

Iraq

MINIMAL ADVANCEMENT – EFFORTS MADE BUT CONTINUED PRACTICE THAT DELAYED ADVANCEMENT

In 2024, Iraq made minimal advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government launched 44 Childhood Care Units, including 2 central units and 42 units spread throughout the country, to coordinate child protection services and support child protection case management systems. However, despite this initiative to address child labor, Iraq is assessed as having made only minimal advancement because Iraqi and Kurdistan regional government authorities continued to inappropriately detain or punish children allegedly affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq—some of whom were victims of forcible recruitment or use in armed conflict. In addition, the Interministerial Committee on Child Labor does not effectively coordinate with other agencies to process cases of children suspected of having ties to the Islamic State or who may be victims of human trafficking. The government also did not provide complete information on its criminal law enforcement efforts for inclusion in this report.

PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Statistics on Children’s Work and Education		
Children	Age	Percent and Population
Working	5 to 14	4.8% (Unavailable)
Hazardous Work by Children	15 to 17	Unavailable
Attending School	5 to 14	78.4%
Combining Work and School	7 to 14	4.2%

Children in Iraq are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including recruitment by non-state armed groups for use in use in illicit activities, such as cross-border smuggling, drug and weapons trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking.

Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity	
Agriculture	Farming and work in fisheries.
Industry	Construction,† working in small factories and brick kilns, and recycling plastic. Work in chemical factories.†
Services	Street work, including selling goods, cleaning cars, and begging. Domestic work and working in restaurants, bars, nightclubs,† and in brothels. Scavenging and collecting garbage† and scrap metal. Working at auto repair shops.
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Forced recruitment of children for use in illicit activities, including cross-border smuggling and drug and weapons trafficking. Recruitment of children by non-state armed groups for use in armed conflict. Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Forced begging and forced domestic work. Forced work in chemical factories.

† Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor *per se* under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.

SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

The suggested government actions below would close gaps USDOL has identified in Iraq’s implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

Area	Suggested Action
Legal Framework	Criminalize the use, procuring, and offering of children for prostitution, pornography, and pornographic performances regardless of means (without requiring force, fraud, or coercion). Ensure that penalties in Kurdistan for the use, procurement, and offering of children in prostitution, pornography, and pornographic performances are sufficient to serve as a deterrent.
	Ensure the penalty attached for forced labor is more than one year imprisonment.

Area	Suggested Action
	Criminally prohibit the use of children in illicit activities, including in the production and trafficking of drugs.
	Criminally prohibit the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.
	Criminalize child sex trafficking without requiring force, fraud, or coercion to be present.
	Ensure that laws establishing free public education apply to all children. Raise the compulsory education age of 12 years in Iraq to age 16, the minimum age for work.
Enforcement	Ensure that children are not arrested, detained, tortured, or denied services on the basis of their or their family members' perceived ties to the Islamic State.
	Investigate allegations of sexual exploitation and trafficking of girls in internally displaced persons camps by government officials and hold those responsible criminally liable.
	Enhance screening of children who are picked up by authorities for begging for trafficking indicators, do not imprison child trafficking survivors, and give survivors of the worst forms of child labor access to social services providers and humanitarian assistance.
	Provide sufficient resources and training on child labor issues to labor inspectors and criminal investigators so they can effectively carry out their duties. Employ at least 690 labor inspectors to provide adequate coverage for the labor force of approximately 10.3 million people, and ensure adequate funding to enforce legal protections against child labor.
	Publish labor law enforcement information, such as labor inspectorate funding; the number of labor inspectors, the number of labor inspections conducted at worksites, the number of child labor violations found, the number of child labor violations for which penalties were imposed, and the number of child labor penalties imposed that were collected; whether routine inspections and targeted inspections were conducted; and whether unannounced inspections were conducted.
	Publish information on criminal law enforcement on the worst forms of child labor in Iraq and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.
	Ensure that routine labor inspections are carried out in Iraq.
Coordination	Implement a digital tracking system for civil worst forms of child labor inspections.
	Ensure that the Interministerial Committee on Child Labor effectively coordinates among agencies to process cases of children suspected of having ties to the Islamic State or who are victims of human trafficking.
Government Policies	Adopt a child labor policy that covers all worst forms of child labor present in Iraq, including forced begging and commercial sexual exploitation.
Social Programs	Expand programs to provide protection services to demobilized child soldiers.
	Ensure that universal access to education is consistent with international standards, including for refugee and internally displaced children, Black Iraqi children, and children with special needs, and address barriers to education. Ensure that the lack of identification documents does not hinder access to education, including for internally displaced persons and refugees, children with suspected ties to the Islamic State, and children born of "informal" marriages.
	Implement programs in Iraq to address the worst forms of child labor, such as providing services to child victims of commercial sexual exploitation, demobilizing and reintegrating children engaged in armed groups, and providing informal education programs and shelters for human trafficking victims.

CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Syrians, internally displaced Iraqis, and other non-Iraqi children in Iraq are vulnerable to exploitation due to difficulty accessing basic services, including education. High percentages of children from these groups have never attended school and are subsequently exploited in child labor. Additionally, internally displaced children and returnee children are vulnerable to being forced into labor by their families for a lack of economic opportunities. Closures of displaced persons camps exacerbated existing difficulties among this community.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

Children in Iraq face numerous barriers to accessing education, including displacement, the lack of local schools, costs of transportation and school supplies, and discrimination. Girls face additional barriers in the form of cultural norms that prioritize boys' education and concerns for their safety. Consequently, Iraqi girls are more likely to drop out of school, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Displaced children and non-Iraqi children are especially vulnerable to educational barriers, including the cost of transportation and school supplies, lack of documentation, and host-community children receiving priority for classroom seats. Children with special needs have limited access to education due to a lack of specialized teachers and school infrastructure. Additionally, Iraqis of Zanj heritage in Basrah have difficulty accessing education because of the low number of schools in their communities, bullying, and lack of identification documents.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Iraq has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. However, Iraq's laws do not meet international standards, including on the prohibition of child trafficking, the prohibition of commercial sexual exploitation of children, and the prohibition of using children in illicit activities.

Laws and Regulations on Child Labor			
Standard	Age	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	16	✓	Articles 7, 11, and 98 of the 2015 Labor Law
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	18	✓	Articles 95 and 105 of the 2015 Labor Law
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		✓	Article 95 of the 2015 Labor Law; Ministry of Labor's Instruction 19 of 1987
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		X	Articles 9 and 11.2 of the 2015 Labor Law
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		X	Articles 1 and 6 of the Law to Combat Human Trafficking
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		X	Articles 399 and 403 of the Penal Code
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		X	
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	18	✓	Section 6(2) of the CPA Order 22
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military		N/A	
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups		X	
Compulsory Education Age	12 [‡]	X	Articles 8.1.1 and 11.1 of the Education Law; Article 1.3 of the Law on Compulsory Education
Free Public Education		X	Article 34.2 of the Constitution; Article 9 of the Education Law

[‡] Age calculated based on available information

Article 117 of the Constitution of Iraq recognizes the Iraqi Kurdistan Region as a federal region composed of the provinces of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, as well as Halabja. Article 121 grants the Iraqi Kurdistan Region the right to exercise legislative, executive, and judicial powers. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament must endorse any laws that the Government of Iraq passed after 1991 for such laws to enter into force in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Under the Iraqi Education Law and under the Law on Compulsory Education,

children are required to attend primary school for only 6 years, which is typically up to age 12. This leaves children ages 12 to 15 particularly vulnerable to child labor because they are not required to be in school, yet they are not legally permitted to work. However, in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, compulsory primary education is 9 years, typically to age 15, in accordance with international standards.

In Iraq, Article 1 of the Law to Combat Human Trafficking requires force, fraud, or coercion to be present as an element to constitute the crime of child sex trafficking, which is inconsistent with international standards, including Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol. As the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament has adopted the Iraqi Law to Combat Human Trafficking, the human trafficking standard in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is also not in compliance with international standards. In addition, while Kurdistan criminalizes the worst forms of child labor, including procurement and offering of children for prostitution, pornography, and pornographic performances, the penalty (10 days to 3 months in jail) is insufficient to act as a deterrent. The penalty attached for forced labor, including slavery and bondage, is less than one year imprisonment and is therefore not sufficient. Federal Iraq’s laws do not prohibit the use of children in prostitution and do not clearly prohibit the use, procuring, and offering of children for the production of pornography or pornographic performances. Furthermore, Federal Iraq’s laws do not prohibit the use of children in illicit activities, while the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) prohibits such use under Articles 91.3(c), 91.4, and 97 of the 1987 Labor Law. Moreover, Iraqi law does not prohibit recruitment and use of children by non-state armed groups.

ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

In 2024, labor and criminal law enforcement agencies in Iraq took actions to address child labor. However, continued detention or punishment of children allegedly affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS)—some of whom were victims of forcible recruitment or use—and a lack of financial resources hindered enforcement efforts.

Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement	
Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA): Enforces child labor laws and regulations through its Child Labor Unit. Conducts research on child labor through its Childhood Welfare Authority. Receives complaints of child labor cases. The KRG’s MOLSA also enforces child labor laws and regulations.	
Ministry of Interior: Enforces criminal laws on the worst forms of child labor. Collaborates with MOLSA, the Iraqi Industries Federation, and the Confederation of Trade Unions to conduct inspection campaigns. Maintains a hotline for victims of human trafficking, with calls routed directly to the Ministry’s Anti-Trafficking Directorate. KRG’s Ministry of Interior also enforces child labor laws and regulations, investigates cases of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, and includes a Counter-Trafficking Directorate.	

Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts	
Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Unknown
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes
Has a Complaint Mechanism	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	Unknown
Conducted Criminal Investigations for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Unknown
Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Unknown

In 2024, the Government of Iraq 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. In addition, it is **unknown** how many labor inspectors conducted worksite inspections, or whether child labor violations were found. It is also **unknown** whether investigations into suspected cases of the worst forms of child labor were conducted, prosecutions were initiated, or perpetrators were convicted.

COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

Iraq established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor. However, the Interministerial Committee on Child Labor does not sufficiently coordinate with other agencies.

Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor
Interministerial Committee on Child Labor: Coordinates overall government efforts to address child labor, researches policies regarding child labor, and designs and manages projects. Members include representatives from MOLSA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Education. The committee does not sufficiently coordinate among agencies to effectively process cases of children suspected of having ties to ISIS or were victims of human trafficking. The committee was not active in 2024.

Iraq established policies related to child labor. However, these policies do not cover all the worst forms of child labor, including forced begging and commercial sexual exploitation.

Key Policies Related to Child Labor
Child Protection Policy: Outlines a comprehensive approach to addressing child protection, including addressing child labor through prevention, protection, and rehabilitation programs, such as a poverty alleviation initiative and educational and mental health services. Includes a component to provide rehabilitation and reintegration activities for children previously engaged in armed conflict and those who experienced trauma during the period of ISIS occupation. The policy does not specifically cover other worst forms of child labor present in Iraq, including forced begging and commercial sexual exploitation. In 2024, MOLSA launched 44 Childhood Care Units, including 2 central units and 42 units spread throughout the country. The units will coordinate child protection services, carry out prevention programs, and support child protection case management systems.
National Strategy on Combating Human Trafficking (2023–2026): Aims to address human trafficking by outlining steps to be taken by authorities represented on the Central Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons. Focuses on prevention, protection, prosecution, and regional and international cooperation, and includes items to address child victims. Active in 2024.
Action Plan to Prevent the Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Forces: Aims to prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces through measures such as strengthening age verification, awareness-raising activities, legislation, and investigation into cases of alleged recruitment and use. Signed by MOLSA and the UN and supported by UNICEF and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq. In January 2024, the representatives of the Government of Iraq and KRG met with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

Iraq funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs do not address the full scope of the problem.

Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor
Informal Education: ‡ Government-supported informal education systems, including evening school programs and accelerated education that encourages children ages 12 to 18 who have dropped out of school to continue their education. Active in 2024.
Conditional Subsidies Program: ‡ Provides assistance to low-income families for children to stay in school and out of the workforce. In 2024, the government provided subsidies for 569 children and doubled the amount from \$103 to \$206.

‡ Program is funded by the Government of Iraq.

For references, please visit dol.gov/ChildLaborReports