

Preventing Visa Fraud and Illegal Migration

By **Dr Syed Kaleem Imam**
and **Sevim Saadat**

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CENTRE for GOVERNANCE RESEARCH
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Policy Brief

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1. Introduction

Visa systems were originally designed to regulate lawful entry and exit, protect labor markets, and uphold national security. Today, however, global mobility has expanded far faster than governance and verification systems, leading to increasing misuse and fraud. This misuse not only undermines the integrity of visa regimes but also creates economic, social, and diplomatic costs for countries and travelers alike.

For example, in 2024 Pakistan ranked among the countries with some of the highest Schengen visa rejection rates globally, with nearly 47.5 % of applications refused, resulting in millions of euros lost in non-refundable fees and heightened scrutiny for genuine applicants.¹ With over 1.5 million overseas workers each year, substantial student and professional migration, and rising international mobility, effective visa governance is essential to protect economic interests, prevent criminal exploitation, and maintain diplomatic credibility. Recent enforcement actions illustrate the scope of the challenge: Pakistani authorities have foiled multiple human trafficking and visa fraud operations, arresting suspects who collected large sums of money based on false job offers or fake documentation.²

Strengthening visa systems requires enhancing inter-agency coordination, improving verification and biometric capacity, and adopting intelligence-led approaches that balance facilitation with security, reduce fraud, combat corruption, support legitimate migration, and uphold Pakistan's credibility in the international community. This policy brief focuses on visa fraud and illegal migration as governance and systems challenges rather than isolated law-and-order failures.

2. Visa Misuse

Visa misuse should be understood as a predictable outcome of demand–supply mismatches in global mobility, weak regulation of intermediaries, and uneven verification capacity across states. Globally, advanced visa systems see misuse where organized actors exploit the gap between mobility demand and enforcement capacity:

- a) Schengen visa fraud networks (Europe) short-term visas are misused to move irregular workers across borders, taking advantage of weak cross-country verification.
- b) U.S. H1-B visa misuse by some companies and agents falsify job and wage records, weakening labor safeguards and system credibility.
- c) Australian student visa scams, especially education visas, were used as entry routes for work and stay rather than genuine study.
- d) Canada’s work/study permit misrepresentation and False claims exposed limits in employer and admission verification.
- e) Visitor and student visas in Western countries are increasingly used as entry points for later asylum claims, placing added strain on migration systems.

Similar misuse patterns appear in Pakistan, shaped by economic pressure, weak regulation, and agent-driven migration:

- a) Fake student sponsorships rely on forged admission letters and bank documents to seek entry to Europe and the United States, often resulting in visa refusal, removal, or long-term travel bans.
- b) Forged job offers and fake employment contracts for Gulf visas push workers into irregular status, exposing them to exploitation and abuse abroad.
- c) Repeated visa overstays damage Pakistan’s international reputation and triggers stricter visa regimes for genuine travelers.
- d) Unlicensed and illegal travel agents mislead migrants through fraud and false promises, encouraging them to bypass lawful migration channels.
- e) Manipulation of civil and identity records weakens verification systems and undermines confidence at embassies, ports of entry, and border control points

3. Evolution of Pakistan’s Visa Policy¹

3.1. Visa Policy Before e-Visa / VPA

Pakistan’s visa system previously relied primarily on Embassies and Consulates abroad. Applicants were required to submit physical forms, supporting documents, and visa fees, and processing times were often long and inconsistent. The largely manual system offered limited facilitation or fast-track options, requiring travelers to plan well in advance, which made Pakistan less accessible for tourists, business visitors, and students.

3.2. VPA / e-Visa System (2024–2026)

From 2024, Pakistan introduced the Visa Prior to Arrival (VPA) and e-Visa system for 126 countries, allowing online applications for tourism, business, and Sikh pilgrimage purposes. The system simplified documentation requirements and offered quick approvals, typically within 24 hours, with multiple entries allowed and a stay of up to 90 days. This regime significantly promoted tourism, trade, and international engagement by reducing procedural barriers.

3.3. Current Policy (Post-2026 Suspension of VPA)

In 2026, the VPA facility for 126 countries was suspended, requiring applicants to use the Pakistan Online Visa System (POVS) under the standard paid e-Visa framework. Visa issuance now involves prescribed fees, enhanced scrutiny, and full documentation, and processing times are generally longer than under the former VPA system. Immigration clearance at ports of entry is carried out after verification of electronic visa approval through POVS.

Pakistan’s new visa framework streamlines approvals and facilitates tourism, business, education, and pilgrimage travel, while enabling risk-based screening for legitimate travelers. However, the suspension of the free VPA and longer processing times reduce convenience and may deter short-term visitors. Fragmented inter-agency coordination, persistent illegal migration through fraudulent documents or unlicensed agents, and political-economic instability continue to challenge compliance and effective enforcement.

Pakistan’s experience mirrors global trends where facilitative digital visa regimes, if not matched with strong oversight, are rapidly exploited by organized networks

¹ FIA Immigration, Islamabad

4. Emerging Challenges in Visa Management

Pakistan faces significant challenges in managing visa fraud and illegal migration. While digital visa applications have made basic verification easier, fragmented systems across agencies, weak enforcement, and economic pressures continue to fuel irregular migration. Agent-led fraud networks and human smuggling exploit regulatory gaps, while sophisticated document forgery and identity misuse are increasingly common.

Asylum and student visa systems are sometimes misused beyond their original humanitarian or educational intent. While digitization has improved speed and access, it has not automatically translated into integrated decision-making across institutions.

Recent figures highlight the scale of the problem: the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reported over 1,200 visa-related fraud cases in 2024, and more than 20,000 overstays of foreign nationals were recorded in Karachi and Islamabad in 2023.² Globally, visa fraud is organized, cross-border, and increasingly digital, and Pakistan is not immune. Locally, unauthorized travel agents, fake student sponsorships, forged labor migration documents, and misuse of study visas continue to challenge governance. Persistent overstays have strained diplomatic relations with Gulf countries and Europe, leading to stricter visa scrutiny for all travelers.

5. Key Gaps in Fraudulent Visa Detection Mechanism

5.1 Fragmented Document Verification and Lack of Centralised Expertise

Pakistan does not maintain a central document fraud intelligence repository for travel and identity document authentication. In contrast, UK's NDFU provides a centralized repository of genuine and forged documents, specialist analysis, training, and international cooperation on fraud identification and prevention.

5.2. Limited Biometric and Data-sharing Integration

Pakistan's biometric data infrastructure, such as NADRA, is under-utilized in linking visa applications with exit controls, visa databases, lost/stolen passport lists, previous visa / entry refusals and international watchlists. Systems like the US Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS) and Personal Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System

² Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). (2024). *Annual performance report 2024: Immigration, visa fraud and human smuggling cases*. Government of Pakistan

(PISCES) can improve risk assessment decisions by embedding namecheck and watchlist checks early in the visa process.

5.3. Inadequate Public Awareness

Fraudulent intermediaries exploit applicant ignorance. Fake messages and scams also target visa applicants. Sustained public information campaigns, anti-fraud awareness campaigns will support better preparedness of the general public as was seen in recent initiatives by Australia, Canada and UK in a Global Fraud Campaign. Similar recommendations were also made in the 2025 report on the state of immigration fraud in Canada.³

5.4 Weak Regulation of Migration and Travel Agents

Pakistan's limited identity and background verification prior to registration of a travel agency or travel agent contribute to visa and immigration fraud. Australia's visa system review in 2023 recommended development of comprehensive background checks to strengthen the registration and information on travel agents.⁴

Increased financial penalties in several jurisdictions have yielded positive effects in deterring agents (for example, in UAE and also noted as a recommendation for Australia). Extend application of regulation of agents to apply extraterritorially, i.e., individuals providing Canadian immigration or citizenship services abroad as subject to Canadian law even if they reside outside of Canada and anyone providing New Zealand immigration advice anywhere in the world must be licensed unless exempt.

6. International and Comparative Best Practices

A review of existing literature has identified supply and demand-side interventions that have been implemented in various jurisdictions to respond to visa and immigration fraud. A number of interventions have relied on strengthening a combination of prevention, awareness and international cooperation leading to more holistic improvement in visa and immigration fraud. Select practices are reproduced below as inspiration for local

³ Canadian Immigration Lawyers Association, The State of Immigration Fraud in Canada (March 2025) <<https://cila.co/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/CILA-The-State-of-Immigration-Fraud-in-Canada.pdf>> accessed 2 February 2026.

⁴ C Nixon, 'Rapid Review into the Exploitation of Australia's Visa System' (Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs, 31 March 2023) <<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/nixon-review/nixon-review-exploitation-australia-visa-system.pdf>> accessed 2 February 2026.

interventions that can be developed to improve detection, prevention and prosecution of visa and immigration fraud:

6.1. Centralized Document Fraud Units — UK Model

UK's National Document Fraud Unit (NDFU) is a centralized body within the Home Office that maintains specimen libraries of travel documents, provides forensic expertise, and trains domestic and international partners in identifying forged travel and identity documents.⁵ Increased awareness and promotion of NDFU and specialized training of officers at immigration and entry points has led to some deterrence amongst fraudsters as there is more visibility around a zero tolerance policy.

6.2 Cross-border Forensic Profiling of Fraudulent Identity and Travel Documents

In 2019-2020, France and Switzerland tested cross-border forensic profiling of fraudulent identity and travel documents (FID).⁶ Specialized document examiners in both countries applied a standardized profiling grid to seized passports, ID cards, and residence permits.

Grid captured detailed production characteristics — printing methods, substrates, security feature simulations, personalisation techniques, and recurring defects. Profiles were anonymized and exchanged through secure channels, then systematically compared to identifying identical or closely related production patterns. This pilot project helped i) detect serial document production operating across national borders; ii) link cases handled by separate authorities; and iii) showed the benefit of establishing a systematic exchange of forensic data from profiling systems for FID.

6.3 Biometric and Automated Screening — ABC/E-Gates

Automated Border Control (ABC) systems (e-gates) use biometric verification (face, fingerprint, iris recognition) linked to electronic passports and international databases to validate identity and authenticity before granting entry/exit.⁷ ABC systems enhance identity verification and accelerated processing, reducing dependence on manual checks.

⁵ GOV.UK, 'Guidance on examining identity documents' (15 July 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recognising-fraudulent-identity-documents/guidance-on-examining-identity-documents-accessible>> accessed 2 February 2026.

⁶ SL Moulin and others, 'Cross-border forensic profiling of fraudulent identity and travel documents: A pilot project between France and Switzerland' (2024) 64 Science & Justice 202.

⁷ JS del Río and others, 'Automated border control e-gates and facial recognition systems' (2016) 62 Computers & Security 49.

7. Legal and Regulatory Framework

Pakistan's immigration and migration systems are supported by a comprehensive legal and policy framework that empowers authorities to prevent illegal migration, human trafficking, visa fraud, and related crimes.

7.1. Key Domestic Laws:

- a) FIA Act, 1974 Establishes FIA and authorizes investigation, enforcement, and immigration control.
- b) Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898 Governs investigations, arrests, detentions, and prosecutions relevant to immigration offenses.
- c) Emigration Ordinance, 1979 Regulates emigration and defines offenses related to unlawful migration and smuggling.
- d) Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018 Criminalizes human trafficking and empowers FIA to prosecute offenders.
- e) Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act, 2018 Addresses migrant smuggling and enforcement action.
- f) Pakistan Penal Code Defines offenses such as fraud and forgery applicable to immigration crimes.
- g) Passport Act, 1974 Regulates departure, entry, and international travel of Pakistani citizens.
- h) Exit from Pakistan (Control) Ordinance, 1981 Controls exit of certain individuals.
- i) Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947 Prevents bribery and corruption in immigration administration.
- j) Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 Addresses digital fraud relevant to visas and identity verification.
- k) NADRA Laws Provide authority for identity verification integrated with immigration systems.

7.2. International Frameworks:

- a) UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (2000): Protocols on Smuggling of Migrants; and Trafficking in Persons
- b) Refugee Convention (1951) & Non-Refoulement Principle
- c) ICAO Standards on Travel Documents

Through these domestic and international legal instruments, a strong foundation has been established but enforcement and coordination remain the key factor.

8. Enforcement Actions and Trends (2024–2025)⁸

8.1. Offloaded and Deportees

Pakistan recorded 35,459 offloaded passengers in 2024 and 66,261 in 2025, showing a sharp increase in irregular travel interventions. Deportees numbered 46,277 in 2024 and 51,945 in 2025, indicating persistent misuse of travel channels.

Some travelers used genuine documents but were flagged by profiling systems; others used fraudulent papers. A portion involved organized facilitators, including unlicensed agents. Not all individuals faced prosecution; convictions were limited, with most cases resulting in travel denial or offloading. Deportees also included those caught abroad committing offenses or using illegal documents, often in coordination with foreign authorities.

8.2. Document Fraud (DFDs & OFDs)

- d) Document fraud remains a key challenge: OFDs (offloaded on fake documents): **281 cases** – unauthorized travel attempts, including trafficking with consent or deception.
- e) DFDs A (fake documents from Pakistan): **15 cases** – led to arrests of perpetrators, though not all individuals were convicted.
- f) DFDs B (genuine Pakistani documents used with fake onward documents): **78 cases** – highlighted domestic and international agent networks.

These patterns show that migrants bypass legal channels both from Pakistan and abroad, exploiting loopholes in documentation and border checks.

8.3. Action Against Human Smugglers, Traffickers & Agents (2025)

Offense Category	FIRs	Arrests	Recoveries (Million PKR)
Human Smugglers	1775	1678	828.01
Human Traffickers	53	52	--
Travel Agents	2068	719	216
Visa Forgery	348	542	120
Offloading on Forgery	253	466	–

⁸ FIA Immigration report, Islamabad

Pakistan faces a growing challenge of irregular migration and visa fraud, with cases increasing in both volume and complexity. Repeat travel attempts, organized networks, and multi-step document fraud including forged job offers, fake admissions, and onward travel documents highlight systemic vulnerabilities. Travel agents and facilitators continue to play a central role, exploiting gaps in verification and border control.

While enforcement actions FIRs, arrests, and financial recoveries disrupt individual cases, they do not fully prevent organized exploitation. System responses should be evaluated not merely through arrests and recoveries, but through sustained disruption of criminal networks, fewer repeat attempts, and meaningful convictions.

9. Policy Recommendations

Visa fraud, illegal migration, and human trafficking in Pakistan are not only security concerns they are governance, socio-economic, and reputational challenges. Addressing them requires a layered, intelligence-led, and victim-centered approach that balances facilitation of legitimate travel with enforcement, while tackling the socio-economic pressures that drive irregular migration.

9.1. Immediate Measures

- g) Trafficking cases involving deception, coercion, or abuse abroad constitute grave human rights violations and require a protection-first response.
- h) Enforce strict licensing, monitoring, and accountability of travel agents to prevent exploitation.
- i) Strengthen embassy-level fraud detection units to intercept fake documents and sponsors before departure.
- j) Maintain central blacklists for known fraudulent sponsors, traffickers, and agents.
- k) Conduct public awareness campaigns on the risks of irregular migration, document forgery, and trafficking.
- l) Rapidly verify job offers, university admissions, and sponsorships to prevent misuse of legal pathways.
- m) Focus on victim protection and empathy, ensuring misled or trafficked individuals are supported, not criminalized.
- n) Initiate zero-tolerance enforcement against corrupt officials facilitating visa fraud or illegal migration, supported by internal accountability mechanisms and swift prosecution.

- o) Enhance technical, legal, and investigative capacities of FIA, immigration, and border officials through specialized training, digital tools, and forensic support.
- p) Promote community-based policing and local partnerships to engage families, educational institutions, and local leaders in discouraging illegal travel and reporting fraudulent agents early.

9.2. Mid-Term Measures

- a) Integrate biometric and civil registry systems (NADRA + Immigration) for accurate identity verification.
- b) Facilitate inter-agency data sharing among Immigration, FIA, Police, and other relevant departments.
- c) Develop risk-profiling and analytics to detect high-risk applicants, smuggling patterns, and trafficking networks.
- d) Provide specialized training for visa and border officials to handle document fraud, trafficking cases, and victim support.
- e) Expand bilateral intelligence-sharing with destination countries to track irregular migration and prosecute perpetrators.
- f) Launch campaigns targeting smugglers and intermediaries, emphasizing legal consequences and ethical responsibilities, including cases where migrants travel with consent.
- g) Migration governance reforms will remain incomplete unless corruption risks within facilitation, verification, and enforcement chains are systematically addressed.
- h) Launch public information and anti-fraud awareness campaigns to build greater public understanding of visa scams.

9.3. Long-Term Measures

- a) Implement end-to-end digital visa lifecycle management, ensuring real-time verification and monitoring.
- b) Build international migration intelligence platforms for coordinated tracking of cross-border fraud and trafficking.
- c) Establish labor mobility agreements with Gulf and OECD countries to provide safe and legal pathways for workers.
- d) Long-term success depends on reducing the socio-economic compulsions that make irregular migration appear rational despite known risks.
- e) Align education and employment policies to reduce socio-economic pressures driving irregular migration.

- f) Integrate migration governance into national security planning to ensure a consistent, long-term strategy.

FIA Immigration Wing should maintain a repository of known document features and common fraud templates similar to the UK's NDFU.

Immigration Wing should disseminate alerts on emerging fraud patterns (including by upscaling operations of Second Line Immigration Control System).

Conclusion

Visa fraud and illegal migration cannot be solved by control measures alone. Effective management requires strong governance, socio-economic interventions, and respect for human dignity. Special attention must be given to trafficking victims, who are often deceived or exploited abroad, while firm action taken against perpetrators and fraudulent networks. By combining intelligence-led systems, victim-centered approaches, socio-economic solutions, and public awareness, Pakistan can better secure its borders, protect legitimate travel, and maintain international trust. Strong visa governance not only improves border management but also supports economic resilience, safe labor mobility, and Pakistan's global reputation.

Well-governed visa systems built on strong institutions, professional capacity, and community inclusion do not block movement; they make migration safer, lawful, and credible while protecting national interests and human dignity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Syed Kaleem Imam is a former civil servant, known for his extensive contributions in law enforcement, academics, and organizational development. He has a PhD in Politics and International Relations and an LLM in Human Rights Law from SOAS, UK, master's in philosophy.

He held the position of Inspector General of Police (IGP) in several regions such as Punjab, Islamabad, and Sindh, further serving twice on the National Highways and Motorways. As the Federal Secretary of the Narcotics Control Ministry, he played a key role in formulating national policies that harmonized with international strategies.

He has been the Chief of Operations in Mozambique, Planning Coordinator in Liberia, and UN Police Commissioner in Darfur, Sudan. His service was honored with three UN peace medals, the Quaid Azam Police Medal, the President's Police Medal, and the Sitara Imtiaz and Tamagha-i-Imtiaz.

Moreover, Imam has been instrumental in shaping academic discourse through his numerous national and international publications to his credit and frequently participating in public forums, training institutes, and media outlets. Besides being a security analyst, he is also a law and governance consultant, a strategist, and a policy practitioner.



Sevim Saadat holds a Masters of Law from Cornell University and has worked as a legal practitioner and consultant in the justice sector in Pakistan, specifically on criminal justice reform, gender-based rights, legal education and legal empowerment of marginalized groups. Sevim has worked as part of a group of experts who reviewed and refined model anti-terrorism university course outlines under the UNODC E4J project. She also drafted and reviewed parts of a module 15 on contemporary issues of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Sevim has worked on various projects as a gender-based violence expert including a UNTF funded External Evaluation of a three-year project on reducing gender-based violence ; a rape report funded by the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative on legal challenges for complainants in accessing justice in rape trials in Punjab; a research project funded by United States Institute of Peace on assessing the extent of constitutional guarantees extended to citizens including women in the Newly Merged Districts in KP.

She has worked as a consultant and extensively researched and reviewed a counter terrorist financing guide, developed to assist prosecutors and investigators in Pakistan on money laundering and terrorist financing matters. She has also developed a risk analysis report for child rights and sexual violence victims covering different agencies in Pakistan and their association with ongoing human right violations. Sevim has reviewed pending bills in the National Assembly identifying compliance with both local and international human rights standards. Alongside this, Sevim teaches International Protection of Human Rights at University College Lahore and runs the Gender-based violence clinical program in the Centre for Human Rights. She is also the sub-editor for the Human Rights Review and previously, has served as a LL.M. Editor for the Cornell International Law Journal as well.



CENTRE for GOVERNANCE RESEARCH
PAKISTAN

Islamabad office:

#38-W, Khalid Plaza, 1st. Floor. Jinnah Ave. Blue Area. Islamabad Phones 051-2870852 & 2870853.

Lahore office:

22, Tipu Block, New Garden Town, Lahore
Phone: 042-35831352



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