

Sustainable Tourism Cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia: Implementation of the 2022 Ministerial MoU

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Abstract

As Saudi Arabia implements its Saudi Vision 2030 to diversify its economy from oil-and-gas dependency, extensive tourism development initiatives have been launched as one of the key elements of the Saudi Vision 2030 agenda. Meanwhile, the Government of Indonesia, through the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, has identified an opportunity to support Saudi Arabia's tourism development efforts by promoting sustainable tourism, as outlined in Indonesia's National Long Term Development Plan (RPJPN) 2005-2025. In 2022, both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) under the auspices of their respective tourism ministries, agreeing to cooperate on joint tourism promotion, information exchange, and sharing best practices. This qualitative research uses Lawrence B. Mohr's *physical causality* approach to chronologically describe the causes and effects from implementation of this cooperation, highlighting the efforts made by both countries from 2022 until 2024. Recent findings indicate that cooperation in the exchange of information and the sharing best practices still requires significant attention, while joint tourism promotion undergo fruitful impacts for both nations.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, saudi vision 2030, tourism development, saudi arabia, indonesia

1. Introduction

The implementation of Saudi Vision 2030 aims to transform the identity inherited from Arab ancestors, particularly in the social, cultural, economic, and political sectors. The idea of moderation introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed ibn Salman (MBS) in April 2016 seeks to reshape the country's economy and socio-cultural landscape. This transformative vision is an ambitious master plan with three main objectives: diversifying the oil-based economy by incorporating technology and tourism, positioning Saudi Arabia as the heart of the Islamic world and Arab culture, and establishing it as a geographical and economic hub connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. It also aspires to make Saudi Arabia a leading global investment powerhouse.

The tourism industry is explicitly identified as one of the prioritized economic sectors. Saudi Vision 2030 directs the government to create attractions that meet international standards, promoting economic development and fostering a vibrant society. Four pillars support the tourism industry: expanding the tourism market, opening doors to the private sector, leveraging cultural heritage sites and iconic tourist spots, and developing major tourism destinations [4]. According to Nursalikhah [7], the plan aims for tourism to support national revenue, increasing GDP by up to 10 percent and attracting as many as 100 million visitors annually, thus establishing Saudi Arabia as a global tourist destination.

Pratiwi and Muslikhati [4] noted that several programs aim to improve tourism infrastructure, including airports, roads, and public transportation, as well as increasing the availability of accommodations such as hotels and restaurants. These developments require numerous contractors, stakeholders, investors, and the international community. The growth of the tourism sector creates opportunities for these groups to participate in Saudi Arabia's journey toward modern tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) contributes to developing English language training programs for Saudi tourism

workers, while China, South Korea, and Malaysia have been involved in fostering relationships through educational programs, cultural festivals, and workforce training [15].

Indonesia, through its Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, has shown significant interest in supporting Saudi Vision 2030's tourism development. As one of the countries with the largest Muslim population and experience in sustainable tourism development, Indonesia sees opportunities for mutual benefit from this cooperation. In 2021, during a meeting with the Indonesian Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, Sheikh Essam ibn Abed al-Thaqafi, discussed potential expansions in tourism and the creative economy between the two countries [23].

Several authors, such as Pratiwi and Muslikhati [4], have highlighted that Saudi Arabia's decision to diversify its economic income through Saudi Vision 2030 was primarily driven by a decade of declining oil prices, which reduced GDP from oil exports, citing the needs to engage tourism to contribute more on GDP earnings.

Meanwhile, Alfarisi [15] has discussed Saudi Arabia's efforts to boost tourism numbers through public diplomacy following a decline in visitors due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. These public diplomacy strategies include improving Saudi Arabia's global image—from a historically closed nation, at times accused of human rights violations, to a more open and accessible country. This has been achieved through coverage in local and international media on tourism developments, including appointing football star Lionel Messi as a tourism ambassador and Cristiano Ronaldo's involvement with the Al-Nassr football club.

Unlike what authors such as Pratiwi, Muslikhati, and Alfarisi [4,15] have concluded, this study aims to assess the implementation of the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia in tourism development from the signing of the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to 2024. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, this research will highlight the efforts made by both countries and the contributions of stakeholders in achieving the MoU's objectives.

2. Method

The methodology used in this research was based on library research, incorporating primary sources such as national and regional laws, official press releases, and journals, as well as secondary sources like internet news and reports related to the events. An analytical approach based on Lawrence B. Mohr's concept of *physical causality* was applied to identify the implementation of the MoU through qualitative analysis [5]. In many cases, assessing the implementation of an MoU requires *factual causality* analysis, as described by Mohr, where a quantitative approach is used. In this approach, the researcher compares two scenarios: one where event (X) causes outcome (Y) and another where event (X) did not occur. This method assumes that without (X), (Y) would not happen.

In contrast to traditional *factual analysis* in program evaluation, *physical causality* differs in its origins—while factual analysis stems from philosophical literature, physical causality is derived from physiological literature. Physical causality pertains to observable, tangible connections between causes and effects in the real world, involving a series of efforts that create a chain of events that can be observed. Analytically, Mohr classifies these 'chains of events' into three key determinants. The first is "Modus Operandi", which focuses on identifying the true cause behind the need for specific actions or policies—in this case, the rationale behind Saudi Arabia's enforcement of the MoU. The second is "Operative Reason", which refers to the underlying motivation driving the successful implementation of a program, linking to the participation of stakeholders. Lastly, "Understanding the Process" emphasizes the direct outcomes of efforts, building on the two previous determinants [5].

3. Results and Discussion

Weaving the Desert Dreams: Saudi's Ambition Through Tourism

Saudi Vision 2030, established by Crown Prince Mohammed ibn Salman (MBS), is a strategic plan aimed at enhancing various industries in Saudi Arabia for the future. The goal of this policy is to broaden the economic sector, which has heavily relied on the oil industry. According to MBS, Saudi Arabia needs to discover fresh, sustainable sources of income without entirely disregarding the oil industry, which has been crucial for growth since the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. World crude oil prices dropped significantly by 45 percent in 2015 compared to the previous year, with prices at USD45.59 and USD75.82 in 2015 and the previous year, respectively [17]. Since that time, the price of crude oil has consistently remained lower than USD70 [2].

Globalization has driven the growth of the world economy, which is no longer solely dependent on a single sector, particularly the tourism industry. Tourism impacts various sectors such as the economy, politics, society, culture, environment, and education, making it a multifaceted global phenomenon. Saudi Arabia stands out as a key player in the tourism sector in the Middle East, being one of the leading countries in the region. The official Saudi Vision 2030 website highlights three main pillars that represent the core of the Arab and Islamic world: the hub of investment, and the connection between three continents. Saudi Arabia's tourist attractions include its impressive cultural and historical background, diverse natural resources, and exceptional natural beauty. However, Saudi Arabia's tourism sector has been primarily centered on religious pilgrimages in recent years, attracting Muslim travelers for religious reasons [1].

Muhammad ibn Salman confirmed the Kingdom's long-term strategy, which consists of various policy tools aimed at boosting Saudi Arabia's economy. The tourism industry was prioritized, following the three pillars of Saudi Vision 2030 [1]. Saudi Arabia's tourism sector is supported by four key factors: (1) broadening the tourism market, (2) facilitating opportunities for businesses, (3) cultural heritage sites and popular tourist spots, and (4) ongoing construction of major tourist destinations [3]. Tourism growth focused on these four principles aims to increase the influx of international visitors, expanding the tourism industry and showcasing Saudi Arabia's welcoming attitude towards the global community [4].

The figures for tourism income in Saudi Arabia from 2013 to 2019 have consistently risen [16], due in large part to religious travelers who visit annually without fail. However, to achieve the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia must enhance its financial management, increase investments that drive economic growth, and foster a vibrant society. Various programs are focused on improving the quality of tourism infrastructure, including airports, roads, and public transportation, while also expanding the availability of accommodations and amenities such as hotels and restaurants [12].

Moreover, Saudi Arabia aims to increase the number of foreign tourists by creating new tourist spots alongside these infrastructure advancements. Saudi Vision 2030 is guiding the government in establishing world-class attractions and destinations, including museums, historical landmarks, and additional cultural spaces. NEOM is one of the most ambitious large-scale projects. The proposal for NEOM involves constructing a futuristic city in the desert near the Jordanian border and across the Gulf of Aqaba in Egypt, with an estimated cost of USD500 billion [8]. The project will eventually include additional attractions such as The Line, Oxagon, Trojena, and Sindalah. Apart from NEOM, Saudi Arabia is pursuing other large-scale projects, including the Red Sea Project for luxury tourism, the Qiddiya Project for socio-economic growth, and the Roshn Project for real estate and community development, with the goal of increasing Saudi home ownership to 70 percent [13].

Saudi Vision 2030 continues to prioritize diversifying Saudi Arabia's economy and emphasizes expanding investment as a sustainable supplementary sector. Saudi Arabia has long-standing diplomatic ties with Indonesia, leading to various forms of cooperation. Saudi Vision 2030 also includes Indonesia as a target

for investment, according to Sianturi & Rani [8]. The relationship between the two nations reached a new level following King Salman's trip in 2017 and President Joko Widodo's visit in 2019. During Indonesia's presidency of the G20 in 2022, Crown Prince MBS visited the Southeast Asian nation [28].

Behind the Diplomatic Curtain: The Involved Stakeholders

Both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia view opportunities for enhancing bilateral relations through alignment between their respective strategic frameworks: Saudi Vision 2030 and Indonesia's Vision 2045 transformation plans. Although the primary focus of Indonesia's relationship with Saudi Arabia has been on Hajj and Umrah, with Indonesia sending the largest number of pilgrims each year, discussions have also been initiated to explore opportunities in trade and tourism. Former Indonesian Trade Minister Zulkifli Hasan and former Tourism and Creative Economy Minister Sandiaga Uno have already taken initiatives, such as leading a delegation to Riyadh in early 2023 to boost import and export opportunities, attract more Saudi tourists to Indonesia, and promote Indonesian creative economy products in the Saudi market [28].

During the first half of 2024, the Saudi Arabian Tourism Authority (STA) hosted its inaugural showcase event in Jakarta, Indonesia, to present the cultural and adventurous sights of the Kingdom to Indonesian tourists. As previously mentioned, Saudi Arabia's tourism industry is experiencing rapid growth due to Saudi Vision 2030, with the aim of becoming a vibrant and diverse tourism market contributing 10 percent to GDP by 2030. By 2023, over 1.5 million Indonesians had visited Saudi Arabia, with the majority undertaking Umrah and pilgrimage trips. Efforts are now being made to introduce Indonesian visitors to Saudi Arabia's historical treasures, such as the ancient Al-Ula royal site and the unique architectural styles of Jeddah, which were shaped by ancient trade routes [29].

STA has introduced a variety of programs aimed at promoting Saudi Arabia as a safe, convenient, and culturally fulfilling destination for Indonesian tourists. According to APAC Markets President Alhasan Aldabbagh, Saudi Arabia's tourism industry has seen significant expansion since allowing foreign tourists in 2019, establishing itself as one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic destinations globally, as noted by the UNWTO. STA not only organized an exhibition in Jakarta but also hosted various activities as part of the NUSUK Roadshow, Saudi Arabia's first official comprehensive digital platform, at the St. Regis Hotel on April 29-30, 2024. His Excellency Dr. Tawfiq bin Fawzan AlRabiah, the Minister of Hajj and Umrah of Saudi Arabia, attended the roadshow, which provided pilgrims and visitors with a platform for planning their trips to Makkah, Madinah, and other destinations. Involving 43 stakeholders from DMCs, tour operators, airlines, and the hospitality sector, along with over 1,000 partners from Indonesia's top trade partners and travel agents, the roadshow facilitated 850 productive meetings to discuss potential future collaborations and partnerships [18].

The Government of Indonesia, through the RPJPN (Long-Term National Development Plan) 2005-2025, stated that national economic development should encompass several sectors, including tourism, alongside infrastructure, transportation, trade, and industry [30]. Since its inception as a national development guide, tourism development has been overseen under the RPJMN (Medium-Term National Development Plan), which marks developmental milestones every five years, starting with RPJMN 2010-2014, followed by 2015-2019 and 2020-2024, respectively [21]. Prior to the successive implementations under the RPJMN, in 2009, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (now the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy), along with several other ministerial offices, tourism representatives, stakeholders, and academic experts, submitted a draft to the National Legislative Bodies, which eventually became the National Tourism Law (Law No. 10 of 2009) [11]. This law outlines the principles of tourism, development strategies, the establishment of strategic zones with sustainable tourism principles, the formation of

tourism businesses and federations, and the establishment of national and local tourism promotion agencies [6].

The development and implementation of the National Tourism Law related to sustainable tourism have been subjects of debate and study. Yasin, Amrullah, Asmaniati, and Fetty [10] argue that the implementation of sustainable tourism in Indonesia is crucial due to the country's abundant natural and cultural resources. These resources not only attract tourists and generate income for businesses and local communities but also require preservation. Thus, specific laws are necessary to safeguard and conserve these natural features, legacies, and the overall welfare of communities around tourism sites [10].

Implementation of 2022 Ministerial Sustainable Tourism MoU

To implement sustainable tourism development, the Ministry of Tourism has projected Bali as a pilot province. Regional Regulation Bali Province No. 10 of 2015 outlines the core planning for Bali's tourism development from 2015-2019, making Bali a model for national tourism development and providing official guidance for stakeholders engaged in sustainable tourism in Indonesia [6].

The sustainable tourism development efforts in Bali emphasize the preservation of the natural environment and cultural resources, supported by local communities, businesses, local governments, and stakeholders. This reflects the Indonesian government's commitment to balancing economic development with increased tourism engagement. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which aims to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy from its dependence on oil and gas to a more diversified approach, focuses on four major sectors: dynamic society, business and economy, environment and nature, and tourism and heritage [4]. Sustainable tourism development remains a top priority for Saudi Arabia, which has historically relied on tourism from religious pilgrimages to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina [1].

In relation to religious pilgrimage, Saudi Arabia allocated the highest hajj quota to Indonesia, with 221,000 pilgrims in 2023, increasing to 241,000 in 2024. This quota slightly surpasses that of Pakistani pilgrims, as Pakistan overtook Indonesia as the country with the largest Muslim population in 2024 [26]. The collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia on sustainable tourism development began in early 2021 when Indonesian Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga Uno, met with Saudi Ambassador to Indonesia, Esam A. Abid Althagafi, to discuss potential cooperation. The discussions included facilitating easier visa applications for hajj and umrah and exploring investment and promotional opportunities in tourism [22,19].

To formalize the partnership, Saudi Tourism Minister Ahmed Al-Khatieb and Indonesian Minister Sandiaga Uno signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2022. This bilateral agreement covers various aspects of tourism, including data exchange, sharing best practices, and joint tourism promotions in both countries [20]. In 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted the Riyadh Travel Fair, where Indonesia participated to promote its tourism offerings, particularly targeting Saudi tourists. During this event, Indonesia showcased five Super Priority Destinations—Lake Toba, Mandalika, Likupang, Borobudur, and Labuan Bajo—alongside Bali, which is already well-known to international tourists. Intensive promotion was necessary due to a decline in Saudi tourist arrivals to Indonesia from 2019 to 2022. At the Riyadh Travel Fair 2023, the Ministry of Tourism aimed for a rapid increase of 53,000 Saudi tourists to Indonesia, a significant target given that Indonesia hosted only 2,053 Saudi tourists in 2022 [25].

Figure 1. Tourists From Saudi Arabia Visiting Indonesia (by year)



Source: Badan Pusat Statistika, 2024

Saudi Arabia plans to finance the construction of cable cars in Puncak, Bogor, West Java, and Mount Rinjani, West Nusa Tenggara, to enhance sustainable tourism infrastructure in Indonesia. Currently, the cable car project in West Java is on hold due to administrative and budgetary issues, with preliminary studies estimating a need for 7.3 trillion Rupiah (462 million USD) [24]. In contrast, the project in West Nusa Tenggara has seen its budget increase from 2.2 trillion Rupiah (141 million USD) to 6.7 trillion Rupiah (429 million USD), and as of early 2024, it is still undergoing ecological and geological surveys [27].

4. Conclusion

In the two years since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism, much remains to be discussed regarding the future of cooperation between the two countries in sustainable tourism development. The core aims of the ministerial agreement were to cooperate in at least three major aspects: joint promotion efforts, data exchange, and implementing best practices. Of these three aspects, this study found that joint promotion efforts have been the most applicable and relevant aspect carried out between the two countries. The findings indicate that since the beginning of the cooperation, Saudi Arabia has focused on attracting international tourists by providing better hospitality, a secure and safe tourism environment, and easier visa access, especially for religious tourists who annually visit Saudi Arabia for the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages.

On the other hand, Indonesia has seen a surplus of tourists from Saudi Arabia and has promoted five additional tourist destinations: Lake Toba, Likupang, Mandalika, Borobudur, and Labuan Bajo, alongside the already established Bali. In terms of religious pilgrimage, Indonesian officials have engaged in bilateral discussions with Saudi officials to increase Hajj quotas annually and promote investments in tourism infrastructure in places such as Puncak, West Java, and Mt. Rinjani, West Nusa Tenggara.

The other two aspects, data exchange and implementing best practices, still require further engagement from both countries. There are numerous opportunities for collaboration, such as training manpower, language education, and involving secondary stakeholders in B2B discussions between the two countries, facilitated by the government. Further research is needed, especially on the implementation of latter two aspects.

5. Conflict of Interest

Authors involved declare that there are no conflict of interests.

6. Acknowledgement

7. References

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