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Israel and Sex Trafficking The Fanonite

November 25, 2007

Dubai is of course not the only place in the Middle East famous for sex-trafficking; it faces stiff competition from Israel. [BBC reports](#), in 2006 'the United Nations named Israel as one of the main destinations in the world for trafficked women; it has also consistently appeared as an offender in the annual US State Department's Trafficking in Persons (Tip) report.'

Marina rarely leaves her two-room home in northern Israel these days. She is in hiding - wanted by the Israeli authorities for being an illegal immigrant, and by the criminal gangs who brought her here to sell her into prostitution.

Marina - not her real name - was lured to Israel by human traffickers.

During the height of the phenomenon, from the beginning of the 1990s to the early years of 2000, an estimated 3,000 women a year were brought to Israel on the false promise of jobs and a better way of life.

"When I was in the Ukraine, I had a difficult life," said Marina, who came to Israel in 1999 at the age of 33 after answering a newspaper advertisement offering the opportunity to study abroad.

"I was taken to an apartment in Ashkelon, and other women there told me I was now in prostitution. I became hysterical, but a guy starting hitting me and then others there raped me.

"I was then taken to a place where they sold me - just sold me!" she said, recalling how she was locked in a windowless basement for a month, drank water from a toilet and was deprived of food.

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MAIN ORIGINS OF WOMEN TRAFFICKED TO ISRAEL

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Ukraine
Uzbekistan
Belarus

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That part of her ordeal only ended when she managed to escape, but the physical and mental scars remain.

Last year, the United Nations named Israel as one of the main destinations in the world for trafficked women; it has also consistently appeared as an offender in the annual US State Department's Trafficking in Persons (Tip) report.

While this year's report said Israel was making "significant efforts" to eliminate trafficking, it said it still does not "fully comply with the minimum standards" to do so.

Like Marina, some trafficked women are brought into the country legally, while others are smuggled by Bedouins across the border from Egypt.

In all cases, the traffickers - as many as 20 in the chain from recruitment to sale - take away the women's passports before selling them on to pimps.

Sometimes the women are subjected to degrading human auctions, where they are stripped, examined and sold for \$8,000-\$10,000.

Sanctions threat

Prostitution in Israel is legal, but pimping and maintaining a brothel are not.

The law however is not widely enforced and few brothels are closed down.

In Tel Aviv's Neve Shaanan district for instance, just a short walk from the city's five-star tourist hotels, brothels masquerading as massage parlours, saunas and even internet cafes, fill the side streets. One such place even operates opposite the local police station.

There are bars on windows and heavily-built men guard the doors, which are only opened to let customers in and out.

Inside, groups of sullen-looking women sit in dimly-lit rooms, waiting for their next client.

Foreign women fetch the highest prices, with trafficked women forced to work up to 18 hours a day.

For years, the absence of anti-trafficking laws in Israel meant such activity - less risky and often more profitable than trafficking drugs or arms - went unchecked.



L'Impero si è fermato a Baghdad, by Valeria Poletti

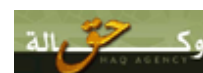
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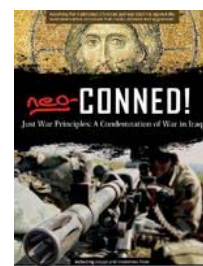
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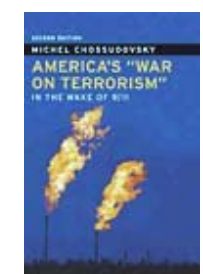
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:: ONU - XX Assemblea Generale (1965): La XX Assemblea Generale dell'ONU (1965) dichiara "la legittimità della lotta da parte dei popoli sotto oppressione coloniale, per esercitare il loro diritto all'autodeterminazione e all'indipendenza". Inoltre, l'Assemblea invita "tutti gli Stati a fornire assistenza morale e materiale ai movimenti di liberazione nazionale nei territori coloniali".

:: ONU - Risoluzione 1514 "L'Assemblea Generale dichiara che: la soggezione dei popoli a dominio straniero, conquista e asservimento costituisce una negazione dei diritti umani fondamentali, è contraria alla Carta delle Nazioni Unite ed è un impedimento alla promozione della pace e della cooperazione mondiali. Tutti i popoli hanno diritto all'autodeterminazione; in virtù di tale diritto essi devono liberamente determinare il loro status politico e liberamente perseguire il loro sviluppo economico, sociale e culturale".

:: Convenzione di Ginevra, Protocollo Addizionale I (1977):

La lotta armata può essere usata, come ultima risorsa, come mezzo per esercitare il diritto all' autodeterminazione.

:: Tribunale penale internazionale

In base allo Statuto del Tribunale penale internazionale, sono definiti "crimini di guerra":
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(4) attacchi lanciati intenzionalmente nella consapevolezza che gli stessi avranno come conseguenza la perdita di vite umane tra la popolazione civile, e lesioni a civili o danni a proprietà civili ovvero danni diffusi duraturi e gravi all'ambiente naturale che siano manifestamente eccessivi rispetto all'insieme dei concreti e diretti i vantaggi militari previsti.

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"During the first 10 years of trafficking, Israel did absolutely nothing," said Nomi Levenkron, of the Migrant Workers' Hotline, an NGO which helps trafficked women and puts pressure on the state to act.

In 2003 we used to find women who were being raped, jailed and under a great amount of violence. In 2007, the situation is completely different.

Raanan Caspi

Israeli anti-trafficking police chief

"Women were trafficked into Israel - the first case we uncovered was in 1992 - and not much really happened," she said. "Occasionally traffickers were brought to trial, but the victims were arrested as well, they were forced to testify, and then they were deported."

In 2000, trafficking for sexual exploitation was made a crime but the punishments were light and its implementation was poor, NGOs say.

It was only after repeated criticism of Israel by the United States - and the threat of sanctions - that authorities began to act.

Investigations into suspected traffickers increased, stiff jail terms were handed down and Israel's borders were tightened against people smuggling.

Changing tactics

Campaigners say things began to change for the better in 2004, when the government opened a shelter in north Tel Aviv for women who had been trafficked for sex.

It marked a change in the way the state perceived them - as victims of a crime rather than accomplices.

There are some 30 women at the Maggan shelter - most from former Soviet states, but also five from China.

"When they come here they are in a bad condition," said Rinat Davidovich, the shelter's director. "Most have sexual diseases and some have hepatitis and even tuberculosis. They also have problems going to sleep because they remember what used to happen to them at night," she said.

"It's very hard and it's a long procedure to start to help and treat them."

Police say their actions have led to a significant drop in the number of women now being trafficked into Israel for sex - hundreds, rather than thousands, a year - and they say the women's working environment has improved too.

"There is a significant change in the conditions that the women are being held in," said anti-trafficking police chief Raanan Caspi.

"In 2003 we used to find women who were being raped, incarcerated and suffering violence. In 2007, the situation is completely different - they get paid in most cases and the conditions that they're in are much more humane."

Now most trafficking occurs through what people like to call

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discreet apartments and escort agencies

Yedida Wolfe

Task Force on Human Trafficking

But the true picture might not be so clear-cut. Campaigners say increased police activity has also had an adverse effect. Instead of operating openly in brothels, traffickers have become more discreet, plying their trade in private apartments and escort agencies, making the practice more difficult to detect.

"We've been keeping tabs on trends, in terms of, for instance, prices of exploitative services," said Yedida Wolfe, of the Task Force on Human Trafficking.

"Those prices have not gone up, which leads us to believe that the supply of victims has not gone down.

"While government officials are saying that their efforts have drastically cut the number of victims in the country, the NGOs on the scene really don't feel that's true."

Israel might well have turned a corner in its fight against the traffickers, but the battle is far from won.

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