**USSD 2021 TIP Report about Israel**

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ISRAEL: Tier 2

The Government of Israel does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included investigating, prosecuting, and convicting complicit officials. The government repealed the “Deposit Law,” thereby decreasing the vulnerability of foreign and migrants’ workers to trafficking and began returning funds to some workers. The government continued to operate shelters and other facilities that provided victims a wide variety of immediate and long-term care and rehabilitative services. However, these efforts were not serious and sustained compared to the efforts during the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government’s anti-trafficking capacity. The government’s victim identification policies sometimes re-traumatized trafficking victims and delayed access to necessary care, at times for years. In addition, the government decreased overall efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers. Government policies towards foreign workers increased their vulnerability to trafficking, and the government did not consistently investigate trafficking cases referred by NGOs. For the fifth consecutive year, the Police Anti-Trafficking Coordinating Unit (PTC), which remained the only authority to officially recognize victims of trafficking, remained severely understaffed, which further impacted the efficiency of victim identification procedures and referral of victims to protection services. Therefore Israel was downgraded to Tier 2.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Expedite processes to identify and refer trafficking victims to appropriate care without re-traumatizing victims, including those referred by NGOs, and ensure victim identification procedures take a trauma-informed approach. • Authorize more government officials, including throughout the country, to identify trafficking victims to allow for more efficient access to protection services. • Proactively screen irregular African migrants and foreign workers to ensure trafficking victims among these populations are not penalized for unlawful acts traffickers compel them to commit, such as immigration violations. • Significantly increase investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of labor traffickers, including potential trafficking cases referred by NGOs. • Sentence convicted traffickers to adequate penalties, which should involve significant prison terms. • Substantially increase anti-trafficking awareness and victim identification trainings for law enforcement, including police officers and prison officials, at regional and local levels. • Provide access to the national healthcare system, including shelter and medical and psycho-social treatment, for victims of all forms of trafficking for the duration of their presence in Israel. • Increase the number of labor inspectors, social workers, and interpreters in the agricultural, construction, and caregiving sectors, and provide them with training on victim identification procedures. • Increase enforcement of foreign worker labor rights, eliminate worker-paid recruitment fees for all foreign and Palestinian workers and ensure any recruitment fees are paid by employers. • Establish systems to ensure foreign and Palestinian workers have valid and fair labor contracts and ensure any employer-paid recruitment fees are not passed onto workers. • Amend the 2006 anti-trafficking law to include a definition of human trafficking consistent with international law. • Transparently share information on government anti-trafficking efforts with civil society. • Designate a Knesset committee or subcommittee to address labor trafficking.

PROSECUTION

The government decreased overall law enforcement efforts. The 2006 anti-trafficking law criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of up to 16 years’ imprisonment for the trafficking of an adult and up to 20 years’ imprisonment for the trafficking of a child. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, the law did not establish the use of force, fraud, or coercion as an essential element of the crime. Under 376A of the Penal Law 5737-1977, holding a person’s passport against their will carried a penalty of three to five years’ imprisonment.

In 2020, the police initiated 11 total investigations, including one investigation of sex trafficking crimes, eight potential forced labor crimes, and two potential child sex trafficking crimes; the government also investigated 91 sex trafficking-related crimes but determined all were prostitution-related offenses. This was a decrease compared with 18 total investigations (three adult sex trafficking, eight forced labor, and seven child sex trafficking investigations) in 2019. In 2020, the government initiated nine total prosecutions, including three for adult sex trafficking, one for forced labor, and five for child sex trafficking; this was a decrease compared with 20 total prosecutions (16 adult sex trafficking, two forced labor, and two child sex trafficking) in 2019. In a case indicted in April 2020, the defendant allegedly held women and children in conditions of slavery in a Jerusalem cult; the defendant allegedly forced participants in his “women’s seminar” to provide involuntary domestic services and cede any wages directly to him. In 2020, the government convicted 12 traffickers, including nine for adult sex trafficking, two for forced labor, and one for child sex trafficking; this was a decrease compared with convicting 17 traffickers (13 for adult sex trafficking, none for forced labor, and four for child sex trafficking) in 2019. Of the 24 sentences issued during 2020, including cases convicted in previous reporting periods, 13 traffickers received sentences greater than one year imprisonment. Sentences ranged from a fine and five months’ community service to 5.5 years’ imprisonment and a 12-month suspended sentence; sentencing also included fines and victim compensation in some cases. The government coordinated with a foreign government to investigate an alleged child sex trafficking case involving foreign and Israeli suspects. Additionally, authorities opened 145 criminal investigations and filed 94 indictments against employers of foreign workers for suspected violations of labor laws; courts rendered 77 sentences with sanctions and compensation totaling approximately 3.7 million Israeli shekels ($1.15 million). This represented a significant decrease from 2019 when the government opened 1,087 criminal investigations for suspected violations of labor laws, filed 94 indictments, and rendered 123 sentences with sanctions and compensation totaling 6.88 million shekels ($2.14 million).

The government continued to report law enforcement efforts to address government officials complicit in trafficking offenses during the reporting period. In September 2020, the government initiated one investigation involving a police officer who allegedly attempted to solicit commercial sex from a child sex trafficking victim; the government indicted the police officer in March 2021. In November 2020, the government sentenced a police officer to 18 months’ imprisonment, a suspended sentence, and a fine for accepting a bribe from the owner of a brothel, where trafficking allegedly occurred, to allow the facility to continue to operate in a case indicted the previous reporting period; at the end of the reporting period, the State Attorney’s Office appealed to the Supreme Court challenging the leniency of the sentence. In January 2021, the government also filed an indictment against a Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA) official responsible for coordinating private recruitment agencies in the caregiving field—a sector highly vulnerable to trafficking—for allegedly fraudulently obtaining visas for foreign workers, accepting bribes, and breach of trust.

Authorities reduced the size of the PTC of the Israeli National Police (INP) to one officer for most of 2020 and often re-assigned the officer to enforce pandemic-related mitigation measures. NGOs reported the government was, at times, reluctant to investigate complex trafficking cases due to lack of resources. For example, the INP initially declined to investigate a potential forced labor case involving Thai agricultural workers; after an NGO petitioned the Supreme Court, the INP opened an investigation, recognized the workers as trafficking victims, and referred them to a trafficking shelter. At the end of 2020, the acting police commissioner decided to divert additional resources and directives to the PTC, including by adding two additional officers to the unit; at the end of the reporting period, the new officers had not yet joined the PTC. The government reported difficulties gathering victim and witness testimony, which was exacerbated by foreign victims’ wishes to return to their home country during the pandemic. To address this gap, the government distributed policy documents on early testimony in these cases to create a uniform standard. The government reported investigations were inhibited during the reporting period due to illness among investigators, mandatory quarantines, and other pandemic-related mitigation measures. To address challenges in reporting trafficking crimes during the pandemic, the INP established an online system to file complaints for victims hesitant to meet with law enforcement officials, including irregular migrant workers. As in previous years, the government provided extensive anti-trafficking training, awareness-raising workshops, and seminars, at times in coordination with NGOs; several trainings were held virtually in response to pandemic-related mitigation measures. However, the government canceled anti-trafficking trainings for key entities due to pandemic-related mitigation efforts, including a training for new-hire police officers and training for border and immigration officials. Due to the pandemic, the government canceled mandatory training on sex crimes and trafficking for judges hearing criminal cases in 2020.

PROTECTION

The government decreased victim identification and protection efforts. In addition, the government’s victim identification policies actively re-traumatized victims and delayed access to appropriate services. In 2020, the government reported receiving 74 victim referrals from NGOs and government sources, compared with 96 referrals in 2019. Of the 74 referrals, the government granted official trafficking victim status to 69 individuals—including 53 women and 16 men—a slight decrease from the 73 victims identified in 2019. Of the 69 identified victims, 39 Israeli women and girls were victims of slavery in a cult, nine were victims of sex trafficking, and 20 were victims of forced labor. The government identified one male victim exploited in the Sinai prior to arriving in Israel, a decrease from three exploited victims identified in the Sinai the previous year. The government continued to circulate trafficking victim identification guidelines widely to relevant ministries. However, the government reported the PTC was the only government entity with the authority to grant individuals official trafficking victim status, which allowed a victim full access to protection services. Because the government only authorized one PTC officer to review victim applications throughout the country, the process significantly delayed for months—and in some cases, years—and at times inhibited victims’ access to much-needed protection services during those delays. NGOs reported the sole PTC officer denied victim identification requests because they appeared complex and only uncomplicated requests received approval; in 2020, the government approved several cases initially denied by PTC after NGOs petitioned the Supreme Court. NGOs reported the government’s strict evidentiary standard for granting official victim status, which required eyewitness accounts, dates, and details from the victims, prevented some victims referred by NGOs from receiving status and, thus appropriate care, in 2020. In addition, due to the high burden placed on victims to recount and prove their victimization, including by providing witnesses to their accounts, NGOs reported victims were re-traumatized without guarantee of receiving government services; victims were also reluctant to contact witnesses due to stigmas associated with their exploitation. In May 2020, the government committed to establishing an appeal process within six months and to create a set of criteria for official victim identification in response to a Supreme Court case; at the end of the reporting period, the PTC had drafted both policies but had yet to finalize or begin implementation of them. Some NGOs did not submit cases of trafficking among the Eritrean and Sudanese irregular migrant community due to this high standard and the risk that the application process would re-traumatize victims but not result in recognition. NGOs also reported multiple cases in which the government significantly delayed the identification of trafficking victims. For example, the government granted victim status to a Moldovan sex trafficking victim 18 years after her exploitation; the recognition was ultimately too late, and she died of a drug overdose two months after her recognition as a trafficking victim.

The government continued to provide a wide range of protective services for victims of all forms of trafficking. The government continued to operate a 35-bed shelter for female trafficking victims, a 35-bed shelter for male trafficking victims, and transitional apartments with 18 beds for female victims. In response to the pandemic, the government divided shelter residents into “bubbles” to limit transmission, and each shelter designated quarantine areas for isolating residents potentially exposed to COVID-19. Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services (MLSS) also facilitated the vaccination of shelter residents and staff ahead of the general population to decrease chances of an outbreak at the shelters. Shelter residents could leave freely. These shelters offered one year of rehabilitation services, including job training, psycho-social support, medical treatment, language training, and legal assistance. Due to pandemic-related mitigation measures, some services, such as medical consultations and psycho-social care, took place virtually or via telephone rather than in-person during part of the reporting period. In 2020, the women’s shelter assisted 40 adult victims and three children of victims; the men’s shelter assisted 32 victims, and the transitional apartments assisted 9 women and 21 children accompanying their mothers; in 2019, the women’s shelter assisted 59 adult victims and three children of victims; the men’s shelter assisted 33 victims, and the transitional apartments assisted 21 men and women, including 18 children. Shelter staff adjusted operations to accommodate deaf and deaf-mute victims during the reporting period including by contracting an interpreter. The MLSS continued to operate the National Center for Survivors of Slavery and Trafficking in Persons, formerly known as the “day center,” in Tel Aviv for male and female trafficking victims who were waiting for a space at a shelter, chose not to reside at a shelter, or had completed one year at a shelter. The center provided psycho-social services and food aid, with social workers trained to identify individuals at risk of re-trafficking. In 2020, the center provided services to 133 male and 106 female victims, as well as 160 children; this is compared to 2019 when the center provided services to 230 male and female victims, as well as 125 children of victims. The government allocated 7.78 million shekels ($2.42 million) to the operation of the shelters, transitional apartments, and center in 2020, the same as 2019. Additionally, for identified trafficking victims who opted not to stay in shelters, the government continued to provide an official letter that protected them from potential arrest for immigration violations and emergency contact numbers for shelters and relevant ministries. The government continued to provide free medical treatment for one year at various government-funded health facilities for identified trafficking victims living outside of shelters.

The government continued to encourage victims to assist in the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers but did not require their participation in court cases as a condition for receiving visas and protective assistance; victims could opt to leave the country pending trial proceedings. During the reporting period, the government distributed new policy guidance for collecting early testimony in cases involving foreign victims if foreign victims requested repatriation before completion of their case. In March 2021, the government established a new procedure for managing sex crimes, including sex trafficking, by designating a contact person at every court to coordinate victims’ security during proceedings, arranging private waiting rooms, and enabling video testimony. The government allowed trafficking victims to work during the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers. The Legal Aid Administration (LAA) continued to provide free legal aid to trafficking victims; due to the pandemic, staff regularly consulted with victims virtually rather than in person. In 2020, the LAA received 76 legal aid requests to assist potential trafficking victims compared to 86 legal aid requests in 2019. The government provided all victims residing in the shelters with B1 visas—unrestricted work visas; in 2020, the government issued 29 new B1 visas and 99 B1 visa extensions to trafficking victims. Following the conclusion of criminal proceedings, trafficking victims could request a rehabilitation visa for an additional year; due to delays caused by the pandemic, the government extended rehabilitation visas on an ad hoc basis. In 2020, the government issued 14 one-year rehabilitation visas and three one-year extensions. It also issued eight visas to trafficking victims to return to Israel after leaving the country in 2020, a significant decrease compared with 34 visas of this kind issued in 2019. The government forfeiture fund, which used property and money confiscated from traffickers to assist victims, lacked sufficient resources to allocate new grants to victims in 2020. However, the National Anti-Trafficking Unit (NATU) and the fund’s committee ensured allocations approved in previous reporting periods would be fully allocated; the government transferred 83 percent of the approved 2019 allocations totaling 419,500 shekels ($130,560) to an unknown number of applicants for the provision of various protection services, including housing, counseling, and vocational training for victims, monetary compensation ordered by courts, and funding for NGOs. The anti-trafficking law dictated the court must explain its decision to abstain from awarding compensation in the verdict, making compensation the default; in 2020, the government awarded at least 235,600 shekels ($73,330) in victim compensation during criminal proceedings.

The government maintained guidelines discouraging the prosecution of trafficking victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit during their exploitation. However, the government did not systematically screen for trafficking among the irregular African migrant population or individuals in prostitution and, as a result, authorities may have penalized unidentified and some identified victims for immigration violations or prostitution offenses. In December 2020, the government announced a program to expunge the records of individuals convicted of prostitution-associated offenses, including potential sex trafficking victims; the government did not report how many records it expunged during the reporting period, and the program was only available to those not sentenced to prison terms. In April 2020, the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the “Deposit Law” (article 4 of the Prevention of Infiltration Law), which required employers to deposit a certain percentage of irregular migrants’ wages—including those of identified trafficking victims—into a fund that migrants could not access until they departed the country; the government could also deduct from the fund for each day a migrant remained in the country without a visa. Following this ruling, PIBA set up a website through which workers could request their deducted wages be returned. As of March 2021, the government had returned 210.54 million shekels ($65.53 million) to 14,473 workers; 3,445 workers had not yet received their deposit, and 3,202 had not yet filed a request. As the government began returning all withheld money to workers, the government opened 60 investigations into employers who deducted but did not deposit funds; 30 employers received fines and authorities launched five criminal investigations, leading to one indictment. In October 2020, the MLSS rejected proposals by Knesset members to require the government to repay money owed to workers or to provide workers with legal assistance to sue their employers; at the end of the reporting period, the government did not address how to return money owed to this group of workers. The government continued to incentivize irregular African migrants to “voluntarily” depart Israel to third countries in Africa, which included a paid plane ticket in most cases and a $3,500 stipend in some cases; however, NGOs and an international organization confirmed that migrants who arrived in a third country in Africa did not receive residency or employment rights upon arrival.

PREVENTION

The government maintained woefully inadequate efforts to prevent human trafficking and government policies towards foreign workers increased their vulnerability to trafficking. NATU within the Ministry of Justice continued to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts effectively among relevant ministries and NGOs during the reporting period, and NATU officials continued to appear regularly in the media to raise awareness of trafficking. The government maintained its 2019-2024 national action plan (NAP) to combat human trafficking. However, for the second consecutive year, the government did not submit its implementation plan for the five-year NAP. Throughout 2020, the five inter-ministerial teams, each focusing on key objectives outlined in the NAP, held more than 20 discussions with NGOs and civil society organizations; the teams were scheduled to present their recommendations to the Committee of Directors General for approval in mid-2021. One of the five inter-ministerial teams was tasked with conducting research on the scope and characteristics of trafficking in Israel; the government did not report whether future research products would be publicly available. The government did not allocate additional funds for full implementation of the NAP for the third consecutive year. In August 2020, the government re-established the Knesset Subcommittee on Trafficking in Women and Prostitution and convened four roundtables with civil society on trafficking-related issues; the subcommittee was not active between April 2019 and August 2020 due to lack of government formation. While the government produced an annual report on its anti-trafficking efforts, the report was not publicly available; NGOs reported difficulty obtaining information on the government’s anti-trafficking efforts, and the government did not respond to most information requests. The government conducted various national awareness-raising campaigns during the reporting period, including education programs for students, national television commercials, radio broadcasts, and lectures for government officials, shelter staff, and academics.

In 2020, the MLSS, which employed 231 labor inspectors during routine inspections, issued 217 administrative warnings, imposed 66 fines totaling 9.96 million shekels ($3.1 million), and filed six indictments for labor violations involving foreign workers; in 2019, the MLSS issued 415 administrative warnings, imposed 53 fines worth 9.6 million shekels ($2.99 million), and processed four criminal complaints that resulted in five indictments for labor violations. NGOs continued to report there were not enough labor inspectors, especially in the construction and agricultural sectors, to sufficiently monitor and enforce labor laws. Additionally, NGOs reported the government did not effectively regulate work force companies, nor did it combat criminal networks that recruited foreigners for the construction and caregiving fields and for commercial sex. In 2020, the government ratified bilateral work agreements (BWA) with Sri Lanka and Georgia for employment of Sri Lankan and Georgian workers in the caregiving sector and caregiving in institutions, respectively; the government also signed a BWA with Nepal but did not ratify the agreement. The government did not implement the BWA ratified in a previous reporting period with the Philippines during the reporting period. The government maintained BWAs with six other countries for agricultural and construction work; in 2020, 3,646 of the 10,662 foreign migrant workers who arrived in Israel did so through these agreements. Foreign workers recruited under BWAs had triplicate standardized labor contracts held by the worker, employer, and the government. While Israeli law required employers of foreign workers to provide detailed labor contracts in a language the worker understands, there was not adequate government oversight to ensure contracts for workers not covered by BWAs met labor standards, which left workers vulnerable to exploitative employment practices. NGOs reported foreign workers often paid exorbitant fees to recruitment agencies in their country of origin or the Israeli manpower agency; NGOs reported many foreign workers financed the fees through high interest rate loans from informal or illicit lenders in Israel further increasing workers’ vulnerability to trafficking. In 2020, the government adopted a policy change wherein foreign workers recruited on an “expert” visa could only be recruited from countries with a higher GDP than Israel and if their home country made adequate efforts to combat trafficking; NGOs reported “expert” foreign workers would continue to be vulnerable to trafficking because they are unable to change employers.

While most foreign workers could change employers without their previous employers’ permission, foreign construction workers were limited to being able to change employers on a specified date each quarter and otherwise required employers’ permission to change employers. NGOs reported the government’s agreements with private Chinese employer associations required workers in the construction industry to pay licensed employment recruiters’ fees and costs, which could increase their debt and vulnerability to forced labor. An NGO also reported that in several cases, a Turkish company coerced migrant workers into signing promissory notes; in at least one case with forced labor indicators, the PTC did not investigate the case when reported, and the government only granted the victim status after the worker filed a petition with the Supreme Court. During the reporting period, the government reassigned PIBA official responsible for construction company oversight to assist pandemic-related mitigation measures, leaving workers without a means of redress. PIBA procedures for recruitment agencies in the caregiving sector continued to require every agency to hire a licensed social worker responsible for supervising the conditions of foreign caregivers, including home visits, and for informing relevant authorities about labor violations. While the government contended that workers’ visas were not tied to a specific employer, government policies restricted foreign caregivers’ ability to change employers by allowing them to work only in a specific geographical area, preventing them from changing employers more than three times, and preventing them from changing employers after being in Israel for 63 months. NGOs reported that more than 68,000 foreign workers were employed under arrangements that did not allow them to change employers within the caregiving sector or dramatically limited their ability to do so. NGOs also reported that if a foreign caregiver abruptly left their employer, including due to physical or sexual violence, government policy allowed employers to unilaterally revoke their visa, and foreign caregivers were not entitled to an immigration hearing. During the reporting period, caregivers were mandated to remain in their employers’ homes during pandemic-related lockdowns; when lockdowns eased for others, including caregiving employers, the government restricted caregivers to their employers’ homes on rest days which further increased caregivers’ vulnerability to trafficking. In December 2020, PIBA adopted a new policy regarding Palestinian work permits in the construction sector to allow Palestinian workers to change employers more easily; however, NGOs reported the new policy was too narrowly focused on the construction sector at the expense of other sectors such as agriculture and the government did not take sufficient steps to inform Palestinian workers about the policy change or implement mechanisms to facilitate the job search process. Due to the government failing to enact a permanent policy to address refugee and immigration processes, asylum-seekers and migrants—including potential trafficking victims—have not been eligible for social benefits such as unemployment compensation and health insurance, which is tied to their work and cannot be obtained otherwise, since their arrival in Israel. The lack of social benefits further increased this population’s vulnerability to trafficking.

PIBA, in collaboration with an NGO, continued to operate a 24-hour hotline to assist foreign workers who were in Israel under bilateral agreements. The hotline employed 13 interpreters in nine languages: Chinese, Thai, Bulgarian, Russian, Nepalese, Sinhalese, Romanian, Ukrainian, and Turkish. In 2020, the hotline received 2,874 calls; similar to previous years, the majority of calls were from Chinese construction workers (1,828 calls). There was no comparable hotline for the approximately 117,000 documented migrant workers who worked in Israel through private recruitment, nor for the approximately 148,000 Palestinian workers in Israel and Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The Child Protection Bureau Hotline, which handled online offenses against children, reported addressing more than 10,000 cases in 2020, an increase from 7,665 in 2019; however, the hotline did not report identifying any suspected cases of trafficking. As in previous years, the government did not maintain a separate hotline for potential child victims of all forms of trafficking. The government also maintained an emergency hotline for women and girls in commercial sex, which provided referrals to emergency and psychological assistance; the government did not report whether the hotline received any calls in 2020. The government made efforts to reduce demand for commercial sex acts by coordinating an awareness campaign that consumption of prostitution is illegal in Israel in Hebrew and Arabic and conducting operations against 24 websites advertising commercial sex. The government did not report efforts to prevent child sex tourism.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Israel. Palestinians and foreign workers, primarily from South and Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, migrate to Israel for temporary work in construction, agriculture, and caregiving; traffickers exploit some of these workers in forced labor. As of March 2021, data from the Israeli government and NGOs indicated there were 265,000 legal foreign workers and 93,000 non-citizens present in Israel, many of whom without legal status, including Palestinian workers, in Israel and Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, approximately 12,476 fewer foreign workers entered Israel in 2020 compared with 2019. Israeli and foreign employers exploit foreign workers, particularly Turkish, Chinese, Palestinian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Serbian men, in the construction sector where they suffer from labor rights abuses and violations and labor trafficking. Some employers in the construction sector illegally charge Palestinian workers monthly commissions and fees, and in many cases, employers illegally hire out Palestinian workers to other workplaces; these workers are vulnerable to forced labor. The employer-based work permit system for Palestinians—except those working in the construction sector—binds Palestinian workers to specific employers, which enables some employers to exploit workers in forced labor. Furthermore, as a condition of their overnight permits, employers retained identity documents of some of the 19,000 Palestinian workers, effectively restricting their movement in Israel. The approximately 1,000 Jordanian day workers are vulnerable to forced labor in construction, agriculture, and other sectors, primarily in the resort city Eilat, due to limits on entry permits and the geographic isolation of Eilat. Traffickers subject some Thai men and women to forced labor in Israel’s agricultural sector imposing conditions of long working hours, no breaks or rest days, withheld passports, poor living conditions, and difficulty changing employers due to limitations on work permits. Some traffickers in the agricultural sector recruit agricultural students to take part in an agricultural study program on student visas and force them to work in the industry upon arrival, effectively circumventing the BWA process; observers reported the programs contain no academic content and students are bound by tuition fees—which NGOs reported were de facto recruitment fees—up to 11,000 shekels ($3,420) effectively creating situations of debt bondage. Over the past two years, trafficking victims were identified in four of the six academic agriculture programs in Israel, including a group of Guatemalan and Honduran agricultural engineering students in 2020. Caregivers are highly vulnerable to forced labor due to their isolation inside private residences and their lack of protection under the labor law; local NGOs report that traffickers subject caregivers to excessive recruitment fees, fraudulent work contracts, long work hours, confiscation of passports, underpayment of wages, physical violence, sexual harassment and abuse, denial of severance pay, and poor housing including—in some cases—living in the same room as their employer. Foreign caregivers constitute the largest share of all legal foreign workers in the country; the vast majority of these workers are women. During the reporting period, NGOs reported Chinese and Turkish construction companies in Israel compelled Chinese and Turkish workers to work under the threat of debt bondage or coercive promissory notes. Foreign workers who entered Israel on “expert” visas—a visa procedure intended to facilitate the recruitment of highly skilled workers to fill hard-to-fill jobs—were vulnerable to trafficking as the manufacturing sector increasingly uses the visa system to recruit workers for low-wage jobs; in 2020, an estimated 7,000 foreign workers in Israel on “expert” visas, primarily from low-income countries, were subjected to worker-paid recruitment fees as high as 98,350 shekels ($30,610). Networks of workforce agencies recruit workers to Israel through a fraudulent asylum-claim process, charge workers high mediation fees, and sell them fake documents; these workers are vulnerable to exploitation. The government’s policy of refusing fast-track asylum claims has resulted in fewer claims from Ukrainian and Georgian applications; however, they were replaced by increased numbers of Russian and Moldovan workers following the same pattern. Some Bedouin Israeli children are reportedly vulnerable to forced labor, experiencing long working hours and physical violence. NGOs reported an increase in Palestinian children exploited in forced begging in the Northern District of Israel and Jerusalem during the reporting period. NGOs also reported large numbers of Arab children in Israel exploited in various forms of labor exploitation during the reporting due to pandemic-related school closures; NGOs cited concerns many of these children will not return to school due to their increased labor exploitation.

Eritrean and Sudanese male and female migrants and asylum-seekers are highly vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking in Israel. As of March 2021, there were approximately 31,000 African migrants and asylum-seekers in Israel, most of whom were from Eritrea or Sudan. According to NGOs, these migrants and asylum-seekers were increasingly vulnerable to trafficking due to the government’s implementation of the Deposit Law that reduced net wages for this population; the government repealed this law in April 2020, but the government was not able to return all funds to workers due to fraudulent practices by employers. NGOs reported, due to the pandemic, nearly 80 percent of this population experienced some type of unemployment, further increasing their risk to exploitation. Economic distress among women in this population, especially Eritrean women, greatly increases their vulnerability to sex trafficking. Approximately 400 female asylum seekers engaged in survival sex prior to the pandemic; the government estimates that figure tripled during 2020. Since 2007, thousands of African migrants entered Israel via the Sinai Peninsula. The flow of these migrants arriving in Israel, peaking at more than 17,000 in 2011, dramatically decreased to zero in 2017. Many of these migrants were kidnapped in the Sinai and subjected to severe abuse, including forced labor and sex trafficking, at the hands of criminal groups in the Sinai before reaching Israel. In 2020, an NGO reported that of the approximately 4,000 to 5,000 of these migrants still present in Israel, the government had only recognized approximately 400 to 500 as trafficking victims but that the actual number was much higher.

Israeli children, Israeli Bedouin and Palestinian women and girls, foreign women, and transgender adults and children are vulnerable to sex trafficking in Israel. Traffickers use social media websites, including dating apps, online forums and chat rooms, and Facebook groups, to exploit girls in sex trafficking. In 2020, an NGO reported there were approximately 3,000 Israeli child sex trafficking victims in Israel. Israeli Bedouin and West Bank Palestinian women and girls are vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking after family members force them into marriages with older men; these women and girls experience physical and sexual abuse, threats of violence, and restricted movement. Russian, Ukrainian, Eritrean, and Ethiopian women are also vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking through online-facilitated forced marriages. NGOs report some Palestinian LGBTQI+ men and boys in Israel are vulnerable to abuse and sexual exploitation due to their lack of legal status and restrictions on work eligibility for Palestinian nationals in Israel. Some Israeli transgender women and girls are sexually exploited in commercial sex to be able to afford gender-affirming care. Some transgender children as young as 13 years old, many of whom ran away from home, come under the mentorship of transgender women in commercial sex; sometimes these “mentors” then exploit these transgender children in commercial sex. Traffickers subject women from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, China, and Ghana, as well as Eritrean women, to sex trafficking in Israel; some women arrive on tourist visas to work willingly in commercial sex—particularly in the southern coastal resort city of Eilat—but sex traffickers subsequently exploit them. Some traffickers reportedly recruit sex trafficking victims with false, fraudulent, or misleading job offers on the internet, sometimes through legitimate employment websites. During the reporting period, Israeli authorities indicted a suspect for allegedly holding people in conditions of slavery while operating a religious cult by allegedly forcing women and children to provide any earnings to the suspect and to perform involuntary domestic work; media reporting also alleged the suspect sexually exploited the victims.

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