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New Regulations for Zaireen Travel to Iraq, Syria, and Iran

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Pakistan's government has introduced stringent regulations for Zaireen (pilgrims) traveling to Iraq, Syria, and Iran, effective January 1, 2026, to curb illegal migration and enhance safety. This article explores the new Zaireen Group Organizers (ZGO) system, its implications for pilgrims, and the regional cooperation driving these changes.

The traditional Salar System, which allowed individual Zaireen to appoint their own group leaders for visa and travel arrangements, has been scrapped. Instead, the ZGO model mandates that pilgrims travel only through officially registered organizers. Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, speaking at a trilateral conference in Tehran on July 24, 2025, emphasized that this shift aims to prevent visa overstays and illegal activities, issues that have strained relations with host countries. “From January 1, 2026, no Pakistani will be allowed to travel to Iraq without a ZGO,” Naqvi stated, noting that Iraq and Iran endorse the framework.

The absence of a centralized tracking mechanism previously led to significant challenges, with over 40,000 Pakistani Zaireen remaining in Iraq, Syria, and Iran, prompting concerns from these nations. The new system requires existing ZGOs to submit documentation by July 31, 2025, and new applicants by August 10, 2025, ensuring accountability. Religious Affairs Minister Sardar Muhammad Yousaf highlighted that managing Zaireen, like Hajj pilgrims, falls under his ministry’s purview, signaling a robust administrative overhaul.

Regional cooperation is central to this initiative. Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq have formed a joint working group to streamline pilgrimage logistics, particularly for events like Arbaeen. Naqvi praised the Iraqi and Iranian governments for managing large pilgrim crowds, stating, “Taking care of millions of Zaireen is a significant challenge, and both interior ministers are fulfilling this duty effectively.” This collaboration reflects a conservative approach to national security and cultural preservation, prioritizing order over unchecked mobility.

These regulations mark a pragmatic step toward safer, more accountable pilgrimage travel. While some may view the restrictions as limiting

personal freedom, they address legitimate concerns about illegal migration and regional stability. As Pakistan strengthens ties with Iran and Iraq, the ZGO system could set a precedent for disciplined, faith-based travel.