosecute continued allegations that security and management personnel in IDP camps were complicit in the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls, particularly those with ties to alleged ISIS members.

The MOI's anti-trafficking directorate continued to report its many responsibilities limited its ability to conduct trafficking investigations; lack of resources, budgetary constraints due the country's financial crisis, ongoing government formation following October 2021 elections, and weak coordination among governmental ministries also hindered overall law enforcement efforts. Additionally, some Iraqi government and KRG officials – including police officers and investigative judges – continued to lack a general understanding of trafficking and the ability to recognize trafficking indicators. Observers also reported KRG law enforcement lacked a clear reporting system for trafficking crimes and many government actors tasked with handling trafficking lacked specialized training for identifying and investigating potential cases. The government reported each province had a judge specializing in human trafficking cases and each province's city police command had an anti- trafficking division. The KRG reported it continued to utilize its anti-trafficking police units in all four governates and two independent administrations in the IKR; it also reported the remaining units stationed in the other two independent administrations -- Soran and Zakho - - were established but were not fully staffed at the end close of the reporting period. In the KRG, trafficking cases were initially heard in the

Investigation Court where a judge determined whether to refer the case to criminal, civil, or juvenile court.

The government, in cooperation with an international organization, trained MOI officials on identifying and investigating human trafficking. The government cooperated with Interpol on multiple cases of sex and labor trafficking. The government maintained cooperation with regional governments and expanded information sharing with international organizations to counter trafficking. Observers reported the KRG and Iraqi central government cooperated well on trafficking issues.

## **PROTECTION**

The government decreased overall efforts to protect victims. The MOI reported it identified 32 trafficking victims, including 22 sex trafficking victims (including six girls), seven forced labor victims (all adults), and three victims of unspecified forms of trafficking (including one boy). This compared with identifying 81 victims in the previous reporting period. The government referred all 32 identified victims to care and provided healthcare, shelter, and legal assistance. The KRG did not report victim identification or referral data. The Iraqi government repatriated four victims during the reporting period; this compared with the repatriation of around 125 foreign trafficking victims and more than 3,000 vulnerable Iraqi migrants returning from Europe in the previous reporting period.

The Iraqi government remained without systematic victim identification guidelines for all officials, including first responders who encountered potential trafficking victims among vulnerable groups, including undocumented foreign migrants and persons in commercial sex. The Iraqi government also did not have an NRM; the government continued to have an ad hoc referral process. In 2020 and 2021, an international organization coordinated with the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) to address capacity gaps in referral mechanisms; with support from an international organization, the MOMD previously piloted a NRM in Ninewa governate and Al Anbar governate. During the reporting period, an international organization facilitated training for NRM caseworkers as part

of this pilot. Civil society organizations reported some Iraqi officials, including district-level police officers, did not proactively identify trafficking victims because they lacked a general understanding of the crime. NGOs reported some foreign workers were detained and deported without being screened for trafficking indicators and the government also did not routinely screen IDPs for trafficking indicators.

Investigative judges were the only officials legally authorized to identify and refer a trafficking victim to protection services via a court order, including the government-run shelter in Baghdad. Although witnesses were not required to testify in front of their traffickers, their testimony was a prerequisite to initiate a criminal investigation. If victims did not provide testimony, or judges determined there was insufficient evidence, an individual could be denied status as a trafficking victim which would then deny access to protection services. In a previous reporting period, an international organization noted successful victim identification was strongly linked to the capacity and experience of individual investigative judges. NGOs and an international organization continued to report authorities frequently held trafficking victims in detention facilities while an investigative judge determined their status as a victim.

The KRG reported victims could be identified through management offices at refugee and IDP camps, hotlines, foreign embassies, and the public and then referred to the appropriate law enforcement agency, including the specialized anti-trafficking police in IKR. However, just as in Federal Iraq, in the IKR specialized judges also retained sole authority to refer victims to government-run shelters and IKR observers reported similar concerns that some victims may have been unable to receive access to the shelter and protective services during the year if they were not recognized as a victim by a judge.

Some officials continued to criminalize and punish trafficking victims. Authorities arrested, imprisoned, deported, and financially penalized trafficking victims in Iraq, including in the IKR, for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as “prostitution” and immigration

violations. Foreign migrant workers, including foreign labor trafficking victims, faced regular discrimination in the criminal justice process, revictimization, and retaliation from traffickers.

Although employers were legally responsible to pay immigration fees or expenses related to foreign worker recruitment under Iraq's sponsorship system, in previous reporting periods, some authorities penalized workers, including identified and unidentified trafficking victims, for failing to pay. Observers continued to report officials sometimes waived residency fines, but the decision-making process appeared arbitrary and highly dependent on the individual official. In March 2020, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) advised its judges to waive all fines for trafficking victims who were in violation of Iraq's residency laws. In 2022, the Iraqi government reported all foreign trafficking victims who had violated residency laws during the year had fines waived. Within the IKR, KRG authorities also improved the process for waiving fines that trafficking victims would otherwise be subject to for working in Kurdistan without legal documentation; however, as this process was informal, some trafficking victims may not have benefitted from the change.

In addition, Iraqi and KRG authorities continued to inappropriately detain and prosecute, without legal representation, children allegedly affiliated with ISIS – some of whom were victims of forcible recruitment or use – and used abusive interrogation techniques and torture to obtain confessions; the Iraqi government did not report screening these children as potential trafficking victims or referring them to protection services. As of February 2022, an international NGO reported more than 1,000 children remained in detention in Iraq for alleged association with armed groups, primarily ISIS.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) operated one shelter which could accommodate 50 adult female victims. There were no trafficking-specific shelters available for men, children, or LGBTQI+ victims. Men were released to their homes and children were sent to orphanages or homeless shelters. Iraqi law prohibited NGOs from operating shelters. Victims were only allowed to enter or leave the shelter by a judge's order. NGOs reported

the Iraqi government relied on donations from civil society and international organizations to fund the government shelter. MOLSA – in coordination with the Ministry of Health (MOH) – reported it provided victims at the shelter with psycho-social, trauma, and reintegration services, medical care, and long-term shelter; MOH reported it dedicated two doctors for trafficking victims at the shelter. Observers reported overall services fulfilled victims' basic physical needs, but a lack of resources, staffing, and case management training limited shelter staff's ability to provide psycho-social and medical care and vocational training specifically for trafficking victims. An international organization reported MOLSA shelter staff referred cases to other organizations for specific protection needs. Foreign trafficking victims were legally entitled to the same benefits as domestic victims, but in practice were frequently referred to an international organization for assistance, including shelter and facilitating repatriation to the victims' countries of origin. Although it did not report the extent to which the case management system was utilized, MOLSA reported victims were provided vocational training at the shelter during the year. In most cases, officials did not allow female victims to freely enter and exit shelters because they were referred via a court order and officials limited victims' ability to communicate with anyone outside of the shelters. An international organization reported foreign victims could not easily access services outside of the shelter while they awaited repatriation; instead, foreign victims often relied on their embassies for support.

During a previous reporting period, an NGO reported allegations that staff and guards at the Iraqi government-operated shelter abused trafficking victims. Subsequently, the government installed a monitoring system at the shelter which remained operational during the reporting period. The Iraqi government did not provide specialized care for rape victims, including trafficking victims who were also victims of rape. The family members of some sex trafficking victims attempted to convince them to leave the MOLSA shelter and drop any charges to avoid stigma. For such cases, the government continued to operate 16 Family Protection Units across federal Iraq that focused on family reconciliation for victims of trafficking or other crimes such as rape. NGOs continued to report the largest gap in victim



service provision was the lack of specialized trafficking shelters in the country. The Iraqi government did not report providing funding or in-kind assistance to NGOs that provided victim care; however, NGOs and international organizations reported the government fully cooperated with civil society actors, especially regarding victim services for foreign trafficking victims. The Iraqi government did not report providing protection or reintegration services to demobilized child soldiers of ISIS.

The KRG continued to operate four domestic violence shelters in the IKR for women; the shelters could provide limited services to female trafficking victims. Victims needed to obtain a court order to leave the shelters, which significantly restricted their movement, and shelter space was limited. The KRG did not report how many trafficking victims received services at these shelters during the reporting period. Since November 2019, the KRG allowed an Erbil-based NGO to operate the first and only trafficking shelter in the IKR. In December 2021, the KRG renewed its partnership with the NGO to operate the shelter through December 2022; the renewed partnership continued to support comprehensive case management, and legal, health and mental health services and expanded psycho-social support programming was not renewed as of the close of the reporting period. The shelter could house as many as 38 victims at one time and was almost always at capacity. The KRG continued to facilitate the release of Yazidis held captive by ISIS, most of whom were likely trafficking victims, and reported it coordinated with NGOs and an international organization to provide essential psycho-social and protective services to these victims.

Neither the Iraqi government nor the KRG provided adequate protections to victims or witnesses to encourage their assistance in investigations and prosecutions of traffickers. The government did not report whether any identified victims voluntarily assisted law enforcement authorities during the investigation and prosecution of traffickers following initial confirmation of a victim by an investigative judge. Victims were not required to participate in prosecution of their traffickers in order to access protection services. Civil society organizations, including the Iraqi Bar Association, reported they provided free attorneys to represent foreign workers in court

proceedings. The Iraqi government allowed trafficking victims to work, move freely, and leave the country during trials. The MOI reported any foreign or Iraqi trafficking victim could file a civil lawsuit against a trafficker but did not report if any victims filed during the reporting period. NGOs reported government compensation was available to victims but took an extended period of time to obtain. A court ordered employers pay 25 labor trafficking victims' unpaid wages during the reporting period.

The government did not always provide reliable translation and interpretation services for foreign trafficking victims, which delayed cases for months; in some cases, courts used unqualified interpreters, which harmed the credibility of victims' testimonies. Labor and criminal courts in the IKR did not provide translation and interpretation services for foreign workers, including foreign labor trafficking victims.

Iraqi anti-trafficking law allowed the government to provide special residency status benefits to foreign trafficking victims; MOI reported that it provided residency waivers to all 32 identified it victims during the reporting period. The KRG did not offer special residency status to victims during the reporting period, but it reportedly continued to refrain from deporting victims. The Iraqi government and the KRG could provide foreign victims relief from deportation or offer legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they may have faced hardship or retribution and reported doing so during the reporting period but did not provide details.

## **PREVENTION**

The government maintained efforts to prevent human trafficking. The government's Central Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (CCCT) continued to be led by MOI, and included representatives from the MOH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Displacement and Migration, MOLSA, Ministry of Justice, the SJC, the Council of Ministers General Secretariat (COMSEC), Iraq's Independent High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR), and three representatives from the KRG; the committee met three times during the reporting period. The KRG's anti-trafficking committee – established in 2016 – which was led by the KMOI

and included 19 government ministries and an international organization as an observer, met at least once during the reporting period. DCOC was also represented in the committee. The government's 2022-2026 NAP, drafted in cooperation with an NGO, remained with the CCCT at the close of the reporting period pending further amendments.

During the reporting period, the MOI's anti-trafficking directorate and the CCCT conducted a nationwide awareness campaign broadcast on media outlets and posted information at border crossings and security checkpoints, airports, police stations, and hospitals. As in the previous reporting period, the Ministry of Transportation reported it continued to work with bus companies and airlines to raise awareness about trafficking. A network of NGOs established by an international organization in conjunction with the government held a training session on victim identification and service provision for members of the network. In the IKR, the DCOC used its specialized trafficking unit to provide seminars, campaigns, and sessions for community members and foreign workers to raise awareness of trafficking. In July 2022, in conjunction with World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, DCOC hosted an art exhibition to illustrate how trafficking manifests in Iraq. In May 2022, the KMOI's Residency Directorate coordinated with a local television channel to film a documentary on domestic servitude in the IKR.

The MOI continued to operate a 24-hour anti-trafficking hotline and maintained a public email address to receive trafficking tips; the government reported approximately half of identified trafficking cases came from the hotline. The hotline was only available in Arabic, which limited its accessibility for foreign trafficking victims. The KRG did not have a hotline for reporting trafficking cases and the phone numbers for DCOC TIP police units were not publicly available. An Erbil-based NGO also operated a general service line, available for victims of trafficking and gender-based violence and other vulnerable populations.

The Iraqi government and the KRG continued to cooperate with each other to maintain an online visa system to track migrant workers and their sponsoring companies to prevent employers from committing labor abuses;

the government reported the system could automatically block any single individual or company from sponsoring more than 50 foreign laborers. The KRG reported challenges tracking migrant workers hired by employers and companies that used fake or fraudulent registrations and others who acted as agents, sponsoring foreign labor visas before ultimately hiring the workers to third party companies for profit. However, in an effort to improve tracking of sponsors of migrant workers – including agencies, tourist companies, private citizens among other entities – the KRG began to require such entities to submit a deposit to KMOI to be used for any fines incurred for non-compliance with labor laws. Although the KRG prohibited “pre-payment employment,” recruitment agencies were able to deduct up to 25 percent of a worker’s first paycheck as a service fee for facilitating employment, which may have increased the vulnerability of workers to exploitation and debt bondage. The government regulated labor recruitment and placement of foreign workers through MOI’s Residency Office and MOLSA. Recruitment agents or private citizens working as lawyers licensed by the government could sponsor workers, though observers noted some employment agencies operated outside of the government’s control, often because they were affiliated with political parties or militias. Migrant workers could not change employers prior to completing two years of work with a sponsor except in documented cases of poor treatment or abuse. However, even in cases where an employee had a legitimate complaint, NGOs and an international organization reported the employee was often relocated to a new employer and authorities rarely held the abusive employer accountable. An international organization also reported agencies that the government blacklisted changed names frequently to enable them to continue to operate, and in cases where an employer was punished for abuse, it was common for a single perpetrator to be penalized, rather than the entire company or agency.

Observers noted the KMOLSA’s regulation on foreign labor conflicted with its 2018 anti-trafficking law, particularly in the case of exploited workers who may be potential trafficking victims and, although they may be recognized as victims under the anti-trafficking law, they could be punished for having an irregular status under the foreign worker regulations in the

IKR. Observers stated KMOLSA strengthened oversight of recruitment agencies bringing migrants to the IKR who often are subjected to forced labor. MOLSA established a labor instructor corps trained in 2022 and utilized an e-Visa system which helped it monitor individual cases more easily. The government reported it made efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts by continuing surveillance on social clubs, hotels, massage parlors; increasingly MOI also conducted surveillance on coffee shops and cafeterias. In the IKR, KMOI and Asayish security forces continued to monitor message centers, cafes, bars, and hotels; locations often used for commercial sex. Neither the Iraqi government nor the KRG provided anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel.

Iraqi law prohibited compulsory or voluntary recruitment of any person younger than age 18 into the governmental armed forces, including governmental paramilitary forces, militia groups, or other armed groups. There were no reports the Iraqi military or KRG security forces unlawfully recruited or used children in combat or support roles during the reporting period. However, the Iraqi government did not exercise complete control over certain units of the PMF, which sometimes undertook operations independent of political leaders or military commanders. In the previous reporting period, MOLSA, in coordination with an international organization, the government's inter-ministerial committee, and the Popular Mobilization Committee (which oversaw the PMF), developed and finalized an action plan to address the recruitment or use of children in armed conflict; the plan was implemented in January 2022, and there were no credible reports of child soldier recruitment or use during the reporting period or since 2019. In March 2023, MOLSA and an international organization signed an action plan to prevent the recruitment or use of children by the PMF.

**TRAFFICKING PROFILE:** As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Iraq, and traffickers exploit victims from Iraq abroad. Insecurity throughout the country increased vulnerability to trafficking among the population. As of December 2022, five million Iraqis remained displaced as a result of ISIS. As of November 2022, more than 180,000 IDPs were living in 25 formal camp

locations in Iraq and over 100,000 are informal settlements. As of March 2023, there were more than 260,000 Syrian refugees displaced in Iraq, the vast majority in the IKR.

Refugees and IDPs face heightened risk of forced labor and sex trafficking due to their economic and social vulnerability and lack of security and protections. Women and girls in IDP camps whose family members have alleged ties to ISIS may continue to be exposed to a complex system of potential sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and abuse by security and military officials. Criminal gangs continued to reportedly force women into “prostitution” and boys and girls to beg. In previous reporting periods, observers noted in the IKR IDP and refugee children and children with disabilities, primarily in urban areas, were at highest risk for forced begging. The government stated criminal gangs have forced children to sell and transport drugs and weapons. Observers reported an increase in the use of children 8-15 years old by criminal gangs to distribute narcotics. Civil society organizations also reported children, including IDP children, were forced to work in chemical factories in Erbil and mining shops in Sinjar. In October 2020, the Iraqi government announced its decision to begin to close all IDP camps across the country. Following the closure of several IDP camps in previous reporting periods, NGOs reported camp residents experienced challenges obtaining civil documentation and security clearance to travel to other parts of the country, resulting in secondary displacement and exacerbating the risk of trafficking in a highly vulnerable population. An international organization reported tens of thousands of IDP children lacked civil documentation, particularly those born or formerly residing in areas under ISIS control, and could not access basic services, including enrolling in school. An international organization reported approximately 1 million displaced Iraqis lacked civil documentation. Observers noted forced labor was often seen among Iraqi IDP children as well as Syrian refugee children between the ages of 10-18 who were exploited in street-selling and hospitality, including girls who were predominately forced into domestic work. Iraqi refugees in Jordan are vulnerable to labor trafficking in Jordan’s informal labor sector, in part due to employers paying them below-market wages and expecting them to work excessively long hours.

Between 2014 and 2018, ISIS militants kidnapped and held captive thousands of women and children from a wide range of ethnic and religious groups, especially Yezidis, and sold them to ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS fighters subjected them to forced marriage, sexual slavery, rape, and domestic servitude, both within Iraq and in neighboring countries. IKR-based civil society organizations also reported in 2018 that ISIS members and supporters kidnapped Yezidi children for exploitation in Türkiye. Throughout 2015-2019, thousands of women and children escaped ISIS captivity – many of whom were pregnant as a result of rape, forced marriage, and sex trafficking; these women and girls, including IDPs among this population, remain highly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including re-trafficking. As of August 2022, the KRG reported 2,717 Yezidis – including adults and children – remain missing.

Children remain vulnerable to forcible recruitment or use by multiple armed groups operating in Iraq, including ISIS, tribal forces, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and non-PMF Iran-backed militias. The last credible report of recruitment of soldiers under the age of 18 by the PMF occurred in 2019. An international organization reported PKK and the People's Defense Forces (HPG) recruited and used child soldiers during the reporting period. In 2018, observers reported Yezidi and PKK-affiliated militias recruited and used children as child soldiers both in Iraq and neighboring countries. In 2018 and 2019, NGOs alleged that some PMF-affiliated militias, including Iranian-backed Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), recruited boys younger than the age of 18 to fight in Syria and Yemen. International observers reported the ISF used three children at a checkpoint in early 2019. In past reporting periods an international organization reported ISIS abducted and forcibly recruited and used children in combat and support roles, including as human shields, informants, bomb makers, executioners, and suicide bombers; some of these children were as young as eight years old and some were children with intellectual disabilities.

Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian women and girls, as well as LGBTQI+ persons in the IKR and federal Iraq are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. LGBTQI+

individuals across all ethnic and religious groups remained at risk of sex trafficking primarily because of cultural stigmas. Observers reported many Iranian women and girls in the IKR were victims of sex trafficking in cafes, hotels, and massage centers. Numerous media reports from 2018 claim girls as young as 11 years old were observed in night clubs and casinos in Baghdad as waitresses, dancers, and in commercial sex; some militia groups, including AAH, reportedly provided security at these establishments and relied on them for income. NGOs reported in 2018 and 2019 male sex traffickers in the IKR use the threat of publicizing compromising photos of women to sexually exploit or force them into commercial sex. The media reported in 2018 trafficking gangs increasingly use social media sites, particularly Facebook, to buy and sell women and girls for sex and labor exploitation. Foreign media reports from 2018 suggested a growing trend of child sex trafficking of Iraqi girls aged 11-16 in Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the UAE.

Traditional practices, including *fasliya* – the exchange of family members to settle tribal disputes – and forced child and “temporary” marriages also place women and girls at increased risk of trafficking within the country. In 2019, an international media outlet reported clerics operated “marriage offices” in areas outside of important shrines in Iraq, which advertised “temporary marriages” with girls as young as nine years old for the purpose of sex trafficking. Some militia groups, such as Iran-aligned Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), reportedly provided security for these “offices” and relied on them for income. Additionally, observers noted Saudis and Kuwaitis exploited children in sex trafficking during hunting trips in areas inhabited by Kawalyah, nomadic tribesman without civil documentation. Traffickers continued to operate massage parlors in five-star hotels in Iraq as a cover for commercial sex and sex trafficking; some of these hotels are owned by state entities, which allow the traffickers to avoid law enforcement scrutiny. Massage parlors, coffee shops, bars, and nightclubs were locations for sex trafficking. Traffickers use social media to operate their networks and recruit victims, such as by advertising fake job offers.



Some men and women from throughout Asia and Africa who migrate – both legally and illegally – to Iraq are subjected to forced labor as construction workers, security guards, cleaners, handymen, and domestic workers. In previous reporting periods, observers reported an increase in trafficking victims from Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, India, Indonesia, Sudan, and Syria. Observers noted an increase of Ghanaian domestic workers referred to NGOs as trafficking victims during the previous reporting period. In addition, in a previous reporting period, NGOs noted an increase in Indonesian trafficking victims being transported through Türkiye to the IKR, then working in Türkiye for around a month, before being told to renew their work permits in Kurdistan and then forcibly made to remain and work. The IKR continued to be a destination for TIP victims primarily from South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines, and neighboring nations. NGOs reported some employers and recruitment agents exploit workers' illegal status by withholding salaries and subjecting workers to substandard living conditions. Some foreign migrants are recruited for work in other countries in the region but are forced, coerced, or deceived into working in Iraq and the IKR. In 2021, NGOs reported migrants in the IKR receive harsher treatment by their employers, including physical and emotional abuse and continue to be vulnerable to nonpayment or under-payment of wages and food deprivation, both of which have increased during the pandemic. An international organization reported in 2018 that if a foreign worker had a complaint of abuse about an employer, recruitment agents moved the worker to a different employer and did not report the employer to the police. Recruitment agencies reportedly operate clandestinely without permits and beyond the control of the government.