



Ranking States, Advancing Interests: The Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) as an Instrument of American Soft Power

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Abstract:

The annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports issued by the U.S. Department of State operate as a primary instrument of American soft power, directly advancing Washington's foreign policy objectives. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the United States consolidated its role as the dominant global authority on human trafficking, wielding the report's tier rankings to steer international assistance flows and compel policy changes abroad. Central to this critique is the argument that the report's seemingly objective evaluations are consistently filtered through strategic alliances, frequently overriding factual assessment. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of the reports, official documents, and existing academic literature, the article maps the precise connections between U.S. geopolitical goals and country rankings. The findings suggest that the TIP Report serves not as a neutral gauge of anti-trafficking efforts worldwide but as a sophisticated mechanism for shaping international conduct and projecting American influence across the global stage.

Keywords: Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report; U.S. foreign policy; soft power; human trafficking; state compliance.

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Introduction:

The subject of human trafficking has recently moved to the forefront of global political discourse. Despite a growing number of publications, debates surrounding this issue have become intensely politicized. As a result, anti-trafficking initiatives have too often prioritized political objectives over the welfare of victims ^[1]. Among these initiatives, the United States Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report occupies a distinctive position as both an evaluative and normative instrument within the global anti-trafficking regime. Since its introduction in 2001, the TIP Report has sought to assess governments' compliance with the minimum standards established by the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), through ranking countries according to their efforts to combat trafficking in persons ^[2].

The TIP Report, officially portrayed as a tool for promoting accountability and strengthen global cooperation, has sparked considerable controversy regarding its objectivity, legitimacy, and political intent. Scholars and policymakers have questioned whether the report functions primarily as a mechanism of human rights advocacy or as a means of advancing U.S. foreign policy priorities under the guise of soft diplomacy. This tension situates the TIP Report within broader discussions of global governance, where normative agendas consistently intersect with asymmetrical power relations and strategic objectives.

The present inquiry probes the degree to which the TIP Report acts as a lever of political influence within global governance. Through a descriptive qualitative analysis of annual reports, official records, and scholarly research, the analysis delineates how the ranking process mirrors deeper political and economic calculations. The investigation pays particular attention to the manner in which the United States mobilizes the TIP apparatus to apply pressure on states with fragile governance institutions, often simultaneously granting leniency to strategic allies. These observations add weight to a growing scholarly consensus that interprets global governance frameworks not as impartial tools for international cooperation, but as contested spaces where power, policy, and perception continually interact.

THE FIRST TOPIC: THE GLOBAL RESPONSE AS A CONFRONTATION TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The late 20th century witnessed human trafficking re-emerge as a paramount concern on the global stage, drawing attention from scholars, activists,



and governments across the fields of human rights, criminology, and international law. Despite the perception of the phenomenon as a new crisis, its deep association with historical forms of exploitation is undeniable. As Wong ^[3] notes, contemporary debates often echo the widespread fears and moral panics surrounding “white slavery” that preoccupied American and European societies a century earlier. This historical parallel is instructive, as it shows how responses to trafficking have long been shaped by a convergence of genuine humanitarianism, gendered anxieties, and nationalistic policies. The modern anti-trafficking movement, however, has unfolded within a unique context of accelerated globalization and evolving international law, creating a distinct environment marked by deep-seated ambiguity and competing interests. The following sections will first dissect the modern definition and forms of this crime, then analyze the specific global conditions that fueled its resurgence at the end of the Cold War, and finally, trace the evolution of international law from fragmented early agreements to the cohesive protocol that now guides global efforts.

THE FIRST REQUIREMENT: WHAT DOES HUMAN TRAFFICKING STAND FOR? DEFINING A COMPLEX CRIME

The global community’s effort to combat human trafficking has been consistently hampered by the protracted struggle to formulate a clear and actionable definition. The United Nations Palermo Protocol provided a crucial, standardized definition, describing it as the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons” by improper means “for the purpose of exploitation” ^[4]. This exploitation manifests in multiple forms, driven by a range of social, economic, and political variables that determine which populations are most at risk. The most common types of human trafficking are moving people within or across national borders for sexual exploitation, forced labor in different economic sectors, domestic servitude, and organ harvesting ^[5].

This legal definition represented a significant evolution from earlier, more limited conceptions of human trafficking. In the late nineteenth century, feminist reformers and social activists formed the first transnational alliances to address the cross-border movement of women and girls for sexual exploitation, efforts that culminated in international treaties aimed at eradicating the so-called “white slave traffic” ^[6]. By contrast, the modern legal framework, formalized in the early 2000s, broadens this narrow focus beyond sexual exploitation to include a wide range of



forced labor practices and human rights violations. This shift reflects an increasingly sophisticated understanding of trafficking as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon shaped by economic vulnerability, migration dynamics, and structural inequality.

THE SECOND REQUIREMENT: THE PERFECT STORM: GLOBALIZATION AND THE RESURGENCE OF TRAFFICKING

The end of the Cold War created a global environment ripe for the proliferation of human trafficking. The onset of rapid economic globalization, characterized by a sharp increase in international trade and reduced government intervention, coincided with the profound economic crisis following the Soviet Union's disintegration. This collapse resulted in widespread financial vulnerability and political instability across Eastern Europe and beyond, providing fertile ground for organized criminal networks to flourish and exacerbating government corruption^[7]. The interplay of economic shock, diminished state capacity, and escalating criminality has fundamentally altered global migration patterns. They created powerful push factors, compelling individuals to seek livelihoods abroad through increasingly irregular and dangerous channels. The modern human trafficking industry established itself within this governance vacuum, systematically exploiting the gap between the demand for cheap, disposable labor and the desperation of vulnerable migrants^[8]. This exploitation soon became recognized under the modern umbrella of "human trafficking," a direct consequence of this post-Cold War dislocation.

THE THIRD REQUIREMENT: FROM FRAGMENTED AGREEMENTS TO A UNIFIED PROTOCOL

The emergence of international human rights law brought about the formalization of various cardinal legal principles, particularly regarding the abolition of slavery and forced labor. Throughout the 19th century, international consensus led to the prohibition of the slave trade in almost all countries. The global community further advanced this agenda with the 1926 Slavery Convention and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both of which unequivocally outlawed slavery worldwide. Recognizing that exploitative practices evolved under different guises, the 1956 Supplementary Convention extended these prohibitions to include "practices similar to slavery," such as debt bondage and serfdom^[9].



Although a web of prior international agreements held theoretical relevance, the widely reported “resurgence” of human trafficking in the 1990s compelled nations to draft new treaties targeting this specific crime. This effort culminated in the year 2000 with the United Nations adoption of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. This landmark instrument set forth clear international standards for handling trafficking cases and bolstering worldwide collaboration. Its most consequential contribution was articulating the first legally recognized and all-encompassing meaning of “human trafficking” in international law. The definition broke from earlier, narrower instruments by making sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery, and similar practices are illegal, thereby acknowledging the full spectrum of this crime.

Beyond global agreements and national laws, regional institutions have emerged as decisive actors in the campaign against human trafficking. The Council of Europe’s Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, legally binding through the European Court of Human Rights, compelled member states to ground their anti-trafficking measures in a human rights-based approach ^[10]. A similar commitment is visible in Southeast Asia, where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has constructed its own distinct regime to counter human trafficking and galvanize collective regional action. These regional pacts enable a form of legal and policy coordination that is often more immediate and context-sensitive than broader global instruments. The ASEAN initiative, for example, has generated specific protocols for member states, including standardized data collection procedures and stronger international cooperation for prosecuting traffickers ^[11]. The regional momentum culminated in 2015 with ASEAN’s formal ratification of the Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, along with its associated Plan of Action, which explicitly categorizes trafficking as a grave human rights violation ^[12].

THE SECOND TOPIC: ASSESSMENT OF THE U.S. TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS REPORT: METHODOLOGY AND TIERING CRITERIA.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was a groundbreaking law that the United States passed in 2000. It later became a model for anti-trafficking laws around the world. The TVPA explicitly authorized the U.S. government to leverage its diplomatic and economic influence to compel foreign nations to confront human trafficking within their jurisdictions ^[13]. The Act outlines minimum standards for foreign governments, requiring them to prohibit severe



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forms of trafficking, manifest sustained and earnest efforts to eliminate it, and punish convicted traffickers.

To enforce this policy, the TVPA directed the Department of State to publish an annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, evaluating the performance of other nations. The publication, produced by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, synthesizes vast amounts of data into individual country narratives. The narratives grade national performance based on the “Three Ps” principle: prosecution of traffickers, protection for victims, and prevention of the crime^[14]. The report is praised as a reliable global resource for policymakers and activists, but its translation of complex national situations into standardized tiers raises questions about its methodology and its authors' significant freedom to make decisions.

The report categorizes countries into a three-tier hierarchy based on their adherence to the standards defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its subsequent reauthorizations. However, the process of converting qualitative narratives into these definitive rankings remains opaque, granting authors substantial interpretive leeway. This ambiguity stands in stark contrast to the profound material consequences the ratings carry. A Tier 3 designation triggers mandatory U.S. sanctions, including the withdrawal of non-humanitarian aid and instructions for American representatives at international financial institutions to oppose loans^[15]. The tier system itself is defined as follows: Tier 1 signifies full compliance with the TVPA's standards; Tier 2 denotes incomplete compliance coupled with substantial efforts to improve; and the Tier 2 Watch List identifies nations making determined efforts while also facing a severe trafficking situation, stalled progress, or untested new anti-trafficking measures^[16].

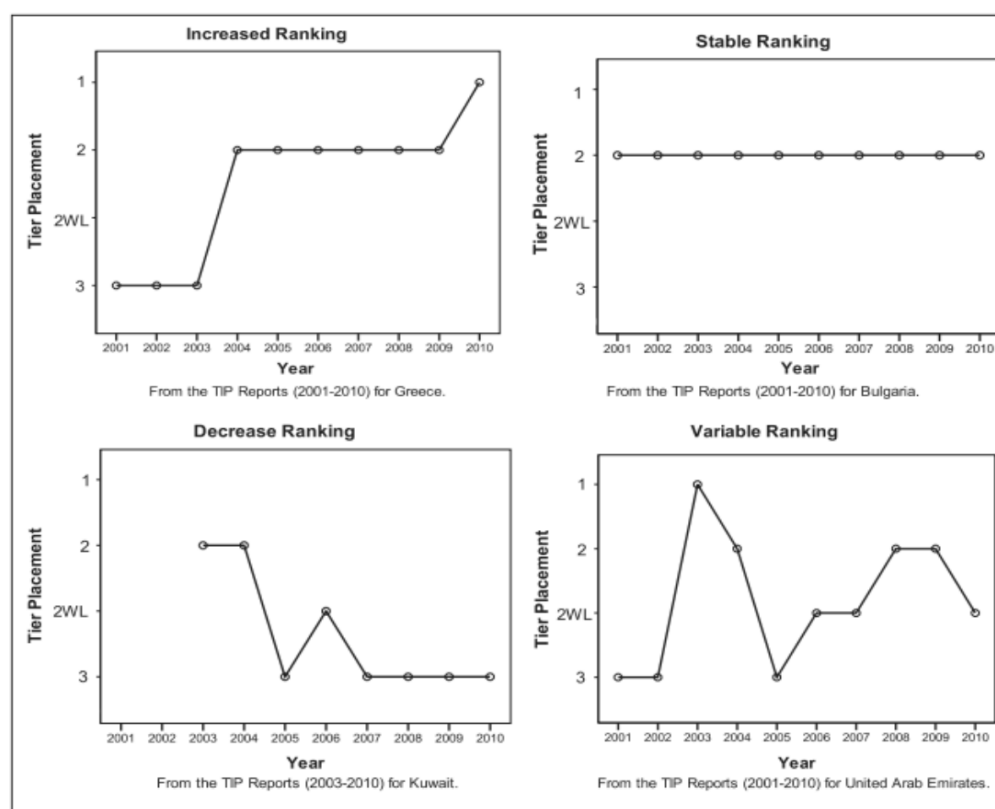
The tier rankings are inherently provisional. Nations are reassessed annually based on their anti-trafficking activities, leading to possible shifts in their tier placement. A discernible trend shows a growing count of Tier 1 countries and a corresponding decline in Tier 3 nations since the report's inception. The general upward movement, however, obscures a more fragmented reality of volatile and often contradictory year-to-year country trajectories^[17]. The report's capacity to stimulate policy change appears inconsistent; some states achieve higher or stable rankings, while others see their positions falter or become erratic when they fail to intensify or maintain previous levels of effort. **Figure 1** illustrates specific instances of these fluctuations.



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The TIP report's role in mobilizing a global response to human trafficking is undeniable. Evidence indicates that its impact has led to tangible policy modifications, including legislative revisions in multiple countries to offer protective visas for victims of exploitation^[18]. Furthermore, the report has been instrumental in elevating human trafficking as a non-negotiable priority on the international agenda, signaling to governments worldwide that engagement with the United States is a required component of an effective response. The report's systematic ranking of nations publicizes the visible repercussions of non-compliance for a country's international standing and internal security. This process has also dispelled the myth that any nation remains invulnerable to this crime.

Figure 1. Illustration of changes in their placement



Source: Wooditch, 2011, p. 475

THE FIRST REQUIREMENT: POLITICAL, IDEOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC BIASES IN THE TIP REPORTS



The US annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report operates with a dual identity, functioning as both a purported monitor of global compliance and a deliberate instrument of American foreign policy. Its evaluations are repeatedly leveraged to champion Washington's specific political and economic interests within the international arena. This strategic usage creates a fundamental tension with the report's humanitarian mandate. The practice unfolds against a backdrop of established international law, namely the Palermo Protocol, and a widespread consensus among states and non-governmental organizations that trafficking is a severe transnational crime. Since the turn of the millennium, the United States has consciously constructed a public identity as the preeminent global leader against human trafficking. The yearly publication of the TIP Report is the central performance of this role, intended to symbolize the nation's professed dedication to confronting the issue worldwide.

Scholars have directly questioned the TIP Report's capacity to drive meaningful policy reform^[19], with particular skepticism aimed at its inconsistent enforcement of sanctions. Nevertheless, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) includes a waiver to nullify all penalties and prevent harm to vulnerable populations; the application of this clause indicates a pattern of leniency. A clear example occurred in 2007, when President Bush imposed sanctions on only five of the fifteen Tier 3 countries; the remaining eleven avoided the specific censure because pre-existing penalties, unrelated to trafficking, were already in place^[20]. The selective enforcement undermines the report's credibility as a coercive tool and suggests political considerations often override its stated criteria. Further critiques target the misallocation of anti-trafficking resources. Official reports state that U.S. funds failed to meet pressing domestic needs and were not strategically directed to assist the most critically ranked nations^[21]. The disconnect is systemic, as summarized by Egli-Gany et al.^[22], who note that "United States Government agencies do not systematically link the programs they fund to combat human trafficking abroad to the level or deficiencies that are narratively identified per country in the report."

The narratives and rankings within the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report face legitimate scrutiny over their vulnerability to bias, a problem amplified by the ambiguous nature of its underlying methodology and scoring system^[23]. A degree of partiality may be an inherent feature of any state-produced document, as these publications inevitably reflect, whether by design or unconscious absorption, the political agenda of their sponsor^[24]. A 2015 Reuters investigation, for instance, documented instances where specialized human trafficking analysts were



repeatedly overruled by U.S. State Department officials who softened critical language in the report to preserve diplomatic relationships. The subordination of expert assessment to political expediency directly compromises the integrity of the evaluation process. A further and deeply symbolic contradiction is the U.S. unwavering self-placement in Tier 1. The premier ranking is upheld despite evident regression in two of the essential "Three Ps" (prosecution and protection) that constitute the universal criteria for evaluating all other nations ^[25].

The tier classification for each country is based on the State Department TIP Office's annual assessment of its anti-trafficking efforts. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) mandates that the State Department consider three specific factors during the placement process. These criteria are: 1) the scale of human trafficking within the country's borders; 2) the extent of non-compliance with minimum standards, with special attention to any level of official complicity in trafficking; and 3) the concrete, reasonable efforts a government is making, or could undertake, to achieve compliance ^[26]. The third, forward-looking criterion introduces a significant element of subjective interpretation, as judgments about what is "reasonable" can be swayed by diplomatic relations and geopolitical strategy, not merely objective effort.

Demonstrated inconsistencies in the TIP Report's country categorization and the ambiguous drafting process leading to these rankings serve as a primary critique. Scholars like Lamont ^[27] identify a clear pattern where certain Tier 2 nations "clearly do not meet minimum standards, some of which are not yet threatened by Tier 3 and the loss of foreign aid that accompanies that status." This creates a concerning gray area where governments face no tangible pressure to improve. The cases of China and India are illustrative; by 2010, both had remained on the Tier 2 Watch List for six consecutive years, a period of prolonged non-compliance that did not trigger a mandatory downgrade to Tier 3 ^[28]. A parallel situation is evident with Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern allies, which have repeatedly avoided the American sanctions despite documented and enduring failures, often receiving Tier 2 or even Tier 3 classifications that carry no punitive weight ^[29].

The repeated leniency toward strategic nations suggests that the tier system functions not as a rigid, rules-based mechanism, but as a flexible diplomatic tool. Evidence points to political and economic interests directly shaping outcomes: in 2013, the rankings of major powers like China, Russia, and India were allegedly inflated to protect American economic engagements. In a more explicit trade-off,



Uzbekistan reportedly received favorable treatment as a direct reward for its logistical support to U.S. military operations in Afghanistan ^[30].

The United States' inclusion in its report creates a fundamental conflict of interest that severely undermines the legitimacy of its judgments against other nations. A more credible system would require an independent international body to monitor global anti-trafficking efforts and enforce compliance, replacing a structure where the world's primary prosecutor is also a major defendant. The need for impartial oversight is accentuated by the nation's own major role in the human trafficking ecosystem; the United States repeatedly appears among the top three destination countries for trafficking flows while also harboring a massive domestic population of exploited individuals. Estimates indicate between 18,000 and 20,000 people are trafficked into the country annually, a staggering figure that exists within a global context of approximately 12.3 million victims, according to United Nations data. Adding to this, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that hundreds of thousands are currently trapped in situations of trafficking inside U.S. borders ^[31]. The central hypocrisy that weakens the entire system of the TIP Report is exposed by the jarring contradiction between the nation's status as a hub of severe exploitation and its self-appointed role as the global arbiter of anti-trafficking compliance.

Critics contend the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report exhibits transparent political and economic motivations, generating substantial unease within the global anti-trafficking community. Skepticism deepened markedly with the 2015 report, which featured the contentious decision to elevate Cuba and Malaysia from Tier 3 to the Tier 2 Watch List ^[32]. Malaysia's promotion, arriving after a single year in the lowest tier, appeared particularly suspect. The timing of this reclassification appeared to correspond to President Obama's diplomatic push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a major trade agreement involving Malaysia. Synchrony strongly implies that the upgrade served as a political concession to facilitate the trade deal, directly subordinating the report's evaluative function to broader U.S. strategic aims. The incident is a strong example of how geopolitical and commercial priorities can override the report's stated commitment to an impartial assessment of anti-trafficking efforts.

The State Department's pronounced emphasis on a specific, carceral model for combating human trafficking invites scrutiny for imposing Western legal standards on diverse non-Western societies. Numerous scholars interpret this prescriptive approach as a contemporary manifestation of cultural imperialism.



Glenn Harden, a professor at Asbury University, argues in his presentation “Evaluating Bias in U.S. TIP Reports and Sanction Decisions” asserts that the construction of the TIP Report is likely compromised by profound cultural insensitivity^[33]. He contends that policies grounded in cultural adaptation would prove far more effective across varied global settings. This critique pinpoints a fundamental weakness in the report's design: its methodology narrowly focuses on prosecutorial and punitive measures. The singular focus sidelines alternative, community-based interventions—such as initiatives that strengthen local economic and social structures—which may offer more sustainable, though less easily quantified, solutions to the root causes of trafficking.

THE THIRD TOPIC: HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: UNILATERALISM AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM.

A central question in international relations involves the motives behind state adoption of global norms, particularly emergent prohibitions like that against human trafficking. State sovereignty, the exclusive right of independent nations to govern internal affairs without external interference, has formed a bedrock of the international order for centuries^[34]. The promotion of any new international standard inherently questions the absolute character of sovereign authority. Despite that principle, nations continuously attempt to shape each other's conduct to advance strategic and ideological goals^[35]. Instruments for this influence span a wide spectrum, from overt coercion, exercised through military or legal force, to the more subtle exertion of "soft power," which relies on attraction and persuasion^[36]. The U.S. TIP Report represents a hybrid of these tools, using the soft power of normative persuasion to legitimize a unilateral, coercive ranking system.

International law operates without the strong enforcement structures that define domestic legal systems. While the United Nations and its affiliated bodies are central to formulating international statutes, their power to impose these laws remains circumscribed. Consequently, even universally recognized human rights, though codified in international law, depend almost entirely on individual nations for their implementation^[37]. Into this enforcement vacuum, the United States has inserted its system: The global anti-trafficking regime centered on the TIP Report.

The most conspicuous instrument in this U.S. strategy is the Trafficking in Persons Report itself. The practice of ranking national performance constitutes a form of “governance by indicators,” a technique that has gained considerable traction in global policy over recent decades. The reliance on such quantitative



metrics, which originated with international financial institutions comparing economic strength, expanded dramatically after the 1990's^[38]. Policymakers and advocates now lean heavily on these indices to monitor state conduct across a range of sociopolitical domains, including crime, corruption, and violence against women. These rankings have become indispensable levers for state and non-state actors to pressure governments for better outcomes^[39]. They function as "highly effective levers" precisely because they command public and political attention. Analyzing the TIP Report as a prime example, Kelley and Simmons^[40] concluded through macro-level analysis that it has been instrumental in spreading the global norm to criminalize human trafficking.

When contemplating the adoption of an international instrument, states carefully calculate the implications for their sovereign authority—their ultimate power to govern, legislate, and regulate internal affairs. Although numerous human rights norms have achieved international recognition, enforcement power resides almost wholly with sovereign states. Exceptions are infrequent and generally confined to severe situations such as genocide or war crimes, where international intervention may be contemplated^[41]. The drive for universal legal standards often originates from activists, non-governmental organizations, and other non-state actors campaigning for global reform. Nevertheless, the final decision always rests with state actors, who strategically weigh the political and economic costs of integrating these external norms into their domestic legal fabric, often invoking sovereignty as a shield.

Within this global context, the U.S. TIP Report operates as a deliberate foreign policy tool designed to advance American political and economic interests. A Tier 3 ranking carries tangible repercussions: possible restrictions on U.S. foreign aid, the withholding of funding for government personnel, and directives to American representatives at international financial institutions to vote against loans. Therefore, the report's primary function extends beyond monitoring; it is a consequential device for shaping foreign economic policy and compelling behavioral change within the international system.

A deeper analysis indicates the U.S. State Department aggressively champions a specific, carceral model for anti-trafficking policy, which critics argue imposes Western standards and verges on cultural imperialism. Professor Glenn Harden (2022) notes this in his presentation, "Evaluating Bias in U.S. TIP Reports and Sanction Decisions," stating that cultural insensitivity likely influences the report's development. He calls for a more adaptive, context-sensitive strategy that



could prove more effective across diverse global settings^[42]. The TIP methodology exhibits a clear bias toward punitive measures, while largely ignoring alternative, less quantifiable approaches, such as social and economic empowerment initiatives, that could yield more sustainable results. Moreover, as Professor Sikka (2020) contends, the punitive nature of low rankings has compelled many nations to adopt policies focused narrowly on arrests and prosecutions, often at the expense of more holistic, preventative solutions to human trafficking^[43].

THE FOURTH TOPIC: THE BIAS AND INCONSISTENCY OF THE U.S. TIP REPORT: A CRITICAL AUDIT

A complete assessment of the Trafficking in Persons Report requires examining several enduring critiques that illuminate its global influence and historical development. One primary accusation is that the United States presents itself as an unchallenged authority while making controversial decisions against other states. The perception drives a divisive reception: Some nations publicly celebrate their tier rankings, while others denounce low placements as products of systemic prejudice. Glaring inconsistencies compound the problem, as Tier 3 nations face actual sanctions while others receive waivers, exempting them from penalties. Despite sustained questions from analysts worldwide concerning its methodology and data integrity, the TIP Report maintains a powerful grip on global anti-trafficking agendas and national policy responses. The enduring influence is partly explained by the report's capacity for adaptation, as U.S. institutions have occasionally refined its purpose to better support the stated mission of galvanizing government action.

Beyond isolated media critiques, several institutional studies have undertaken systematic evaluations of the TIP Report's policy impact. A 2006 investigation by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) scrutinized global trafficking estimates, U.S. anti-trafficking efforts abroad, and the country classification process. The GAO concluded that the report fails to justify its ranking decisions fully, and its application to shape anti-trafficking programs lacks uniformity. It also found the country narratives often incomplete, particularly in detailing a nation's compliance with the TVPA's minimum standards. A 2010 longitudinal study by Wooditch further probed this issue, analyzing the relationship between tier classifications and the allocation of U.S. anti-trafficking funding^[44].



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The report's credibility faced early and intense criticism for its initial exclusion of the United States from its rankings, which cast doubt on its impartiality. To counter these claims of bias and bolster its legitimacy, the 2010 edition introduced a U.S. self-evaluation that has never portrayed the nation as flawless; instead, it documents trafficking issues specific to the American context and proposes numerous corrective measures. For instance, the 2019 report acknowledged how the foster care system contributes to child sex trafficking within the United States, citing data that a considerable number of identified victims had contact with that system ^[45]. Despite these admitted domestic struggles, the United States is ranked as a Tier 1 country annually, a designation signifying full compliance with the standards it enforces globally.

Substantial concerns have also been raised regarding inflated rankings for U.S. trade partners. Christopher H. Smith, a congressional subcommittee chairman, publicly stated that the 2015 and 2016 reports "gave passing grades" to nations like Malaysia and China, despite evidence of official complicity in trafficking ^[46]. Another well-documented source of bias is political proximity and favoritism, which demonstrates the entanglement of a global humanitarian issue with strategic interests. The recurring pattern of adjusting tier placements to serve diplomatic and economic priorities, rather than objective performance, represents a central flaw that undermines the report's moral authority. Observers note the TIP Report's possible use as a bargaining chip in diplomatic talks, a situation that calls for greater precision and research to fortify its integrity ^[47]. Echoing this, the GAO has repeatedly cited a lack of clarity in the tier ranking rationale. Its 2016 audit found that the reports failed to explain the basis for country placements or year-to-year changes. For Tier 1 nations, the GAO noted that justifications were unclear and that narrative language sometimes contradicted the established standards ^[48]. The office stressed that for the report to remain a useful global tool, information must be communicated transparently. A direct response to this criticism was included in the 2017 report, which introduced a tier justification paragraph for each country's narrative; this change provided governments with clearer guidance for improvement ^[49].

Efforts to confront such critiques marked the evolution of the report. Early versions, such as the 2003 report, faced criticism for their shallow narratives, omission of extensive country data, and neglect of anti-trafficking activities by non-governmental organizations. Recognizing that these elements were vital for a complete understanding, subsequent editions expanded the narratives considerably. This necessary revision resulted in a more detailed account of national efforts and



future recommendations, which strengthened the report's clarity, helped justify its rankings more effectively, and incorporated factors previously overlooked.

Conclusion

The U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report represents a central paradox in the global governance of human trafficking: it is simultaneously an indispensable source of data and a powerful instrument of American foreign policy. Its annual publication provides an unrivaled compilation of information that has successfully pressured nations to enact anti-trafficking legislation and adopt the U.S.-prescribed "Three Ps" model. However, the investigation has revealed that the report's structure systematically undermines its authority. The opaque methodology, the politicization of tier rankings to favor strategic allies and trade partners, and the consistent self-assessment as a Tier 1 nation despite documented domestic shortcomings all show a manifest misalignment between its humanitarian objectives and its operational reality.

Consequently, the report's greatest utility for policymakers, activists, and scholars lies not in its rankings as a definitive verdict, but in its narratives as a starting point for deeper, more critical inquiry. Its value is conditional upon a rigorous understanding of the political and ideological biases that shape it. The ongoing efforts by the State Department to refine its narratives and justifications, often in direct response to external audits and scholarly criticism, lead to a capacity for incremental reform. Therefore, the path toward a more legitimate and effective global monitoring system depends on the very cycle of external pressure and internal adaptation. The future of the TIP Report hinges on whether the push for genuine, objective assessment can finally prevail over the deeply rooted imperatives of diplomatic and economic strategy.

Notes:

- 1- Jahic & Finckenauer, 2005, p. 25
- 2- U.S. Department of State, 2024
- 3- Wong, 2005, p. 76
- 4- UNODC, 2004, p. 42
- 5- Cockbain et al., 2019, p. 10



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- 6- Berkovitch, 1999, p. 132; Gallagher, 2010, p. 17
- 7- Aronowitz, 2009, pp. 1-3
- 8- Raigrodski, 2006, p. 81
- 9- Allain, 2012, p. 61
- 10- Gallagher, 2006, p. 141
- 11- ASEAN, 2010
- 12- (ASEAN, 2010)
- 13- Wooditch, 2011, p. 472
- 14- Storck, 2022, p. 10
- 15- Raigrodski, 2015, p. 84
- 16- United States Congress, 2000
- 17- Perry, 2016, p. 26
- 18- Tiefenbrun, 2007, p. 107
- 19- Chuang, 2006, p. 466
- 20- Peterson, 2014, p. 241
- 21- United States Government Accountability Office, 2006-2007
- 22- Egli-Gany et al., 2020, p. 4
- 23- McGrath & Watson, 2018, p. 25
- 24- Vries et al., 2024, p. 4
- 25- TIP-ping the Scales, 2022
- 26- United States Congress, 2000
- 27- Lamont, 2016, p. 67



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- 28- CRS, 2017, pp. 9-10
- 29- U.S. Department of State, 2017, p. 380
- 30- Temasmico Djayoesman, 2024, p. 173
- 31- International Labour Organization, 2005
- 32- Rushton, 2015, p.
- 33- Harden,
- 34- Kyris, 2022, p. 291
- 35- Michalski, 2019, p. 5
- 36- Gallarotti, 2011, p. 17
- 37- Hafner-Burton, 2008, p. 693
- 38- Broome & Quirk, 2015, p. 820
- 39- Aronowitz, 2009, pp. 1-3
- 40- Kelley and Simmons, 2015, pp. 55-56
- 41- Makum Mbaku, 2018, p. 6
- 42- Harden, 2022
- 43- Gallagher, 2016, pp. 149-151
- 44- Government Accountability Office, 2006
- 45- (Department of State, 2019)
- 46- Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 2016, pg. 17
- 47- Roster, 2016, p. 62
- 48- U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016
- 49- Storck, 2022, p. 28



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