Iraq - United States Department of State

IRAQ: Tier 2

The Government of Iraq does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period; therefore Iraq was upgraded to Tier 2. These efforts included investigating, prosecuting, and convicting more traffickers, except complicit officials; identifying more than 70 victims; and increasing the staffing of the Ministry of Interior’s (MOI) anti-human trafficking directorate. The government also continued to provide shelter and some protection services to a limited number of victims in the government-run shelter in Baghdad, and it made efforts to prevent trafficking, including continuing to implement its national anti-trafficking action plan. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) gave official permission to an NGO to operate the first trafficking shelter in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), and it continued to facilitate the release of several hundred Yezidis from ISIS. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The Iraqi government identified significantly fewer victims than in the previous reporting period. Deficiencies in identification and referral procedures, coupled with authorities’ lack of understanding of trafficking, continued to prevent many victims from receiving appropriate protection services. Authorities did not proactively identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, which resulted in the continued punishment of some victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as immigration and prostitution violations and child soldiering. The government also remained without adequate protection services for victims of all forms of trafficking. The government did not investigate or hold criminally accountable officials allegedly complicit in sex trafficking crimes or non-compliant militia units affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that operated under the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), a component of the Iraqi armed forces. In addition, the KRG did not report prosecuting or convicting any traffickers during the reporting period.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Ensure trafficking victims are not punished for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as prostitution and immigration violations. • Prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers by all armed groups, including units of the PMF and independent militias, and provide appropriate protection services to demobilized child soldiers. • Develop and institute guidelines for proactive victim identification and referral to protection services for all relevant officials, and train officials on these procedures. • Allow all relevant government authorities to officially identify potential trafficking victims and refer them to care. • Ensure victim identification and protection measures are not tied to the prosecution of a trafficker. • Drastically 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, translation and interpretation services, reintegration services, employment training, and financial assistance. • Protect victims from re-traumatization during trial, including by allowing...
alternative means for victim and witness testimony. • Make significant efforts to investigate, prosecute, convict, and stringently sentence traffickers, including complicit government officials, even when victims do not participate in legal proceedings against their trafficker. • 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. • Establish a legal framework for NGOs to operate shelters for victims, and provide support to such organizations.

PROSECUTION

The government increased law enforcement efforts but did not hold criminally accountable officials complicit in trafficking. Iraq’s 2012 anti-trafficking law criminalized 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 of up to 10 million Iraqi dinar ($8,790) for trafficking offenses involving adult male victims, and up to life imprisonment and a fine of 15 million to 25 million Iraqi dinar ($13,180 to $21,970) 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 did not develop the regulatory and enforcement framework required to fully implement the 2012 Iraqi anti-trafficking law, which the IKR’s regional parliament approved in 2018. However, during the reporting period the KRG’s anti-trafficking committee created sub-committees to address implementation of the anti-trafficking law, and it inaugurated the Erbil Office of the Directorate of Combating Human Trafficking.

The MOI’s anti-trafficking unit continued to report that its many responsibilities limited its ability to conduct trafficking investigations; lack of resources and weak coordination among governmental ministries also hindered trafficking investigations. Additionally, Iraqi and KRG officials—including police officers and investigative judges—continued to lack a general understanding of trafficking and the ability to recognize trafficking indicators. The government also reported the judiciary often used prostitution or residency laws in the criminal code, which carried lesser penalties for offenders than the anti-trafficking law, to prosecute sex trafficking offenses. The MOI took steps to address some of these shortfalls during the reporting period. It continued to provide several anti-trafficking trainings for MOI, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) personnel on victim identification and protection. In addition, in March 2020, the MOI upgraded the anti-human trafficking unit to the equivalent of a Directorate, which included six sections, 14 units, and two offices in Baghdad. The new structure included an information technology section for compiling data and records related to trafficking crimes and a strategic planning unit—which included four Iraqi
academics—to develop policies on identifying trafficking crimes, victim identification, and long-term tracking of trafficking networks. Additional units in the Directorate structure included one dedicated to provincial outreach and another focused on coordinating the activities of the inter-ministerial counter-trafficking committee (CCCT). The MOI also added the anti-money laundering and terrorism finance offices in the Iraqi Council of Ministers General Secretariat (COMSEC) to the CCCT, in recognition that funds generated from trafficking cases sometimes supported terrorist organizations.

During the reporting period, the MOI’s anti-trafficking unit arrested and detained 504 individuals for alleged involvement in trafficking crimes; the unit arrested 54 of these alleged traffickers after conducting 37 raids on massage parlors, coffee shops, and other establishments known for human trafficking activities. Of the 504 individuals, authorities referred 160 for prosecution, while it acquitted 48 and released 34 on bail. The government convicted and sentenced 67 traffickers under the anti-trafficking law and sentenced them to five to 15 years in prison, but it did not provide additional details of these cases. This demonstrated an increase from the 426 alleged traffickers it detained, 105 referrals for prosecution, and 53 traffickers convicted and sentenced during the previous reporting period. The KRG did not report prosecuting or convicting any traffickers during the reporting period, which demonstrated a decrease from the 89 prosecutions and seven convictions during the previous reporting period. The KRG also did not report providing anti-trafficking training for its personnel.

Concerns of alleged official complicity in trafficking crimes remained, but the government did not report efforts to investigate such allegations. Some NGOs continued to provide uncorroborated anecdotal reports that government officials in key security positions protected traffickers from investigation and prosecution. The government did not report efforts to investigate or prosecute continued allegations that security and camp 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. However, during the reporting period, the government cooperated with an international organization and NGOs to address sexual exploitation concerns in IDP camps. The government did not report efforts to investigate allegations that some PMF-affiliated militias, including Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), recruited boys under the age of 18 to fight in Syria and Yemen. Furthermore, some foreign governments with large numbers of migrant workers in Iraq continued to report that Iraqi officials sometimes forced them to pay bribes, along with immigration fees, to release their citizens who were trafficking victims from detention and to repatriate them.

PROTECTION

The government identified fewer trafficking victims, and measures to protect victims remained weak. The MOI reported it identified 72 total trafficking victims, which included 51 male and female victims of sex trafficking, six child trafficking victims, and 10 foreign labor trafficking victims referred to the MOI from the victims’ embassies during the reporting period. This demonstrated a significant decrease from the 148 victims the MOI identified during the previous reporting period. Of the 72 identified victims, the government referred 26 adult female victims to the MOLSA-run trafficking shelter in Baghdad, four child victims to orphanages, six labor trafficking victims to rehabilitation services, and repatriated four labor trafficking victims; it also provided shelter services and 24-hour protection to five
victims involved in a trafficking case, as well as a direct hotline for an emergency response team to nine witnesses involved in the same trafficking case and ensured their identities were protected. It did not report if it provided or referred the remaining 27 identified victims to protection services. The government did not have victim identification guidelines for all officials and first responders who came in contact with potential trafficking victims among vulnerable groups, including undocumented foreign migrants and persons in commercial sex. The government also did not have a national victim referral mechanism, and the government’s ad hoc referral process remained deficient. Civil society organizations reported some Iraqi officials, including district-level police officers, did not proactively identify trafficking victims because officials lacked a general understanding of the crime. An international organization reported that some police officials proactively identified foreign labor trafficking victims, but they did not adequately screen for victims among Iraqi citizens or during investigations of prostitution crimes. Investigative judges were the only officials who could officially identify and refer a trafficking victim to protection services, including the government-run shelter in Baghdad; however, because judges required victims to testify in front of their perpetrators in court, many victims did not come forward due to fear of retaliation. Because of this requirement and the resulting absence of victim witnesses, judges determined in many cases there was insufficient evidence to officially classify a person as a trafficking victim, thereby denying victims’ access to protection services. Furthermore, the government did not have specialized judges or courts that were trained or dedicated to handling trafficking cases; an NGO reported in early 2020 that the lack of specialized judges prevented trafficking victims from gaining access to shelters and medical services.

Because of the government’s victim identification and referral deficiencies, as well as authorities’ lack of knowledge of trafficking, 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 and child soldiering. Foreign migrant workers, including foreign labor trafficking victims, faced regular discrimination in the criminal justice process, re-victimization, and retaliation from traffickers. Police at times inappropriately arrested and detained foreign trafficking victims, rather than the perpetrators, after employers and recruitment agents filed false claims of theft against the victim in retaliation for victims reporting allegations of trafficking to the police. The government also required foreign labor trafficking victims—both identified and unidentified—to pay overstay fines to obtain an exit visa to legally exit the country. Although employers were legally responsible to pay immigration fees or liabilities related to foreign workers under Iraq’s sponsorship system, in practice authorities penalized workers for failing to pay. For example, between May 2019 and February 2020, an NGO reported authorities detained 200 foreign male trafficking victims from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Egypt in police stations, as well as 100 foreign female trafficking victims from sub-Saharan and West Africa and Southeast Asia at a female prison in Baghdad because of unpaid overstay fines. An international organization continued to report the government increasingly recognized that people arrested for prostitution crimes could be victims of trafficking and should be treated as such; however, an NGO reported authorities continued to charge sex trafficking victims on prostitution violations. During the reporting period, an international organization reported one case in which Iraqi judicial officials did not appropriately identify a female trafficking victim and therefore detained her at a correctional facility. In December 2019, IKR media
reported that KRG internal security forces (Asayish) personnel, failed to appropriately screen for and refer to protection services an unknown number of foreign sex trafficking victims. Asayish personnel reportedly seized the passport of one of the victims and returned her to the trafficker and further threatened the victims with deportation, which discouraged them from filing charges against their trafficker. 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 and use—and used abusive interrogation techniques and torture to gain children’s confessions; the government did not report screening these children as potential trafficking victims or referring them to protection services.

The Iraqi government and the KRG provided limited protection services to trafficking victims and did not operate shelters specifically for male trafficking victims. By law, the Iraqi government was the only authority permitted to provide shelter to trafficking victims, which severely limited the availability of protection services for victims. The Iraqi government, however, did not allocate funding in its budget specifically for victim protection services. NGOs continued to report a shortage of specialized shelters for trafficking victims, in part because of laws and government actions preventing NGOs from legally operating shelters. However, during the reporting, CCCT and MOLSA formed an emergency committee to review the cases of trafficking victims located in state shelters and assess their psychological and physical condition in order to provide them with medical care; the committee included a shelter manager, two doctors, two psychologists, and two social workers. MOLSA continued to operate a trafficking shelter in Baghdad for female trafficking victims, but it did not have dedicated funding for its operation or services and therefore relied on donations from civil society organizations. During the reporting period, seven trafficking victims utilized the shelter, which was the same number of victims assisted at the shelter in the previous reporting period. MOLSA—in coordination with the Ministry of Health—provided victims at the shelter with psycho-social, trauma, and reintegration services and medical care; however, NGOs reported the level of care was poor. Civil society organizations reported that overall services provided in other government-operated shelters also remained poor, as they were limited in capacity, staffing, and case management training and provided inadequate psycho-social and medical care and vocational training specifically for trafficking victims. Additionally, female victims were not allowed to freely enter and exit shelters, and officials limited victims’ ability to communicate with anyone outside of the shelters. The government did not provide foreign victims access to protection services other than the provision of shelter. Furthermore, an NGO reported allegations that staff and guards at government-operated shelters abused trafficking victims during the reporting period. The government did not provide care for rape victims, including trafficking victims who were also victims of rape; due to social norms, rape victims were often encouraged by government authorities or sometimes forced by their families to marry their rapists. The Iraqi government did not provide funding or in-kind assistance to NGOs that provided victim care. NGOs that provided shelter and other forms of assistance to trafficking victims faced harassment by Iraqi authorities, as well as obstacles to registering with COMSEC to obtain certificates to legally operate. For example, in December 2019, the Iraqi government suspended NGOs’ access to a registration system that would allow them to conduct humanitarian and development work, including work on human trafficking issues; as of March 2020, the system remained excessively burdensome. However, the government worked with the international community to find an alternate solution to ensure access
letters for NGOs, but significant deficiencies remained with this process. Furthermore, in January 2020, COMSEC officials filed a lawsuit against an NGO that provided support to female trafficking victims, in an effort to dissolve the NGO.

The KRG’s Erbil Office of the Directorate of Combatting Human Trafficking—established in June 2019—assisted 155 potential trafficking victims, 11 of whom were confirmed trafficking cases; it did not report if it referred or provided protection services to these victims. The KRG continued to operate four shelters in the IKR for women, which could provide services to female trafficking victims but rarely did so in practice. 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, if any, trafficking victims received services at these shelters during the reporting period. During the reporting period, the KRG gave official permission to an Erbil-based NGO to operate the first trafficking shelter in the IKR, which could house as many as 38 victims, including both male and female victims; the shelter became operational in November 2019. During the reporting period, the KRG continued to facilitate the release of several hundred Yezidis held captive by ISIS, most of whom were likely trafficking victims; however, the KRG did not report whether it provided essential psycho-social or other protective services to these victims. Neither the KRG nor the Iraqi government reported efforts to provide protection services to demobilized child soldiers of ISIS, the PMF, or other armed groups, thus failing to prevent re-victimization or re-recruitment of these children.

Neither the Iraqi government nor the KRG provided adequate protections to victims or witnesses to encourage their assistance in investigations and prosecutions of traffickers. However, the MOI reported all 72 identified victims voluntarily assisted law enforcement authorities during the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers. The Iraqi government did not allow trafficking victims to work, move freely, or leave the country during trials. The MOI reported that any foreign or Iraqi trafficking victim could file a civil lawsuit against a trafficker, but an NGO reported no victims filed such lawsuits in 2019, likely due in part to authorities’ poor investigative techniques for trafficking cases and the overall lack of protections provided to victims during trial. Courts did not protect the privacy or identity of victims when testifying against their trafficker; during the reporting period, NGOs reported courts required victims to testify in front of their traffickers, as well as—at times—in front of an entire courtroom of other people waiting for their cases to be heard. Iraqi courts also did not provide 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 courts in the IKR did not provide translation and interpretation services for foreign workers, including foreign labor trafficking victims, creating difficulties for victims to sue abusive employers. Although the Iraqi anti-trafficking law allowed for the government to provide special residency status benefits to foreign trafficking victims, the government did not report offering this assistance to any victims during the reporting period. The KRG did not offer special residency status to victims during the reporting period either, but it reportedly continued to refrain from deporting victims. The Iraqi government and the KRG provided foreign victims relief from deportation or offered legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they may have faced hardship or retribution. The Iraqi government and KRG reportedly cooperated with an international organization to repatriate an unknown number of foreign trafficking victims during the reporting period.

**PREVENTION**
The government made modest efforts to prevent human trafficking. Political unrest, including mass protests, budget shortfalls, understaffing, a stagnant economy, and vast reconstruction needs limited the Iraqi government and KRG's ability to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts and dedicate resources to combat trafficking. Nevertheless, the CCCT continued to meet nearly every month during the reporting period. The KRG's anti-trafficking committee—established in 2016—which was led by the KRG Ministry of Interior (KMOI) and included 17 government ministries, met every 60 days starting in October 2019. The Iraqi government maintained a national anti-trafficking action plan, implemented in March 2019; while the government increased personnel to the MOI's anti-trafficking Directorate during the reporting period, it did not report if it dedicated a specific budget to overall implementation of the action plan. The Iraqi government continued to raise awareness about trafficking by advertising its anti-trafficking hotline and posting information at hospitals, markets, border crossings and security checkpoints, airports, and transportation hubs. In addition, the Ministry of Transportation reported it worked with bus companies and airlines to raise awareness about trafficking, and the Ministry of Displacement and Migration raised awareness at IDP camps during the reporting period. The MOI continued to operate a 24-hour anti-trafficking hotline, and it reported receiving 26 alleged trafficking cases in 2019. The KRG also operated a hotline where trafficking victims could seek assistance and report labor abuses, but it did not report how many alleged trafficking cases it received through the hotline during the reporting period. 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. However, the KRG reported challenges tracking migrant workers hired by employers and companies that used fake or fraudulent registrations. A Kurdish media outlet reported in February 2020 that the KRG blacklisted 38 employment agencies and companies because of alleged trafficking concerns, but it did not report if the KRG prosecuted any of these companies for potential labor trafficking crimes. The Iraqi government reported that it closed 24 recruitment agencies during the reporting period, and it referred 14 of them to the judiciary for violating labor regulations; it did not report if it investigated these agencies for potential trafficking crimes. The Minister of Interior reported in February 2020 that the government restricted visa issuance to Bangladeshi nationals—estimated at 400,000 in Iraq—in an effort to curb illegal immigration and address widespread concerns about the trafficking of workers from Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. The Iraqi government reported it provided anti-trafficking training to all government employees, including diplomatic personnel, but it did not adopt specific measures to prevent its diplomats from facilitating human trafficking. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts or child sex tourism. In July 2019, the Iraqi High Judicial Council (HJC) directed courts to use the anti-terrorism law to counter some forced marriage practices, including fasliya—the exchange of family members to settle tribal disputes—and nahwa—a practice in which a family forces a woman to marry one of her father's cousins—which placed women and girls at increased risk of trafficking. During the reporting period, the Iraqi government deprived thousands of children, whose parents were allegedly affiliated with ISIS, access to education, thereby creating greater vulnerabilities for these children.

Iraqi law prohibited 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 of child soldiers used within the Iraqi military, and the government reportedly provided training to military
officers on child soldier issues. 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. The Iraqi government’s inter-ministerial senior committee to monitor, evaluate, and report on children’s rights violations in conflict zones in Iraq continued to closely coordinate with an international organization during the reporting period. The government also continued to discuss the development of an action plan with an international organization for the PMC to address the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

**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. The violent conflict with ISIS exacerbated the population’s vulnerability to trafficking, in particular women and children, although the government’s territorial defeat of the terrorist group, announced December 9, 2017, has improved conditions for Iraqi civilians. However, insecurity remains in many areas, including those liberated from ISIS rule. Since January 2014, more than five million Iraqis have been displaced, with approximately 1.4 million still displaced as of the end of 2019, many of whom are female heads of household vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse due to their perceived affiliation with ISIS. In addition, more than 245,000 Syrian refugees remained displaced in Iraq, the vast majority in the IKR. With the defeat of the ISIS physical caliphate, the reported incidence of these violations has diminished.

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. ISIS maintained an organized system to buy and sell women and girls for sexual slavery, including sales contracts notarized by ISIS-run courts. Media have reported that ISIS sold some captives to wealthy individuals in Gulf countries, and reports suggested that some Yezidi captives were moved to Syria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. IKR-based civil society organizations also reported in 2018 that ISIS members and supporters kidnapped Yezidi children for exploitation in Turkey. ISIS reportedly kidnapped 120 Turkmen children in 2014; they have reportedly been sold multiple times for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and only 20 of the kidnapped children were rescued by the end of 2018. 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. Some Yezidi women and girls reportedly reside in Iraqi IDP camps or Al-Hol camp in Syria where they continue to live with Sunni families that formerly exploited them under ISIS rule. As of February 2020, the KRG reported 2,893 Yezidis—including men, women, and children—remain missing. Some reports indicate the missing women and girls remain with ISIS in eastern Syria and Turkey or have been exploited in other parts of the region, Europe, or Asia.

Children remain vulnerable to forcible recruitment and use by multiple armed groups operating in Iraq, including—but not limited to—ISIS, the PMF, tribal forces, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), and Iran-backed militias. Despite the defeat of the physical caliphate, ISIS continues to abduct and forcibly recruit and use 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 mentally disabled. Multiple sources report the PKK and People’s Protection Units (YPG) operating in the IKR and Sinjar continued to recruit and use children. Local NGOs reported in 2018 that Yezidi militias in Sinjar recruited approximately 10 to 20 Yezidi boys. NGO and local government contacts confirmed that hundreds of Yezidi children have been recruited by the PKK-aligned Yezidi Civil Protection Units and other PKK-affiliated militias. In 2018, civil society organizations reported the PKK recruited and trained children from Sinjar, Makhmour, and other locations, and sent them to bases in Sinjar, Turkey, and the Qandil Mountains between Iraq and Iran.

Since 2015, NGOs have reported that some non-compliant, Iran-aligned PMF units recruit, use, and provide military training to children, though the incidence of these reports has declined with the defeat of ISIS’s territorial presence in Iraq. However, the number of incidents of child soldier recruitment and use continues to decline, according to an international organization in 2019. In 2018 and 2019, NGOs alleged that some PMF-affiliated militias, including Iranian-backed HHN and AAH, recruited boys younger than the age of 18 to fight in Syria and Yemen. In 2017, reports also indicated both the AAH and Kata’ib Hizbullah (KH) militias recruited and used child soldiers. Some of the forces in the HHN, AAH, and KH militias operated under the umbrella of the PMF, but they generally operate outside of the command and control of the Iraqi government. Civil society organizations and local contacts reported in 2017 that posters commemorating children who died while fighting for Shia militias were commonplace in Shia-majority areas of Baghdad and throughout southern Iraq. Most of the children who were celebrated for fighting allegedly fought for brigades of the AAH and KH militias. According to the PMF official social media site and posters in the street in mid-2017, the PMF offered military training courses to children and youth ages 15-25. In 2015 and 2016, multiple sources reported factions of the PMF recruited and used children in operations in Fallujah and other areas of the country, while PMF-affiliated media celebrated the service and sacrifice of child soldiers. Credible reporting in 2017 indicated Sunni tribal militias recruited boys out of IDP camps, some of whom received military training. In August 2016, an international NGO reported that Sunni tribal militias affiliated with the PMF recruited at least seven children from the Debaga IDP camp in northern Iraq; witness accounts reported that members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) facilitated the recruitment of children from the camp. In addition, international observers reported the ISF used three children at a checkpoint in early 2019.

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. Approximately 1.4 million Iraqis remain internally displaced, of whom 70 percent have been displaced for more than three years. Between 2015-2018, NGOs reported trafficking networks in the IKR targeted refugees and IDPs, operating with assistance from local officials, including judges, officials from the Asayish forces, and border agents. Women and girls in IDP camps whose family members have alleged ties to ISIS continue to be exposed to a complex system of potential sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and abuse by armed actors residing in the camps, security and military officials. In 2015 and 2016, NGOs reported some personnel from the Asayish forces facilitated the sex trafficking of women and girls in Syrian refugee camps in the IKR. Reports from 2015 indicated a trafficking network exploited IDPs and some Syrian refugee women in sex trafficking in hotels and brothels in Baghdad, Basrah, and other cities in southern Iraq after agents of the
network promised to resettle them from the IKR; the network also forced the women’s children to beg on the street. Criminal gangs reportedly force boys and girls to beg, especially IDP and refugee children, and children with disabilities, primarily in urban areas; criminal gangs also force children to sell and transport drugs and weapons, particularly in southern Iraq.

Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian women and girls, as well as LGBTI persons in the IKR, are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. LGBTI individuals across all ethnic and religious groups remained at risk of sex trafficking primarily because of cultural stigmas. According to IKR press reports, the collapse of Iran’s currency and economic slowdown spurred an influx of more than 2,000 young Iranian women and girls into the IKR in 2018, many of whom were victims of sex trafficking in cafes, hotels, and massage centers. According to KRG law enforcement in 2018, IKR-based taxi drivers allegedly facilitate the transportation of these women and girls from Iran to the IKR under the cover of tourism. Numerous media reports in 2018 claimed girls as young as 11 years old are 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 that male sex traffickers in the IKR use the threat of publicizing compromising photos of women to sexually exploit or force them into commercial sex. NGOs in 2016 reported cases in which criminal networks exploited girls who had run away from their families out of fear of honor killings in child sex trafficking. The media reported in 2018 that trafficking gangs increasingly used social media sites, particularly Facebook, to buy and sell women and girls for sex and labor exploitation. Reports from 2014-2017 suggested some Iraqi law enforcement officials have allegedly frequented brothels known for sex trafficking or accepted bribes to allow sex trafficking. 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. Trafficking networks also reportedly sell Iraqi children in neighboring countries and Europe for commercial sexual exploitation. 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.

Traditional practices, including fasliya and child forced 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 the AAH, reportedly provide security for these “offices” and rely on them for income. In 2016, child protection organizations reported incidents of child marriage—which could increase a child’s risk of trafficking—increased among IDPs and Syrian refugees in the IKR, as heads of households sought ways to generate income and reduce the family’s economic burden. As reported in previous years, traffickers forced Syrian girls from refugee camps in the IKR into early or “temporary marriages” with Iraqi or other refugee men; some KRG authorities allegedly ignored, or may have accepted bribes to ignore such cases, including those in which girls are sold multiple times. In early 2020, an NGO reported that traffickers are beginning to open 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 operate with impunity. The Iraqi government further confirmed in early 2020 that massage parlors, coffee shops, bars, and nightclubs were locations for sex trafficking. Additionally, according to the
Iraqi government, 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 early 2020, contacts reported an increase in trafficking victims from Ghana, Kenya, and Sierra Leone. In January 2016, the MOLSA reported approximately 140,000 foreign workers lacked formal work permits; 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 2018, the KMOI reported 22 workers from the Philippines legally entered the IKR under the sponsorship of a labor contracting company, but were subsequently forced to work in Baghdad. In early 2020, NGOs reported that smugglers in the IKR promise some sub-Saharan African workers better work opportunities in Baghdad, but upon arrival, traffickers exploited the workers in forced labor. In 2018, an international organization reported 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.