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40,000 Pakistani Pilgrims Missing After Visits to Iraq, Syria, Iran

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Over 40,000 Pakistani Zaireen (pilgrims) have vanished after traveling to Iraq, Iran, and Syria for religious pilgrimages in recent years, exposing serious flaws in Pakistan's oversight of religious travel. This article explores the causes, security concerns, and Pakistan's response, raising questions about accountability and regional stability.

On July 16, 2025, Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Sardar Muhammad Yousaf revealed that 40,000 Zaireen, primarily Shiite Muslims visiting holy sites, never returned, with no records of their whereabouts. “If the government had proper records, we would know where each pilgrim went,” Yousaf admitted during a press conference, noting complaints from host nations. The lack of a formal tracking system, relying on informal “Salar” group leaders, has left pilgrims vulnerable to exploitation or worse. Concerns have surfaced that some may have been recruited into Iran-backed militias like the Zainabiyoun Brigade, banned by Pakistan in 2024 for its role in Syria’s conflict.

The absence of oversight has alarmed Iraq, Iran, and Syria, who flagged the issue to Pakistan. Iraqi official Shamil Al-Ghariri told The Media Line that lax visa controls allowed pilgrims to infiltrate regions for illegal work, with some arrested in Erbil and Baghdad. Speculation persists that economic desperation drives pilgrims to overstay, while others fear recruitment into sectarian conflicts. “Many were lured by better pay as fighters,” said Ihsan Ghani, former chief of Pakistan’s National Counter Terrorism Authority, referencing Syria’s war.

Pakistan’s response includes a new centralized system for Zaireen Group Organizers (ZGOs), with over 1,400 companies applying for registration by July 31, 2025. This aims to mirror the regulated Hajj system, phasing out informal travel. Yet, critics argue this is too late, given the scale of the crisis and Pakistan’s history of lax enforcement. The government’s failure to act since 2021, when the policy was approved, underscores systemic neglect.

This debacle demands scrutiny. With regional tensions escalating, including Israel-Iran clashes stranding pilgrims in June 2025, Pakistan

must prioritize security and accountability. The fate of 40,000 citizens cannot be dismissed as mere administrative oversight—it's a national security concern requiring urgent action.