



FACTSHEET

SPOTLIGHT AT THE BORDER:

DATA INSIGHTS INTO TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS IN IRAQ

INTRODUCTION

In Iraq, modern slavery affects an estimated 221,000 people.¹ Human Trafficking, also known as Trafficking in Persons (TiP), is a form of modern slavery where individuals are exploited for the benefit of others.² Iraq serves as both a source and destination country for human trafficking,³ a challenge complicated by the post-conflict context of Iraq, contributing to risks for vulnerable people including women, children, minorities, displaced people and other groups.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018* observed that more than 5 out of 10 persons affected worldwide were adult women and nearly 2 in 10 were girls.⁴ Yet the profiles of people affected by TiP differ markedly from one region to another. Notably, in North Africa and the Middle East, the trend diverges from the global pattern, with adult men being affected at a higher rate than other demographic groups.⁵ The conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant exacerbated the incidence of trafficking not only in Iraq but also in neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic.⁶

The Government of Iraq has taken steps to address human trafficking and the exploitation of migrant workers. Among these efforts, the Government enacted Law No. 28 of 2012, known as the Anti-Human Trafficking Law, on April 23, 2012.⁷ This law, modelled on the 2000 UN Trafficking Palermo Protocol,⁸ provides a crucial legal framework to combat human trafficking and protect victims, albeit with some limitations. Nonetheless, the law is a significant step in aligning Iraq's domestic laws with global efforts against human trafficking.

Moreover, Article 9 of the 2015 Labour Law⁹ bans forced or compulsory labour, including against migrant workers. Similarly, Article 5 of the Law on Combating Human Trafficking delineates labour exploitation as a criminal act.¹⁰ The National Migration Management Strategy further bolsters prevention, protection and prosecution efforts against trafficking and exploitation of migrant workers. Efforts include enhancing regulatory measures over recruitment agencies, improving labour controls and fostering ethical recruitment practices.¹¹ Additionally, human trafficking has been criminalized in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since July 2018, following the enactment of Law No. 6 that ratified the Federal Anti-Trafficking Law of 2012.¹² Nevertheless, Iraq has not ratified the main migrant worker conventions especially the International Labour Organization's Conventions 97 on Migration for Employment (1949) and 143 on Migrant Workers (1975). As such, there remains space for improvement through further strengthening existing national laws governing employment rights.

This factsheet aims to explore potential protection risks and concerns among individuals entering and departing Iraq for reasons related to work¹³ who may be susceptible to trafficking in persons and/or other forms of abuse and exploitation. It provides insight into their sociodemographic characteristics, travel arrangements and mobility history. The analysis is focused exclusively on travellers who responded positively to indicators of TiP and might be considered at risk (2,626 individuals), such as performing work or any activities against their will, working without getting the

expected payment or receiving false information about the nature or the location of the work. They will be referred to in the report as the population-at-risk.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for this analysis come from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix's (DTM) existing [Cross-Border Monitoring](#) activities in Iraq. Cross-Border Monitoring provides information on the number of individuals and vehicles transiting five selected land border points with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran), the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and the Republic of Türkiye (Türkiye). It is focused on profiling travellers and migrants in terms of their demographic characteristics, reasons for travel and vulnerabilities. The border points involved in this activity are the following:

- a. Ibrahim Al-Khalil in Dahuk Governorate, bordering Türkiye;
- b. Fishkhabour in Dahuk Governorate, bordering the Syrian Arab Republic;
- c. Bashmagh in Sulaymaniyah Governorate, bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran;
- d. Zurbatiyah (Wassit Terminal) in Wassit Governorate, bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran; and
- e. Al-Shalamcha in Basrah Governorate, bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Beginning in March 2023, however, data were only collected through the first three border points mentioned above. This means that flows from southern governorates toward the Islamic Republic of Iran may be undercounted in this sample.

The data utilized for this analysis were collected between March 2022 and November 2023. Earlier rounds of data collection were not incorporated as the TiP indicators were only added to the questionnaire beginning in March 2022.

Data are collected through IOM's enumerators, composed of over 14 staff members deployed across Iraq (35% of enumerators are female) at the border crossing points, five days per week (weekdays only) from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm.

Travellers for face-to-face interviews are selected randomly through the adoption of a 'systematic step/interval' selection process – i.e. travellers are systematically selected at fixed intervals from the start of the workday. The interval is fixed at 1:5 (one in every five individuals will be selected for an interview). All travellers aged 18 years and older who were crossing borders were eligible for an interview, regardless of their nationality. To estimate the total number of travellers and their characteristics, the sampling weight is applied.

Further details on definitions, selection of indicators and limitations are available on the last page of this factsheet.

1 Walk Free, *The Global Slavery Index 2023*, Minderoo Foundation Limited (n.p., 2023).

2 Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Financial Flows from Human Trafficking* (Paris, 2018).

3 United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, *Trafficking in Persons Report: Iraq* (Washington, D.C., 2023).

4 UN Women, *Trafficking in women and girls: Crises as a risk multiplier* (A/77/292 of 15 August 2022).

5 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (Vienna, 2020).

6 Kathryn Kosanovich, 'Connecting human trafficking and conflict,' *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime* (8 June 2017).

7 Government of Iraq, *Law on Combatting Human Trafficking No. 28 of 2012* (4 April 2012).

8 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (A/RES/55/25 of 15 November 2000).

9 Government of Iraq, *Labor Law, 2015* (15 October 2015).

10 Government of Iraq, *Law on Combating Human Trafficking No. 28 of 2012* (4 April 2012).

11 IOM, *Migration Governance Indicators | Second Profile 2023 | Republic of Iraq* (Geneva, 2023).

12 KRG, 'OCIA and Heartland Alliance organized a workshop on human trafficking' (13 June 2022).

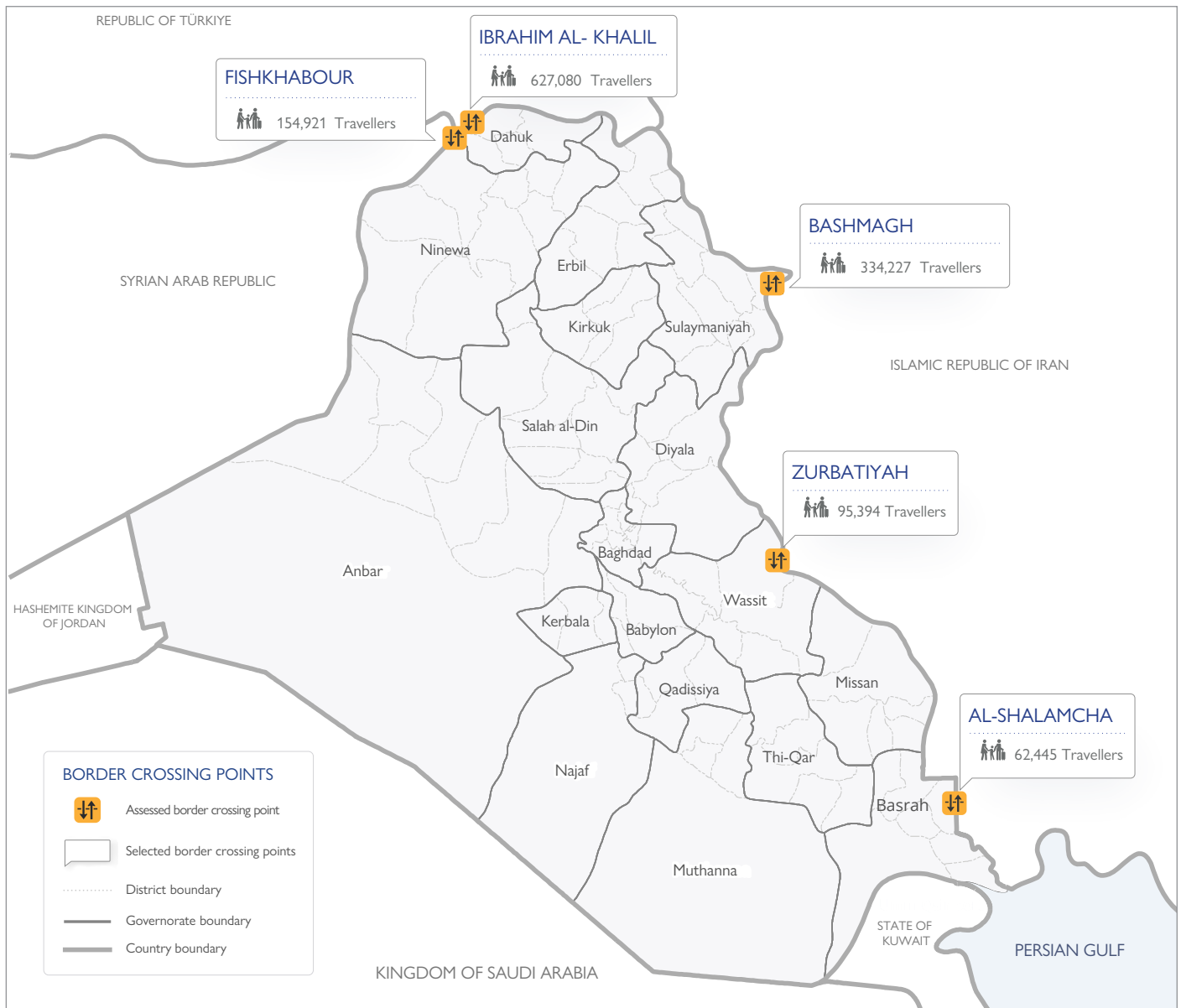
13 Those considered to be travelling for work include travellers who answered 'I got a job offer in Iraq or country of destination', 'I am actively looking for work (but no offer)' or 'I lost my job or did not find work' when asked about their reasons for travel.

FINDINGS

Between 1 March 2022 to 30 November 2023, DTM recorded 1,274,067 individuals crossing five land border crossing points between Iraq and its neighbouring countries – the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye. Ibrahim al Khalil saw the most movements with a total of 627,080 travellers passing through the border crossing point, whilst Fishkhabour saw

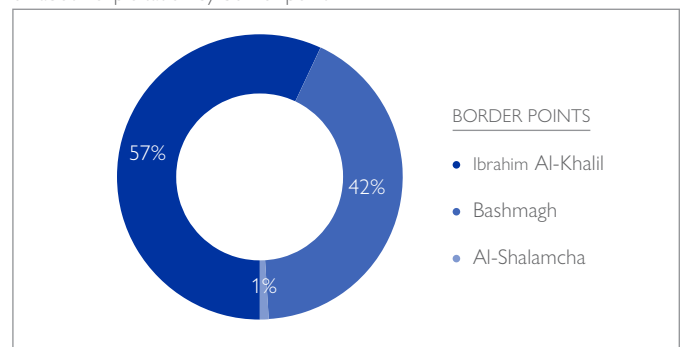
the least movements with 154,921 travellers passing through the border. These individuals were travelling for multiple reasons with the most frequently mentioned involving returning to their home country or country of habitual residence (35%), shopping (24%), family visit (15%) and tourism (13%).

Map 1: Assessed Border Crossing Points and Flow of Travellers (March 2022 – November 2023)



Out of these travellers, 36,422 individuals crossed for labour-related reasons and 2,626 travellers (7%) reported possible indications of exploitation; these included performing work or any activities against their will, working without getting the expected payment and receiving false information about the nature or the location of the work. Most of these travellers (57%) were recorded while crossing the Ibrahim al-Khalil border point with Türkiye or Bashmagh border point with the Islamic Republic of Iran (42%). Only a small number were recorded at the Al-Shalamcha border crossing point (1%).

Figure 1: Share of travellers responding affirmatively to at least one TIP indicator of labour exploitation by border point

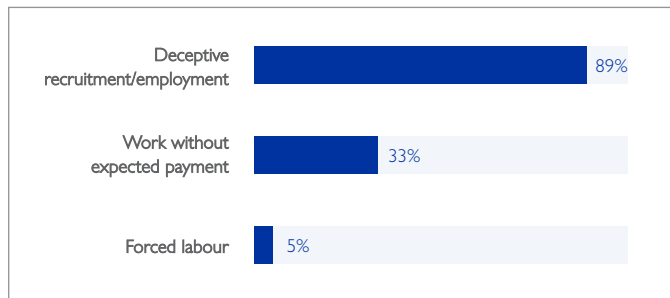


"I will try to find work in Türkiye, and if I have the opportunity, I will migrate to Greece from there, because I have a friend of mine who lives there and promised to help me."

Male respondent, 28 years old, Iraqi national living in Iraq

The most commonly reported risk indicator was receiving false information from employers about the nature or the location of the work (89%). This can indicate deceptive recruitment. Most cases were reported either in Iraq (63%) or the Islamic Republic of Iran (29%). Deceptive recruitment in trafficking involves recruiters providing false information about job conditions, leading victims into exploitative situations under false pretences. This practice is recognized as a common method of coercion into forced labour or trafficking situations.¹⁴ Deceptive recruitment tactics can vary widely but often include promises of high wages, good working conditions, legal documentation and benefits that do not materialize. Once at the destination or in the employment situation, individuals may find themselves in vastly different conditions than those promised, such as lower pay (or no pay), abusive working conditions, illegal activities or even conditions amounting to forced labour or slavery.¹⁵

Figure 2: Indicators of labor exploitation



KEY FIGURES

REASONS FOR TRAVEL 36,422 individuals travelled for work	SEX AND AGE 79% of males are between 18 and 34 years old
POPULATION-AT-RISK 7% responded affirmatively to indicators of TIP	EMPLOYMENT STATUS 27% are unemployed
MOST COMMON FORM OF LABOUR EXPLOITATION 89% reported receiving false information from employers about the nature or the location of the work	TOP SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT 32% services, hospitality and sales 29% factory work 22% trained manual work
TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS 19% received some assistance to migrate	EDUCATION 47% indicated secondary education as their highest degree
FINANCING THE TRIP 17% used coping strategies ¹⁶ to pay for the travel	RISK AWARENESS 7% were aware of risks

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

SEX AND AGE

"I just want to get a job so that I could take care of my parents and get married. I wouldn't migrate if my job was good"

Male respondent, 21 years old, Iraqi national living in Iraq and intending to go to Türkiye

In line with the previous research, most of the population-at-risk were males. Further, most of them were between 18 and 34 years old, while female travellers

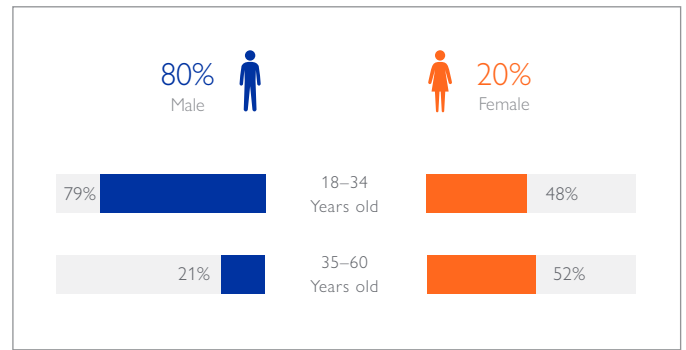
14 For further details, UNODC provides insights on this matter here.

15 ILO, 'Deceptive recruitment and coercion' (May 2016).

16 Coping strategies include borrowing money from friends or family or selling assets.

were either young adults (18–34 years old) or middle-aged (35–60 years old).

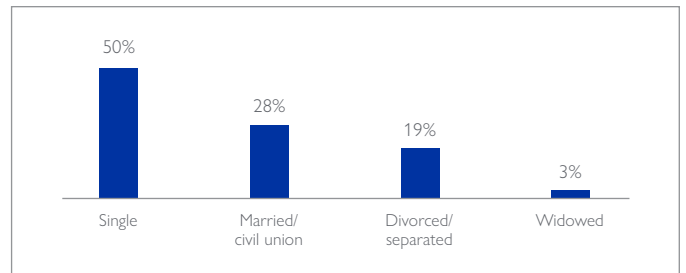
Figure 3: Population-at-risk by sex and age



MARITAL STATUS

Half of the population-at-risk were single (50%) and a third were married (28%). The remaining shares were either divorced (19%) or widowed (3%).

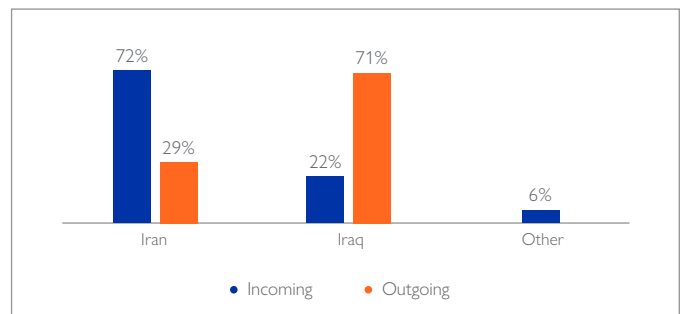
Figure 4: Population-at-risk by marital status



NATIONALITY

Most travellers-at-risk who entered Iraq were Iranian nationals (72%) while most travellers-at-risk who were leaving the country were Iraqi nationals (71%). Others entering Iraq were from Indonesia or Türkiye.

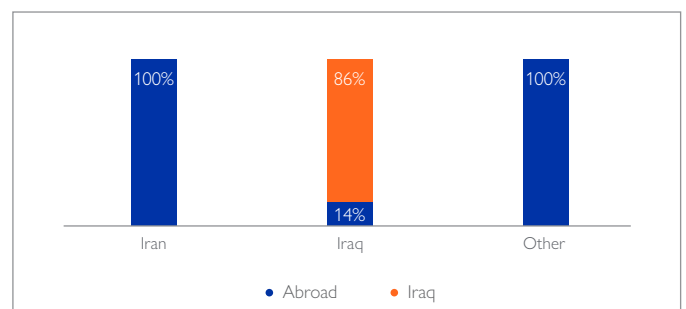
Figure 5: Population-at-risk by nationality and type of flow



COUNTRY OF USUAL RESIDENCE

Most Iraqi travellers-at-risk reside in Iraq (86%) with a small portion residing in Türkiye (14%), while all Iranian nationals reside in Iran.

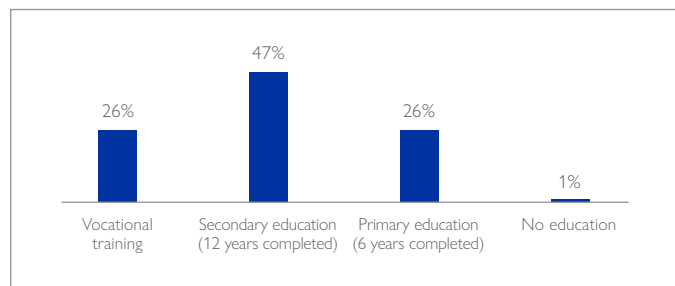
Figure 7: Population-at-risk by nationality and country of usual residence



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Most travellers-at-risk had completed either secondary education (47%) or vocational training (26%). Around a quarter (26%) had only primary education (six years of schooling). None of the travellers-at-risk had any form of higher education (Bachelor's, Master's or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees). Just 1 per cent received no form of education.

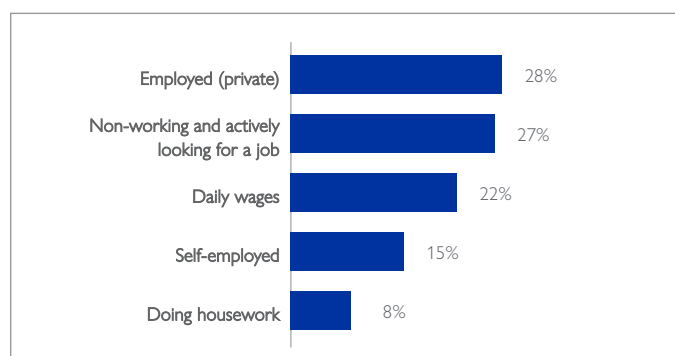
Figure 6: Population-at-risk by educational attainment



CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS

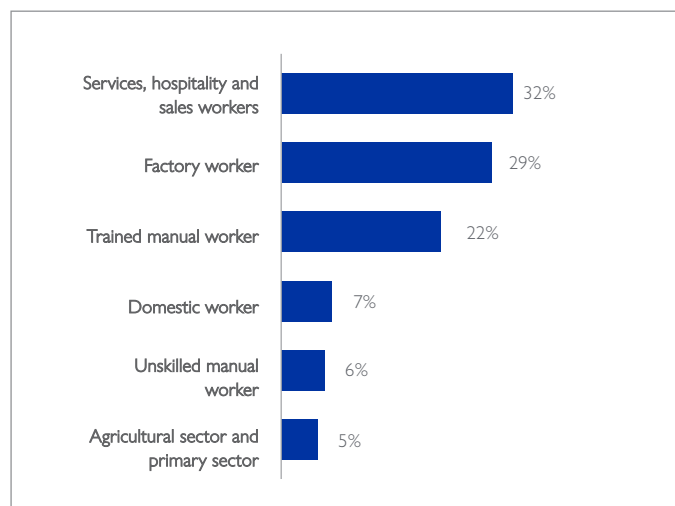
Around a quarter of the population-at-risk (27%) were unemployed and ready to start to work in two weeks and substantial share relied on unstable sources of income as daily wage workers (22%). The remaining caseload was employed in the private sector (28%), self-employed (15%) or doing housework (8%).

Figure 8: Population-at-risk by employment status



The top three sectors of work among population-at-risk crossing due to a job offer were services, hospitality and sales (32%), followed by factory work (29%) and trained manual work (22%).

Figure 9: Population-at-risk by type of work in destination country among those travelling due to job offer

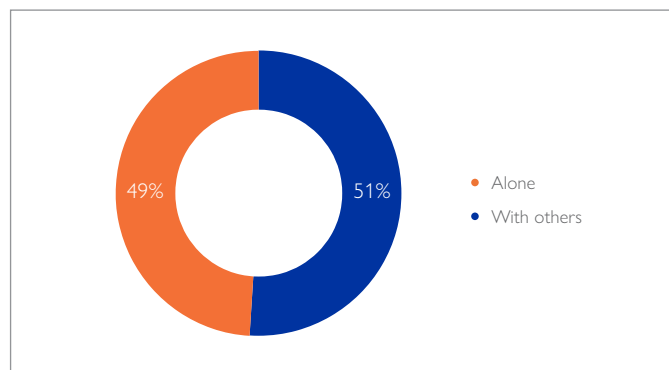


MOBILITY PROFILE

TRAVEL GROUP

Around half of travellers-at-risk took the journey alone and another half with others, mostly friends or neighbours. Those travelling alone were commonly men actively seeking employment in the country of destination and who had either friends or relatives waiting for them there. In a few cases, travellers-at-risk were crossing with groups of unknown individuals, which presents its own set of risks.

Figure 10: Population-at-risk by travel group

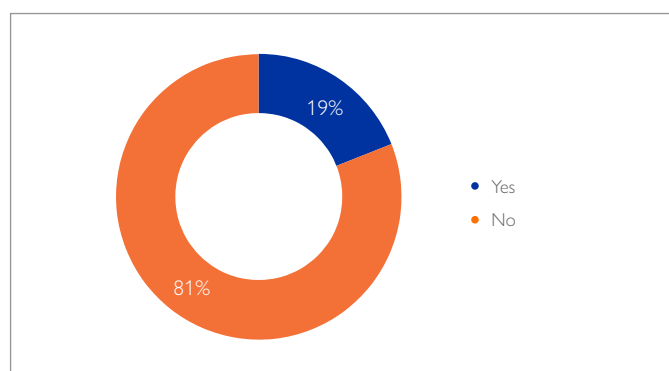


TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

Among the population-at-risk, 19 per cent reported receiving some assistance to migrate. This support came either from family and friends or employers, indicating the role of businesses in directly supporting labour migration. This assistance ranges from logistical support, such as securing visas, to financial help with travel expenses.

In a few cases, travellers-at-risk used the services of a smuggler or broker to arrange their travel. The use of smugglers or brokers not only increases the financial cost of migration but also exposes migrants to potential exploitation, trafficking and other dangers during their journey.

Figure 11: Population-at-risk who received assistance in arranging their travel



WAYS TO PAY FOR THE TRAVEL

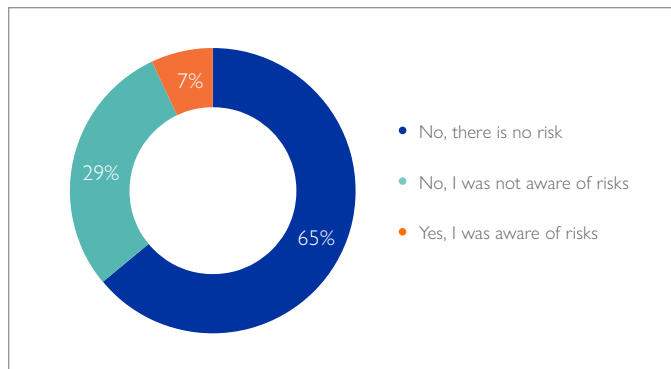
The financial strategies employed by the population-at-risk reveal a combination of self-reliance, usage of several sources and potential vulnerability. Most travellers-at-risk (88%) used their own savings to finance their journey. However, some travellers-at-risk (17%) were using coping strategies such as borrowing money from friends and family in their home country or selling assets to finance their journey, which might involve liquidating property, land or other valuable possessions, actions that can have profound impacts on their long-term financial stability and ability to return or rebuild in their home countries. Selling assets could be an indication of the high stakes many migrants associate with their journey.

Around half of those travelling for a job offer confirmed that it covers their travel expenses but they will have to repay it. Traffickers employ a range of tactics to exploit and control their victims, ensuring compliance through coercion and manipulation. Among these methods, debt-bondage is used to create a state of vulnerability and dependency. Victims are told that they owe money for their travel and living expenses and they are not released until this debt has been repaid.

RISK AWARENESS

Data point out a critical gap in awareness of trafficking risks. A majority of travellers-at-risk perceived no risk prior to their journey or were unaware of potential dangers, yet a portion of these individuals reported facing exploitation. Approximately two in three travellers-at-risk reported that they did not perceive any risk to themselves before beginning their journey. Furthermore, one in three were not aware of any risks associated with migration in general. Those few who were aware of potential risks cited dangers including hunger/thirst, lack of shelter, detention and robbery.

Figure 12: Population-at-risk by risk awareness



These findings underscore the continued and urgent need for a comprehensive, informed and coordinated response to human trafficking. Both governmental and non-governmental protection actors must enhance support for persons at risk of trafficking through targeted awareness campaigns about trafficking risks and provision of protection services, particularly in high-risk sectors and among communities prone to TIP. Additionally, enhancing cross-border cooperation and information sharing between Iraq and its neighbouring countries can also play a crucial role in early identification and intervention for those at risk and trends of trafficking. Such comprehensive measures will not only aid in preventing trafficking but also support the recovery and integration of survivors back into society.

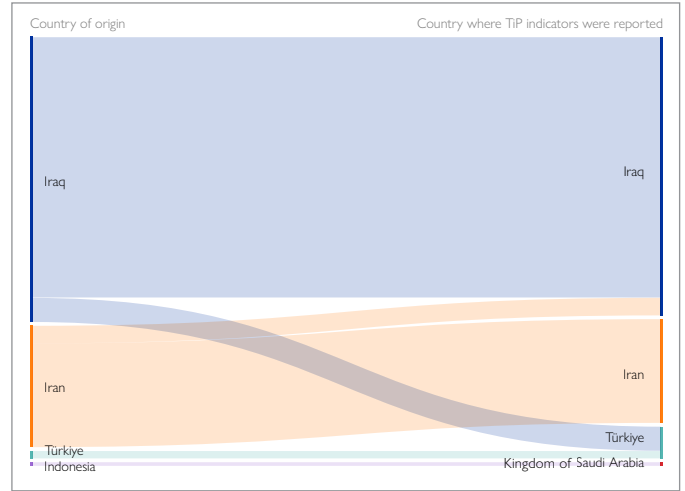
COUNTRY WHERE TIP WAS REPORTED BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

For most Iraqi nationals, protection concerns occurred in their country of origin, while 12 per cent reported it in Türkiye. Similarly, for most Iranian nationals, protection concerns took place in their country of origin, while 11 per cent reported it in Iraq.

"I would like to return [to Türkiye], but I do not have a job or livelihood [there]. The high cost of living in Türkiye, the bad political situation and natural disasters are some of the reasons for lack of job opportunities for Iraqis in Türkiye."

Male respondent, 41 years old, Iraqi national returning to Iraq from Türkiye

Figure 13: Population-at-risk by nationality and country where TIP indicators were reported

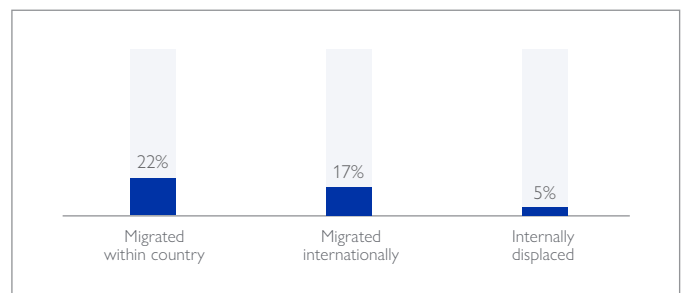


MOBILITY HISTORY

An individual's history of movement, including previous migrations, travel patterns and experiences with displacement, can indicate vulnerability to trafficking. Frequent movement, especially under unsafe or irregular conditions, may increase exposure to traffickers.^{17, 18}

However, most travellers-at-risk reported no previous experience with migration¹⁹ within their own country. Combined, three in five travellers-at-risk were first-time migrants, both within their country and internationally. This inexperience could be a critical factor in their vulnerability, as they may have limited knowledge of migration processes due the unfamiliarity with the legal and social landscapes of their destination areas and their lack of social networks, which could make them more likely to be misled or coerced by traffickers.

Figure 14: History of migration among population-at-risk



17 OHCHR, 'Human trafficking risks in the context of migration' (15 September 2016).

18 World Economic Forum, 'World Day Against Trafficking: Challenging misconceptions about it in migration pathways' (30 July 2021).

19 Both internal and international migration are defined as moving to a new location for period of three months or more.

METHODOLOGY

DEFINITIONS

Deceptive recruitment/employment: According to the International Labour Organization: 'Deception is the most common form of "recruitment" when it comes to forced labour. Third-party recruiters – often operating unlawfully or semi-lawfully – may be the only source of employment information available to migrants. This makes it easy for them to lie about the nature of jobs and conditions of work.'²⁰ One form of deception concerns access to legal status. Migrants may pay for documentation and be promised legal status in the destination country without receiving it. Additionally, migrants may not receive their promised wage due to deductions, penalties or debt.²¹

Forced or compulsory labour: The ILO's Convention 29 on Forced Labour (1930) defines forced labour as 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself/herself voluntarily.'²²

Travellers: In this report, travellers refers to all individuals crossing an international border with Iraq to differentiate it from the term 'migrants' which refers to individuals who have changed their country of usual residence or those who have been away, or are planning to be away, from their country of nationality for at least three months.²³

Trafficking in Persons: The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children defines trafficking in persons as 'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.'²⁴

SELECTION OF INDICATORS

Indicators serve a dual purpose: they are employed primarily as signals that may suggest instances of trafficking or highlight areas for potential investigation. These indicators also guide the data collection process. It is essential to use both direct and indirect indicators not to identify victims of trafficking (VoTs) but to highlight risks. Indirect indicators, in particular, serve as supplementary tools that, while not conclusively proving the existence of human trafficking, can be valuable in estimating its likelihood and informing further detailed analysis.

IOM has identified 18 core indicators²⁵ for human trafficking, focusing on actions, means and processes. These indicators provide a framework for assessing potential cases of trafficking and are intended for use in guiding further identification processes. Beyond this, the data serve as a guide for collecting information on the victim's profile and factors heightening the risk of trafficking. Additionally, the framework sheds light on the patterns of entry into the trafficking process, movement dynamics, the profile of traffickers and

their methods of controlling victims.

In the context of identifying persons potentially at risk of TiP, this report prioritizes the examination of workplace-related protection concerns and risks. This approach is grounded in the understanding that exploitation often occurs within the realm of employment, making it a critical area for intervention.

This report utilizes three core indicators aimed at identifying potential signs of prevalent forms of labour exploitation, which may suggest the possibility of trafficking.

- **Work without compensation:** This indicator assesses situations where individuals are compelled to work without receiving the agreed-upon wages or, in extreme cases, without any payment at all. The absence of compensation, despite the labour provided, is a clear violation of labour rights and a strong sign of exploitative practices. It is essential to investigate the conditions under which work is performed, including any promises of payment that are later reneged upon by employers.
- **Forced or compulsory labour:** Encompasses scenarios where individuals are made to work against their will, under threat of penalty or coercion. It includes the use of violence or intimidation, debt bondage, retention of identity papers and other forms of restriction on freedom of movement. Identifying forced labour involves looking beyond the surface to understand the power dynamics at play and the means by which individuals are kept in exploitative situations.
- **Deceptive recruitment:** This indicator focuses on the tactics used by employers or recruiters to entice individuals into exploitative work situations under false pretences. Deception can range from misleading information about the nature or conditions of the work, the compensation, the location or the legal status of the employment. Deceptive recruitment is often a precursor to other forms of exploitation, as it traps individuals in situations from which it is difficult to escape due to misinformation or false promises.

The analysis was conducted exclusively for travelers who responded positively at least to one out of three utilized TiP indicators and might be considered at risk. With these restrictions, the sample size for this analysis was 116 individuals.

LIMITATIONS

The resulting data are representative of the individuals crossing at each of the selected border points only during the times of data collection. Data should not be generalized and do not represent a full picture of inter- and intra-regional migration, but rather of migration flows at the selected border points. Data collected in assessed border points should not lead to assumptions about border crossings in non-assessed border points or areas without monitoring points.

For an overview of the methodology behind the Flow Monitoring activities, please consult the [Cross-Border Monitoring Methodological Overview](#). For a more

20 ILO, 'Deceptive recruitment and coercion' (May 2016).

21 ILO, 'Details of indicators for sexual exploitation: Indicators of deceptive recruitment' (n.p., n.d.).

22 ILO, *Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (No. 29)* (28 June 1930).

23 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Series M, No. 58, Rev. 1* (New York, 1998).

24 OHCHR, *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (A/RES/55/25 of 15 November 2000)*.

25 OHCHR, Federal Ministry of the Interior of Austria, *Guidelines for the Collection of Data on Trafficking in Human Beings, Including Comparable Indicators* (Vienna, 2009).

detailed presentation of the implementation and steps, please consult the *Flow Monitoring Methodological Guide*.

In addition, the sensitive nature of protection issues, coupled with the potential for stigma, often leads to underreporting of such risks. This gap in data can result in an analysis that does not fully reflect the true scale and scope of protection challenges faced by migrants. The underreporting issue underscores the need for cautious interpretation of the data and an understanding that the actual protection risks may be higher than what is captured in the report.

Despite these constraints, this analysis provides a useful picture of the migration situation in Iraq. The findings offer a sketch of migration flows and the nature of protection challenges faced by migrants at these specific points of entry and during the observed periods. This report serves as a foundational understanding of the situation, highlighting areas that require further investigation and broader data collection efforts. Therefore, while the analysis does not encompass the full spectrum of migration and protection issues in Iraq, it contributes to a preliminary understanding of these complex phenomena, underlining the necessity for a cautious yet appreciative interpretation of the available data.

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