



THE MAKKAH ROUTE INITIATIVE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HAJJ SERVICES IN INDONESIA: A CASE STUDY OF SAUDI ARABIA'S HAJJ POLICY

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze how the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) functions as an instrument of Saudi Arabia's soft power and how improvements in Hajj service effectiveness contribute to the construction of Saudi Arabia's international image among Indonesian pilgrims. Using a descriptive qualitative case-study approach, the research examines MRI implementation in Indonesia during the 2024 Hajj season through official reports, policy documents, and academic literature. Service effectiveness is assessed through indicators of processing speed, reduction of waiting time, administrative simplification, logistical efficiency, and pilgrim convenience. The findings indicate that MRI served 128,949 Indonesian pilgrims and reduced immigration processing time to approximately 50 seconds per pilgrim. Through Nye's soft power perspective, MRI converts administrative and technological capacity into attraction, legitimacy, and positive perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a modern and human-centered administrator of Hajj services. The study recommends strengthening inter-institutional coordination and digital infrastructure to sustain service quality and reinforce the long-term soft power benefits of the initiative.

Keywords: Hajj Diplomacy, International Image, Makkah Route Initiative, Service Effectiveness, Soft Power.

Abstrak: Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) berfungsi sebagai instrumen soft power Arab Saudi dan bagaimana perbaikan dalam efektivitas layanan Haji berkontribusi pada pembangunan citra internasional Arab Saudi di kalangan jemaah haji Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini meneliti pelaksanaan MRI di Indonesia selama musim Haji 2024 melalui laporan resmi, dokumen kebijakan, dan literatur akademis. Efektivitas layanan dinilai melalui indikator kecepatan pemrosesan, pengurangan

waktu tunggu, penyederhanaan administratif, efisiensi logistik, dan kenyamanan jemaah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa MRI melayani 128.949 jemaah haji Indonesia dan mengurangi waktu pemrosesan imigrasi menjadi sekitar 50 detik per jemaah. Melalui perspektif kekuatan lembut Nye, MRI mengubah kapasitas administratif dan teknologi menjadi daya tarik, legitimasi, dan persepsi positif terhadap Arab Saudi sebagai administrator layanan Haji yang modern dan berpusat pada manusia. Studi ini merekomendasikan penguatan koordinasi antar lembaga dan infrastruktur digital untuk mempertahankan kualitas layanan dan memperkuat manfaat soft power jangka panjang dari inisiatif tersebut.

Kata Kunci: *Diplomasi Haji, Citra Internasional, Makkah Route Initiative, Efektivitas Layanan, Soft Power.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the global political landscape has undergone a fundamental shift in which states no longer rely solely on military power but increasingly emphasize attraction through soft power instruments. This phenomenon is explicitly reflected in the transformation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy through the Vision 2030 agenda, which aims to promote economic diversification and social modernization (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). This transformation was triggered by the collapse of global oil prices in 2014, which threatened the Kingdom's economic stability (Yuliana, 2024). As part of its diversification efforts, the Hajj and Umrah sector, which had previously received limited managerial attention, is now positioned as the "new oil," expected to generate revenues comparable to the petroleum sector in the future. This systemic transformation places pilgrims as "Guests of Allah" who are entitled to international standards of service. As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Saudi Arabia seeks to reconstruct its moral legitimacy through innovations in Hajj public services.

The formulation of Saudi Vision 2030 was initiated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and officially launched by King Salman bin Abdulaziz on April 25, 2016, as a strategic response to fluctuations in global oil prices that threatened the Kingdom's long-term economic stability (Saad et al., 2021). The

initiative emerged from the realization that Saudi Arabia needed to undertake a comprehensive structural transformation by leveraging its internal strengths, namely its strategic position as the center of the Islamic world, its substantial investment capacity, and its geographical location connecting three continents. Through a comprehensive framework, the vision was designed as a roadmap to reform all aspects of national life, ranging from bureaucratic restructuring and state asset privatization to the development of non-oil sectors, thereby ensuring a more sustainable, open, and globally competitive future.

Saudi Vision 2030 is an ambitious strategic framework launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to diversify its economy, reduce dependence on oil revenues, and develop public service sectors such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and tourism. The vision is built upon three main pillars: A Vibrant Society, A Thriving Economy, and An Ambitious Nation. Through various realization programs, Saudi Arabia is committed to opening itself to the world, improving the quality of life of its citizens, and strengthening its position as a global investment hub and the heart of the Islamic world through modernization while preserving its cultural and historical values (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

One of the key pillars in achieving a vibrant society is the Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP), which aims to provide unforgettable and high-quality spiritual experiences for Hajj and Umrah pilgrims. As part of this program, Saudi Arabia introduced the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI), an innovative public-service diplomacy program that transfers immigration procedures from arrival airports in Saudi Arabia to departure airports in pilgrims' home countries. This initiative represents a tangible manifestation of the digital transformation and bureaucratic efficiency promoted under Vision 2030, enabling pilgrims to utilize a fast-track process and perform their religious duties in a more comfortable, secure, and humane manner from the moment they depart their home countries. The innovation reflects the Kingdom's efforts to project an image of a technologically advanced and efficient state while maintaining humanitarian values. The MRI is not a standalone policy but rather part of the broader strategic Doyof Al-Rahman Program, which aligns with the Kingdom's ambition to enhance service quality through digital transformation initiatives such as Smart Hajj and electronic visas.

The implementation of the MRI in countries such as Türkiye began in 2023. The initiative has been widely recognized for facilitating procedures such as fingerprinting and passport control at Istanbul and Ankara airports, processes that were previously conducted upon arrival in Makkah or Madinah, Saudi Arabia (Saad et al., 2021). In addition, the initiative has been implemented in several other countries, including Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Côte d'Ivoire. The program also provides services related to visa verification, biometric registration, health screening, and baggage processing prior to departure.

The implementation of the MRI in Indonesia reached a significant scale in 2024 through its expansion to three major embarkation points: Soekarno–Hatta International Airport (Jakarta), Juanda International Airport (Surabaya), and Adi Soemarmo International Airport (Solo). Data indicate that the initiative served 128,949 Indonesian pilgrims with a high level of efficiency, with the average immigration process taking only 50 seconds per pilgrim (Pilgrim Experience Program, 2024, p. 46). The substantive impact of the program has been particularly evident among elderly pilgrims, who no longer have to endure long immigration queues upon arrival in Jeddah or Madinah. Furthermore, the baggage management system allows luggage to be delivered directly to pilgrims' accommodations. Despite these technical achievements, the operation of the MRI continues to face multidimensional challenges, including issues related to digital infrastructure synchronization between Saudi authorities and Indonesian domestic institutions, as well as concerns regarding biometric data security that require strict bilateral coordination.

Although the MRI has been implemented for several years, academic studies examining the initiative as a soft power strategy within the field of International Relations remain limited. To position this study within the existing literature, three previous studies are considered. First, Chaziza and Lutmar (2025) analyzed Saudi Arabia's niche diplomacy as a middle power utilizing religious diplomacy to expand its global influence. Second, Khan (2025) explored the use of Islamic soft power in religious diplomacy to secure Saudi national interests within a competitive international system, particularly in relation to regional rivalries. Third, Faza (2025) examined the dynamics of Hajj quota negotiations between

Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, concluding that the allocation of additional quotas increasingly depends on rigorous assessments of infrastructure capacity and the technical readiness of sending countries.

Studies on Hajj administration within the literature of International Relations and public policy generally focus on two primary approaches. First, as discussed above, Hajj is often examined as a component of religious diplomacy, highlighting how Saudi Arabia utilizes its authority over the two holy cities as a source of political legitimacy and global influence. Second, existing research tends to emphasize the technical management of Hajj operations, particularly concerning quota management, pilgrim regulations, and the efficiency of technology-based service governance. While both approaches have contributed significantly to understanding Hajj governance, most studies continue to view Hajj policy innovations primarily through administrative and institutional perspectives. Research that specifically examines public service innovation as an instrument for nation branding and diplomatic influence remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of the Makkah Route Initiative.

This research gap arises because previous studies have not sufficiently analyzed how the Makkah Route Initiative functions as a catalyst for constructing Saudi Arabia's image as a modern and humane state, particularly among Indonesian society in the post-pandemic context. The post-pandemic period has transformed public expectations regarding international public service standards, placing increasing emphasis on efficiency, health security, and user convenience.

Addressing this gap, the present study offers a novel perspective by analyzing the Makkah Route Initiative through the lens of soft power, specifically examining how cross-border public service innovations can be transformed into diplomatic influence that shapes public perceptions. This study also positions pilgrims' direct experiences as an important arena in the transformation of Saudi Arabia's image from a country often associated with conservatism to one that demonstrates an inclusive, modern, and user-oriented service model. Accordingly, this study poses the following research question: *"How does the Makkah Route Initiative function as an instrument of Saudi Arabia's soft power in constructing a*

positive image as a modern and humane Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in the eyes of Indonesian society?”

Based on this background, the objective of this study is to analyze the Makkah Route Initiative as an instrument of Saudi Arabia's soft power and to examine its impact on the effectiveness of Hajj services in Indonesia. Although this study employs Soft Power as its primary analytical framework, the relationship between soft power and the effectiveness of Hajj services is understood as indirect rather than causal. In this research, service effectiveness functions as an intermediate variable through which Saudi Arabia generates attraction, legitimacy, and positive perceptions among Indonesian pilgrims. To operationalize this relationship, the effectiveness of the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) is assessed through five indicators: (1) processing speed, measured by the average time required for immigration clearance; (2) reduction of waiting time at arrival airports in Saudi Arabia; (3) administrative simplification through pre-clearance procedures conducted in Indonesia; (4) logistical efficiency, particularly in baggage handling and passenger flow management; and (5) pilgrim convenience, reflected in the reduction of physical and psychological burdens experienced during travel. These indicators are subsequently analyzed as mechanisms that contribute to the formation of positive perceptions and trust toward Saudi Arabia, thereby supporting the country's soft power objectives. Furthermore, the study seeks to explain how cross-border public service policies can be transformed into soft power resources within contemporary international relations practices.

The significance of this study is both academic and practical. Academically, it contributes to the enrichment of soft power literature by extending the scope of analysis to the domain of religious public-service diplomacy, an area that has received relatively limited scholarly attention. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for policymakers in understanding the diplomatic potential of cross-border public service innovations, particularly in the management of Hajj and Umrah services. This article positions the Makkah Route Initiative at the intersection of public policy, diplomacy, and international relations, demonstrating that religious services can function as a strategic medium for building influence and global legitimacy.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power as the primary conceptual framework for analyzing the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) as an instrument of Saudi Arabian policy. The concept of soft power is selected because it provides an effective explanation of how states influence other actors not through coercion or material incentives, but through attraction derived from values, policies, and institutional practices that are perceived as legitimate and morally acceptable by others (Nye, 2017; Nye, 2021).

1. The Concept of Soft Power

Joseph Nye defines soft power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than through military force or economic pressure. In the context of contemporary international relations, soft power has become increasingly relevant due to growing global interdependence and heightened public sensitivity toward the legitimacy of state policies (Nye, 2011). Such attraction may originate from three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies that are positively perceived by other actors.

In his later works, Nye emphasizes that soft power is not generated automatically. The existence of resources such as advanced technology, modern institutions, or bureaucratic capacity does not necessarily translate into influence unless these resources are strategically converted into attractive outcomes. Therefore, the concept of power conversion becomes a critical component of soft power analysis, referring to the process through which resources are transformed into changes in the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of others (Nye, 2021).

In this study, the Makkah Route Initiative is understood as a form of public service diplomacy, in which technical and administrative policies are transformed into service experiences that generate positive impressions, particularly among Indonesian Hajj pilgrims. Consequently, the MRI is not viewed merely as a bureaucratic innovation but as a soft power instrument aimed at enhancing Saudi Arabia's international image and legitimacy.

2. Characteristics of Soft Power in the Context of the Makkah Route Initiative

Soft power possesses several key characteristics that are relevant to analyzing the implementation of the MRI. First, soft power is voluntaristic, meaning that acceptance of influence occurs voluntarily on the part of those being influenced. In the context of the MRI, Indonesian pilgrims are not compelled to acknowledge Saudi Arabia's excellence; rather, they develop positive perceptions through direct experiences of efficient, comfortable, and human services. Second, soft power depends heavily on the perceptions of the receiving audience, or what Nye describes as the "eye of the beholder" (Nye, 2017). The effectiveness of the MRI as a soft power instrument is therefore determined by the extent to which Indonesian society interprets the initiative as a manifestation of Saudi Arabia's concern, modernity, and professionalism as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. For this reason, the dimension of experience-based diplomacy is particularly significant in this study. Third, soft power operates through moral and symbolic legitimacy. The MRI symbolizes Saudi Arabia's transformation from a state often associated with conservatism into a modern and humane global actor. Features such as reduced immigration processing times, enhanced convenience for elderly pilgrims, and efficient baggage management serve as tangible symbols of a public service commitment grounded in human-centered governance.

3. Analytical Operationalization of the Soft Power Concept

As an analytical tool, the concept of soft power is operationalized in this study through three main analytical stages. First, the study identifies soft power resources, namely the elements of the MRI that possess the potential to generate attraction. These include biometric technology, pre-clearance immigration systems, and integrated cross-border service mechanisms. Second, the study analyzes the process of power conversion, examining how these resources are translated into the actual experiences of Indonesian Hajj pilgrims. At this stage, the research investigates the operational mechanisms of the MRI and assesses how service efficiency contributes to the formation of positive perceptions of Saudi Arabia. Third, the study evaluates the perceptual and legitimacy impacts of the MRI, specifically the extent to which the initiative contributes to shaping Saudi Arabia's image as a modern and humane Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in the eyes of Indonesian society. These impacts are not measured through formal changes in

Indonesian government policy but rather through the strengthening of long-term trust and moral legitimacy within bilateral relations. Through this conceptual framework, the study positions the Makkah Route Initiative as a concrete example of how cross-border public service innovations can be transformed into soft power resources. It also demonstrates that contemporary diplomacy is no longer confined to elite-level forums but increasingly operates through the direct experiences of ordinary citizens as non-state actors.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) as an instrument of Saudi Arabia's soft power in enhancing the effectiveness of Hajj services in Indonesia. A qualitative approach is chosen because the study focuses on meanings, perceptions, and policy processes that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods alone. Consistent with Creswell (2014), qualitative research enables scholars to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena and public policies through the interpretation of textual and contextual data.

1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative case study design, focusing on the implementation of the Makkah Route Initiative in Indonesia during the 2024 Hajj season. A case study approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of a specific policy within a particular spatial and temporal context (Yin, 2018). Indonesia is chosen as the case study site because it is one of Saudi Arabia's principal partners in the implementation of the MRI and hosts the largest scale of operation, involving three international airports: Soekarno–Hatta International Airport (Jakarta), Juanda International Airport (Surabaya), and Adi Soemarmo International Airport (Solo). The study employs a deductive approach, using Joseph Nye's concept of soft power as the theoretical foundation for analyzing empirical data related to the MRI. Accordingly, the analysis is directed toward examining how the policy elements of the MRI function as soft power resources and how their conversion process contributes to the formation of positive

perceptions among Indonesian Hajj pilgrims. To complement Nye's Soft Power framework, this study incorporates the concepts of Public Service Effectiveness, Good Governance, and Public Policy Implementation. These concepts provide an analytical bridge between the operational performance of the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) and its contribution to Saudi Arabia's soft power projection.

Public Service Effectiveness refers to the extent to which public services achieve their intended objectives efficiently while meeting users' expectations and improving service quality. According to the OECD Serving Citizens Framework, the effectiveness of public services can be assessed through indicators of accessibility, responsiveness, service quality, and user satisfaction. Responsiveness includes timeliness, the ability to address users' needs, and the provision of services without unreasonable delay, while service quality relates to the consistency and effectiveness of service delivery (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2023). In the context of the MRI, effectiveness is operationalized through five indicators: processing speed, waiting-time reduction, administrative simplification, logistical efficiency, and pilgrim convenience.

In addition, the concept of Good Governance helps explain how effective service delivery contributes to institutional legitimacy and public trust. Good governance emphasizes accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency in public administration. These principles are widely recognized as key determinants of successful public sector performance and citizen satisfaction. The integration of digital technology, inter-agency coordination, and user-oriented service delivery within the MRI reflects the application of good governance principles in the management of Hajj services.

Furthermore, the implementation of MRI can be understood through the perspective of Public Policy Implementation. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) argue that policy success depends not only on policy design but also on the capacity of institutions to effectively implement programs and coordinate among multiple actors. In the MRI case, successful implementation relies on cooperation between the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, Saudi immigration authorities, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the Directorate General of

Immigration. The effectiveness of this intergovernmental coordination determines whether policy objectives can be translated into tangible benefits for Indonesian pilgrims.

By integrating these three concepts, the study is able to explain more comprehensively how improvements in public service effectiveness and policy implementation generate positive perceptions, trust, and legitimacy, which subsequently contribute to the enhancement of Saudi Arabia's soft power among Indonesian pilgrims.

2. Data Sources and Data Collection Techniques

The primary sources of information are documentation and literature review, which are the methods used to collect the research data. Official documents issued by the governments of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, including reports from the Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP), Saudi Vision 2030 documents, press releases from the Directorate General of Immigration of Indonesia, and official publications from the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah regarding the implementation of the MRI, are used as primary data sources. In addition, the study utilizes secondary data consisting of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and diplomatic news publications relevant to Hajj diplomacy, soft power, and public service modernization. These secondary sources enrich the analytical context and facilitate comparisons between the study's findings and previous research. Data collection is conducted through a systematic review of relevant documents and literature, followed by a selection process based on their relevance to the research focus, namely the implementation of the MRI, the effectiveness of Hajj services, and the construction of Saudi Arabia's image in Indonesia.

3. Data Validity

To ensure the validity and credibility of the research findings, this study employed source triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and document cross-checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from multiple sources, including official reports issued by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, the Pilgrim Experience Program, Saudi Vision 2030 publications, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Directorate General of Immigration,

and relevant academic literature. This approach enabled the researcher to verify the consistency of information across different institutional sources.

Theoretical triangulation was applied by interpreting the findings through multiple analytical perspectives, namely Soft Power Theory, Public Service Effectiveness, Good Governance, and Public Policy Implementation. The use of multiple conceptual lenses enhanced the robustness of the analysis and reduced the risk of single-theory bias.

In addition, document cross-checking was employed to validate statistical information, policy claims, and implementation outcomes reported in government documents and scholarly publications. An audit trail was also maintained throughout the research process to ensure transparency and traceability of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Through these procedures, the study sought to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of its findings.

4. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis is conducted using a descriptive qualitative analysis approach through the following stages. First, the researcher performs data reduction, which involves selecting, organizing, and classifying data according to major themes relevant to the conceptual framework, such as service efficiency, pilgrim experiences, and Saudi Arabia's international image. Second, the researcher undertakes data categorization and interpretation. At this stage, the classified data are analyzed through the lens of soft power to identify sources of attraction and the mechanisms through which the MRI policy is converted into diplomatic influence. The analysis focuses on how public service innovations are translated into positive perceptions among Indonesian pilgrims and other stakeholders. Third, the researcher draws analytical conclusions by linking empirical findings with the theoretical framework in order to answer the research question. This process emphasizes the relationship between the effectiveness of MRI services and the development of legitimacy and long-term trust toward Saudi Arabia as a modern and humane Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Through these analytical procedures, the study seeks to explain how the Makkah Route Initiative functions not only as a public service innovation but

also as a strategic soft power instrument that contributes to Saudi Arabia's international image and diplomatic influence in Indonesia.

RESULTS

The Implementation of the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) in Indonesia in 2024

The Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) represents a strategic manifestation of the Saudi Ministry of Interior that is integrated into the Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP), one of the flagship programs under the broader framework of Saudi Vision 2030. In accordance with the Vision's blueprint, the initiative is designed to transform the spiritual journey of Hajj pilgrims by prioritizing service quality and maximizing convenience. Procedurally, the MRI adopts a rigorous operational framework through a pre-clearance system. This process begins with the issuance of electronic visas, followed by biometric verification and the completion of immigration procedures conducted by Saudi passport officers stationed at designated departure terminals in partner countries.

The technical advantage of this system lies in its integration of logistical management and bureaucratic procedures. Since immigration formalities are completed at the departure airport, pilgrims can proceed directly to Jeddah or Madinah without undergoing additional immigration inspections upon arrival in the Kingdom. Furthermore, the digitized baggage management system ensures that luggage is assigned a special code and delivered directly to pilgrims' accommodations, thereby eliminating waiting times at arrival terminals. Upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, pilgrims are immediately transported by bus to their designated accommodations. This level of efficiency reflects Saudi Arabia's commitment to providing modern and human-centered services for pilgrims.

The evolution of the MRI demonstrates a consistent pattern of expansion from a regional partnership initiative to a broader global program. As shown in Table 1, the initiative has progressively expanded its operational scope since its inception.

Table 1. Stages of Development and Expansion of Saudi Arabia's Hajj and Umrah Management Initiative

Year	Stage of Development and Expansion
2017	Official launch of the initiative by the Saudi Ministry of Interior.
2018	Significant expansion involving Indonesia and Malaysia as the first partner countries.
2019	Operational expansion to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Tunisia.
2022– 2024	Post-pandemic strengthening and expansion to Morocco, Türkiye, and Côte d'Ivoire.
2025	Full implementation across 11 airports in seven partner countries.

Source: Compiled from Saad et al. (2021).

The evolution of the MRI reveals a gradual yet consistent expansion pattern from a domestic Saudi initiative into a transnational cooperation framework. During its initial phase in 2017, the program was officially launched by the Saudi Ministry of Interior as an instrument to strengthen international mobility governance, particularly in relation to monitoring, screening, and managing incoming pilgrim flows. In 2018, the initiative broadened its reach by incorporating Indonesia and Malaysia as its first international partners, marking a transition from an internally oriented policy to an externally coordinated program. By 2019, the MRI had consolidated its operational capacity through partnerships with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Tunisia, reflecting efforts to expand the network to countries characterized by high volumes of pilgrimage-related mobility.

The period between 2022 and 2024 represented a phase of post-pandemic consolidation and cross-regional expansion, marked by the inclusion of new partner countries such as Morocco, Türkiye, and Côte d'Ivoire. This development illustrates the increasingly global orientation of the MRI, extending beyond a

specific geographic region to encompass parts of Africa and Eurasia as part of its strategic expansion agenda. By 2025, the initiative had reached a stage of full implementation, operating in eleven airports across seven partner countries. This achievement indicates that the MRI has evolved into an institutionalized program with mature operational capacities and more stable, standardized mechanisms of cross-border coordination.

Table 2. Distribution of MRI Implementation by Country and Airport

Country	Participating Airports
Indonesia	Soekarno–Hatta (Jakarta), Juanda (Surabaya), and Adi Soemarmo (Solo)
Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA)
Pakistan	Islamabad International Airport and Jinnah International Airport
Bangladesh	Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (Dhaka)
Türkiye	Esenboğa International Airport (Ankara) and Istanbul International Airport
Morocco	Mohammed V International Airport (Casablanca)
Côte d'Ivoire	Félix Houphouët-Boigny International Airport (Abidjan)

Source: Makkah Route Initiative (2025).

The geographical distribution of MRI implementation by 2025 demonstrates that the program has been operationalized across a network of international airports in seven partner countries, serving as an indicator of its institutionalization at the operational level. Having facilitated the travel of approximately 617,756 pilgrims, the MRI has evolved beyond a mere administrative policy into a mechanism that

directly influences the efficiency of cross-border mobility (Makkah Route Initiative, 2025).

The selection of participating airports reflects a strategic focus on major international aviation hubs that function as primary gateways for pilgrims traveling to Saudi Arabia. The distribution pattern further suggests a prioritization of countries with high pilgrimage volumes and significant regional influence. Indonesia has become the partner country with the broadest implementation coverage, involving three major airports—Soekarno–Hatta, Juanda, and Adi Soemarmo—while Malaysia's implementation remains centralized at KLIA as the country's primary aviation hub. Pakistan and Türkiye each operate the program at two airports representing major population centers and international connectivity nodes. In contrast, Bangladesh, Morocco, and Côte d'Ivoire implement the initiative through a single principal airport located in the national capital or economic center. This pattern indicates that the MRI follows a hub-based implementation model, whereby the initiative is concentrated in major airports to effectively serve the largest passenger flows while maximizing the efficiency of cross-border coordination.

The implementation of the Makkah Route Initiative during the 1445 H/2024 Hajj season marked the largest operational expansion since the program was first introduced. In Indonesia, the initiative was initially launched in 2018. Chronologically, intensive preparations for the 2024 implementation began in early 2024 through a series of diplomatic negotiations and inter-agency technical coordination processes. On 9 January 2024, the Indonesian government, represented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, signed the *Ta'limatul Hajj* agreement in Jeddah with the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah. The agreement not only confirmed Indonesia's Hajj quota of 241,000 pilgrims but also reinforced commitments to expand MRI services beyond Jakarta embarkation points (Yuliana, 2024). This development was followed by a working visit by the Director General of Immigration of Indonesia to Saudi Arabia in February 2024 to discuss the standardization of immigration pre-clearance procedures.

During the pre-embarkation phase between March and May 2024, attention shifted toward infrastructure preparation at the three participating airports. At Adi Soemarmo Airport in Solo, coordination efforts began on 20 March 2024 and were followed by the physical renovation of a former Indonesian Migrant Worker (TKI) facility by Dagang Net, a contractor appointed by the Saudi government, between 15 April and 10 May 2024 (Yuliana, 2024). At Juanda Airport in Surabaya, MRI operations utilized a designated sterile area encompassing Gates 13–15 in Terminal 1, which was renovated specifically to separate Hajj pilgrims from domestic passengers. Meanwhile, at Soekarno–Hatta International Airport, MRI services were centralized in Terminal 2F, equipped with ten dedicated Saudi immigration counters. Technical preparations included the installation of transnational data transmission circuits, biometric devices, and firewall configurations to ensure secure integration between Indonesian and Saudi immigration systems.

Operationally, the 2024 MRI commenced on 12 May 2024 with the departure of the first Hajj flight group to Madinah. Services were implemented in two phases: Wave I (12–23 May 2024) and Wave II (24 May–10 June 2024). Statistical data indicate that the program served a total of 128,949 regular Hajj pilgrims, representing approximately 47 percent of all Indonesian pilgrims during the season. Beneficiaries were distributed across Surabaya Embarkation (39,226 pilgrims), Solo Embarkation (35,977 pilgrims), and the Jakarta embarkation centers of Pondok Gede and Bekasi for the remainder. The official inauguration ceremony was conducted by Indonesian Vice President Ma'ruf Amin together with representatives of Saudi immigration authorities at Adi Soemarmo Airport on 31 May 2024, symbolizing the successful bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

Coverage of Hajj Pilgrims 2024

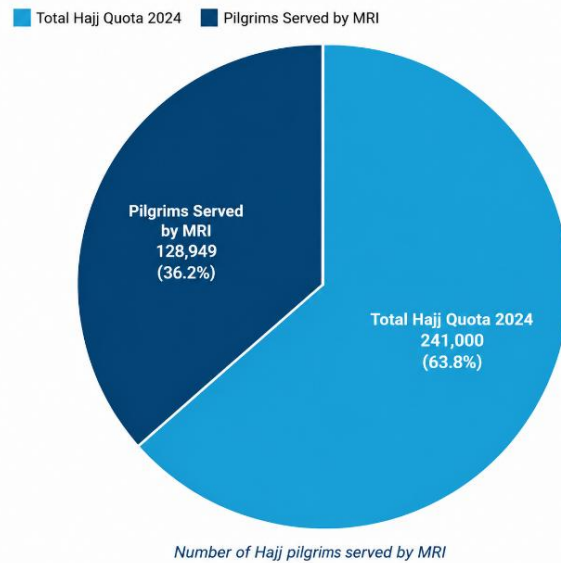


Fig.1: Coverage of Hajj Pilgrims 2024

Source: imigrasi.go.id, 2024

At the operational level, the MRI service flow at departure airports was comprehensively designed to create what can be described as a “domestic flight experience” for international Hajj pilgrims. The process begins in Indonesia, where pilgrims undergo passport verification, health document inspections, and biometric data collection conducted by Saudi immigration officers specially assigned to the country. Technological efficiency enables the entire immigration process to be completed within an average of 30 to 60 seconds per pilgrim. In addition to document processing, electronic baggage coding is implemented to synchronize luggage information with pilgrims’ accommodations in Makkah or Madinah. As a result, upon arrival at King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah or Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz International Airport in Madinah, pilgrims are no longer required to queue at immigration counters and can proceed directly to buses transporting them to their accommodations, while their luggage is delivered separately to their hotels.

The Makkah Route Initiative as an Instrument for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Hajj Services

As the heart of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia, through its Vision 2030 agenda, has undertaken a fundamental transformation in the management of Hajj and Umrah services in response to the continuously increasing number of pilgrims. This modernization effort is aimed not only at supporting economic diversification but also at fulfilling the Kingdom's responsibility to provide the highest standard of service for the Guests of Allah. Consequently, the expansion of facilities and the improvement of service quality have become strategic priorities to ensure that every pilgrim receives a meaningful and comfortable spiritual experience. Within this framework, a series of strategic initiatives have been introduced to address infrastructural and administrative constraints that previously limited the Kingdom's capacity to accommodate growing numbers of pilgrims (Alammash & Guo, 2021).

Among these initiatives, the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) represents one of the most progressive innovations in Hajj governance. The program enables immigration pre-clearance procedures to be conducted in pilgrims' countries of origin before departure. Through this mechanism, visa verification, passport inspection, and biometric registration are completed at departure airports, allowing pilgrims to proceed directly to transportation services upon arrival in Saudi Arabia without enduring lengthy immigration queues. The program was fully implemented in 2019 for several Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (General Authority for Statistics, 2019).

The implementation of the MRI contributes directly to the achievement of the five strategic pillars established by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, particularly those related to enhancing service quality standards and creating a more comfortable pilgrimage environment. By relocating administrative procedures to departure countries, the initiative reduces operational pressure at Saudi airports, thereby minimizing congestion and overcrowding during peak pilgrimage periods. Such efficiency is particularly important in addressing logistical challenges faced by pilgrims, enabling them to concentrate more fully on their religious obligations rather than administrative processes (Ministry of Hajj, 2013).

The effectiveness of the MRI has been further strengthened through its integration with the broader Smart Hajj program, which utilizes advanced technologies such as Smart Cards and Internet of Things (IoT) networks. Complementary initiatives, including the “pilgrimage without a bag” program that manages pilgrims’ luggage transportation directly from airports to accommodations, operate simultaneously with the MRI pre-clearance system. This technological synergy ensures that the movement of both pilgrims and luggage is more systematic, transparent, and secure, while also reducing the risk of loss or theft (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

The implementation of the MRI in Indonesia during the 2024 Hajj season generated a tangible transformation in the quality of Hajj administration, particularly in terms of procedural efficiency, logistical management, and pilgrim welfare. One of the most immediate impacts was the significant acceleration of immigration procedures. Through the pre-clearance system, Indonesian pilgrims required only an average of 30 to 60 seconds to complete passport verification and biometric registration at departure terminals.

This efficiency eliminated the need for lengthy immigration queues that traditionally occur upon arrival at Jeddah or Madinah airports after long-haul flights from Indonesia. Through the Makkah Route Initiative, immigration procedures, biometric verification, health checks, and baggage processing are completed before departure, allowing pilgrims to bypass conventional arrival procedures and proceed directly to their accommodations upon arrival in Saudi Arabia. The use of integrated digital technologies ensured that visa and health requirements were verified in advance, creating a more seamless travel experience for pilgrims. According to the Saudi Press Agency, the initiative reduced the time required to complete entry procedures to approximately 50 seconds per pilgrim in 2023 and further to 40 seconds in 2024 through the deployment of AI-supported service stations and digital processing systems (Saudi Press Agency, 2024). These findings are consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model, which suggests that perceived ease of use and efficiency positively influence users’ acceptance of technology-enabled services (Davis, 1989).

From an operational perspective, the MRI has also contributed to reducing congestion at major Saudi airports during the peak Hajj season. The redistribution of immigration procedures from arrival airports to departure airports has enabled Saudi authorities to optimize passenger flows and allocate resources more efficiently. This operational improvement is particularly significant given the increasing scale of Hajj participation and the Kingdom's long-term objective of accommodating larger numbers of pilgrims under Vision 2030.

Beyond administrative efficiency, the initiative has generated important welfare benefits for pilgrims, particularly elderly participants and individuals with special needs. The Makkah Route Initiative enables pilgrims to complete immigration, health verification, and baggage procedures in their country of departure, thereby eliminating multiple administrative stages upon arrival in Saudi Arabia. This integrated system allows pilgrims to proceed directly to their accommodations in Makkah or Madinah without prolonged waiting at airport terminals, reducing physical strain associated with long-distance travel and complex arrival procedures. Saudi authorities have specifically highlighted the initiative's role in providing dedicated assistance, specialized transportation, and tailored services for elderly pilgrims, contributing to greater comfort and ease throughout the journey (Saudi Press Agency, 2026a; Saudi Press Agency, 2026b). Therefore, the effectiveness of the MRI should not be assessed solely in terms of procedural efficiency but also in terms of its contribution to enhancing the overall pilgrimage experience and pilgrim well-being.

Taken together, these developments indicate that the Makkah Route Initiative has evolved beyond a technical immigration program into a comprehensive service innovation. By integrating digital technology, logistical coordination, and user-centered governance, the MRI has enhanced the effectiveness of Hajj administration while simultaneously supporting Saudi Arabia's broader objective of modernizing pilgrimage services in accordance with the goals of Vision 2030.

Service Time Efficiency

Traditional immigration processing time (without MRI) can take up to 5 hours (300 minutes) after arrival, whereas MRI only takes an average of 50 seconds.

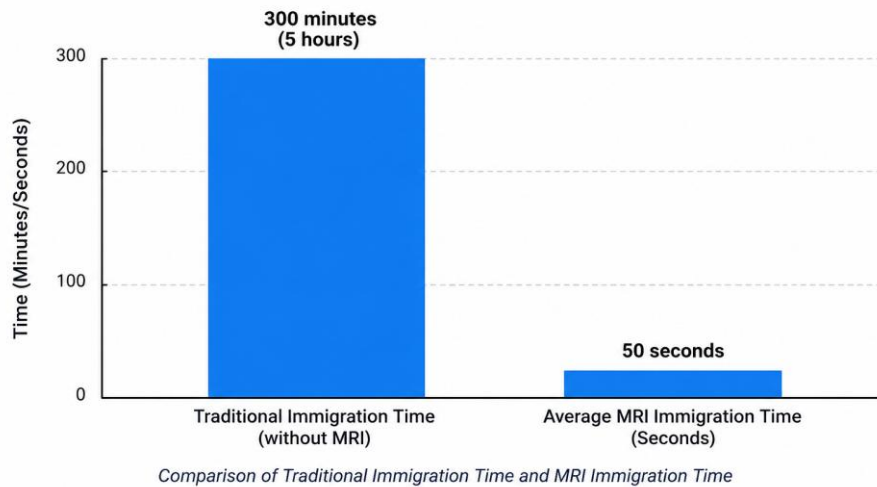


Fig. 2: Service Time Efficiency

Source: Saudi Arabia Pilgrim Experience Annual Report 2024

The relocation of inspection procedures to pilgrims' countries of origin has also significantly reduced the potential for congestion caused by the accumulation of millions of pilgrims at arrival terminals in Saudi Arabia. Another important logistical advantage is the implementation of an electronic luggage coding (e-luggage coding) system, whereby pilgrims' baggage is electronically tagged at Indonesian embarkation points. This system enables Saudi authorities to manage luggage automatically and deliver it directly to pilgrims' accommodations in Makkah or Madinah, eliminating the need for pilgrims to spend additional time and energy waiting at baggage claim areas.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Hajj pilgrims demonstrated steady growth. In 2019, more than two million pilgrims participated in the Hajj pilgrimage, including approximately 1.8 million international pilgrims and 634,000 domestic pilgrims. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 resulted in a dramatic decline in pilgrimage participation due to global travel restrictions. The number of pilgrims was reduced to only 1,000 selected individuals. This reduction was intended to facilitate the implementation of enhanced digital services and strict health protocols to ensure that no pilgrims were exposed to the COVID-19 virus during the pilgrimage period (Arab Journal for Scientific Publishing et al., 2021).

Table 3. Comparison of Non-Saudi Hajj Pilgrims Arriving in Makkah by Country Group, 2018–2019

Country Group	Difference Ratio (%)	Difference (Number)	1439 H (2018)	1440 H (2019)
GCC Countries	-5.8	-2,089	35,794	33,705
Arab Countries (excluding GCC)	2.2	10,320	465,510	475,831
Asian Countries (excluding Arab countries)	6.9	74,392	1,083,528	1,157,919
African Countries (excluding Arab countries)	13.6	22,805	167,959	190,764
European Countries	-24.0	-21,436	89,368	67,932
North and South America and Australia	8.5	2,171	25,519	27,690
Total	4.6	86,163	1,867,678	1,953,841

Source: Adapted from Saad et al. (2021).

The data indicate that prior to the pandemic, Saudi Arabia experienced a sustained increase in international pilgrimage flows. The largest contribution originated from Asian countries, which recorded an increase of 74,392 pilgrims between 2018 and 2019. This trend highlights the growing importance of efficient pilgrimage management systems capable of accommodating large-scale international mobility. Such developments provided an important rationale for Saudi Arabia to accelerate

the modernization of Hajj administration through programs such as the Makkah Route Initiative.

Between 2023 and 2024, Saudi Arabia reached significant milestones in Hajj and Umrah services through the integration of advanced technologies and strategic infrastructure development under the framework of Saudi Vision 2030. The year 2023 marked a historic recovery period, with more than 1.8 million pilgrims performing Hajj following the pandemic. This upward trend continued in 2024, when the combined number of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims reached approximately 18.5 million individuals. This increase was supported by the implementation of the Makkah Route Initiative in several partner countries, including Indonesia.

The enhancement of service effectiveness through the MRI has also strengthened bilateral relations and diplomatic engagement between Saudi Arabia and partner countries such as Indonesia. Innovations in service delivery have not only improved pilgrims' physical comfort and convenience but have also contributed to the construction of a positive international image of the Kingdom. The successful automation of visa processing and the simplification of immigration procedures are expected to continue supporting Saudi Arabia's objective of accommodating 30 million pilgrims by 2030, thereby providing tangible evidence of how public service excellence can contribute to broader diplomatic objectives (Niu & Metwally, 2016).

The Implementation of the Makkah Route Initiative as a Cross-Border Public Service Instrument

This section presents the empirical findings concerning the implementation of the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) in Indonesia as the primary case study of this research. The findings are organized systematically in accordance with the soft power conceptual framework, particularly focusing on sources of attraction, policy implementation mechanisms, and the direct outcomes of the initiative in improving Hajj service effectiveness. All findings are derived from official documents, policy reports, and institutional publications examined throughout the study.

MRI as an Innovation in International Public Service Policy

Document analysis indicates that the Makkah Route Initiative constitutes an integral component of the Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP), which operates under the broader framework of Saudi Vision 2030. Officially launched in 2018, the MRI was designed to simplify pre-departure procedures for Hajj pilgrims through a pre-clearance scheme in which all Saudi immigration procedures are completed in the pilgrims' country of origin. In the Indonesian context, the MRI was initially implemented on a limited basis before being progressively expanded to include three major international airports: Soekarno–Hatta International Airport in Jakarta, Juanda International Airport in Surabaya, and Adi Soemarmo International Airport in Solo. Official documents issued by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah identify Indonesia as one of the countries with the highest levels of participation in the MRI, both in terms of pilgrim volume and the complexity of inter-agency coordination required for implementation. Empirically, the MRI is characterized by the direct involvement of Saudi authorities, including immigration and customs officers stationed at Indonesian airports. This arrangement represents a distinctive form of cross-border administrative cooperation that remains relatively uncommon in contemporary international relations, particularly within the field of religious public services.

Procedural Efficiency and the Reduction of Administrative Burdens

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of the MRI significantly transformed the conventional Hajj service process, which had previously been concentrated at arrival airports in Saudi Arabia. Through the MRI, Indonesian pilgrims complete document verification, biometric registration, immigration procedures, and baggage processing before departing from Indonesia. Implementation reports indicate that pilgrims utilizing the MRI are able to proceed directly to their accommodations upon arrival in Saudi Arabia without passing through lengthy immigration queues. This development has had a measurable impact on reducing waiting times, particularly for elderly pilgrims and individuals with special needs. Furthermore, the integrated baggage management system incorporated within the MRI enables pilgrims' luggage to be transported directly to

their accommodations in Makkah or Madinah. These findings demonstrate that the initiative extends beyond symbolic policy innovation and generates concrete, measurable improvements in the pilgrimage experience.

Technological Integration and the Modernization of Hajj Governance

The findings also reveal that the MRI relies extensively on digital and biometric technologies as key components of policy implementation. Technical documentation highlights the use of an integrated biometric system directly connected to Saudi immigration databases, enabling real-time identity verification at participating Indonesian airports. This technological integration positions the MRI within Saudi Arabia's broader agenda of modernizing Hajj governance. Several official reports explicitly associate the initiative with efforts to project Saudi Arabia as a state capable of managing large-scale pilgrimage mobility efficiently, securely, and through technology-driven solutions. Empirical evidence of this technological success can be observed through the expansion of participating countries and the increasing number of pilgrims served annually. By 2025, the MRI had facilitated the travel of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from multiple countries, with Indonesia serving as one of its most significant contributors.

Pilgrim Experience as a Direct Policy Outcome

The empirical evidence further demonstrates that the MRI produces direct and tangible outcomes at the individual level, namely among Hajj pilgrims themselves. Evaluation reports and official statements consistently describe pilgrims as experiencing a more streamlined, orderly, and less administratively burdensome journey compared to conventional procedures. This finding is particularly important because it illustrates that the MRI operates through concrete lived experiences rather than solely through diplomatic narratives or official government statements. Consequently, the initiative generates micro-level impacts that accumulate over time through the participation of large numbers of pilgrims each year.

These findings indicate that the MRI functions not merely as a technical policy for Hajj administration but also as a platform for direct interaction between a state and foreign citizens. In practice, this interaction serves as an important

channel through which perceptions are formed, maintained, and potentially transformed. Such dynamics become particularly relevant when examining the initiative through the lens of soft power, where attraction is generated not through coercion or material incentives but through positive experiences and perceived service quality.

DISCUSSIONS

The Makkah Route Initiative as Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Instrument

From Nye's (2021) perspective, the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) functions as a highly effective form of public service diplomacy that transforms material resources into symbolic influence. Through this initiative, Saudi Arabia converts its technological capabilities, administrative capacity, and digital infrastructure into sources of attraction that reinforce its image as a modern and humane Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The attractiveness of the MRI operates through two interconnected dimensions. First, the initiative projects an image of modernity through the use of biometric technologies, digitalized immigration procedures, and integrated service platforms such as the *Nusuk* application, all of which significantly reduce bureaucratic complexity. Pilgrims who experience immigration processing times of less than two minutes are more likely to develop favorable perceptions of Saudi Arabia's technological advancement and administrative efficiency. Second, the initiative reflects a strong humanitarian dimension through policies that prioritize the comfort and well-being of vulnerable groups. Elderly pilgrims and persons with disabilities receive dedicated assistance, priority lanes, and specialized support services. In several embarkation points, including Adi Soemarmo Airport in Solo, Saudi personnel introduced additional comfort-oriented services designed to reduce anxiety and enhance pilgrims' travel experience before departure. These practices generate positive emotional responses among pilgrims, who subsequently become informal agents of grassroots public diplomacy by sharing their experiences upon returning to Indonesia.

Within the framework of Vision 2030, the MRI also contributes to the generation of performance legitimacy for Saudi Arabia. Through the Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP), the Kingdom demonstrates that its responsibility

extends beyond safeguarding the physical sites of Islam's holiest places; it also encompasses ensuring the dignity, comfort, and welfare of the "Guests of Allah" through internationally recognized service standards. The successful facilitation of approximately 18.5 million Hajj and Umrah pilgrims globally in 2024 further strengthens Saudi Arabia's position as a competent and forward-looking leader of the Islamic world. Recognition from the Indonesian government, including discussions regarding the adaptation of similar service mechanisms, represents an important form of external validation, indicating that the Saudi model is increasingly perceived as a benchmark for effective pilgrimage administration.

The MRI further functions as a catalyst for bilateral relations that extend beyond purely religious affairs. Continuous coordination among Saudi authorities and Indonesian institutions including the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Directorate General of Immigration, and airport operators has fostered long-term trust and institutional familiarity. Such trust serves as an important facilitator of broader diplomatic engagement. By reducing administrative burdens and improving the overall pilgrimage experience, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its reputation as a reliable, inclusive, and responsive partner. Consequently, the initiative contributes not only to the Kingdom's religious legitimacy but also to its broader smart power strategy by combining administrative effectiveness, technological innovation, and diplomatic influence in a mutually reinforcing manner.

The Makkah Route Initiative as a Mechanism of Soft Power Conversion

This section discusses the empirical findings through the lens of soft power theory. The analysis seeks to explain how the Makkah Route Initiative functions not merely as an innovation in Hajj administration but also as a mechanism through which public policy is transformed into soft power within the context of Saudi Arabia–Indonesia relations. The discussion is informed by scholarship on soft power, public diplomacy, and cross-border public service governance.

MRI and Soft Power Resources: Attraction Through Public Policy

According to Joseph Nye, soft power originates from policies that are perceived as legitimate, attractive, and valuable by others (Nye, 2011; Nye, 2017). The findings of this study indicate that the MRI satisfies these criteria through the provision of

efficient, technology-driven, and human-centered pilgrimage services. The initiative does not rely on coercion or material incentives directed toward Indonesia; rather, it generates attraction through the quality of service experienced by pilgrims. Contemporary public diplomacy literature emphasizes that public policies directly affecting foreign populations have become increasingly important sources of soft power (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008). In this regard, the MRI can be understood as a form of policy-based attraction, in which administrative effectiveness and concern for pilgrim welfare serve as sources of Saudi Arabia's moral legitimacy as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The empirical findings therefore reinforce Nye's argument that well-managed domestic policies can generate international influence, particularly when they embody universal values such as efficiency, human dignity, and equitable service provision.

Pilgrim Experience and Experience-Based Diplomacy

The findings demonstrate that the MRI primarily operates through the direct experiences of Indonesian pilgrims rather than through formal diplomatic narratives. This observation is consistent with literature highlighting the evolution of diplomacy from elite-centered communication toward people-centered diplomacy (Hocking, 2013). Within the soft power framework, positive pilgrim experiences function as a medium through which perceptions are formed and disseminated. Nye (2021) argues that soft power depends significantly on how other actors experience and interpret their interactions with a state. The MRI creates a context in which Saudi Arabia engages directly with individuals not merely as a destination country but as a provider of public services. Research on nation branding further suggests that positive public service experiences can contribute to the long-term construction of a favorable national image (Anholt, 2007). In this context, the MRI strengthens perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a modern, organized, and responsive state capable of addressing the needs of the global Muslim community, particularly pilgrims from developing countries such as Indonesia.

Power Conversion: From Technical Innovation to International Legitimacy

One of the central concepts in soft power theory is power conversion, namely the ability of a state to transform resources into actual influence (Nye, 2021). The

findings indicate that the MRI provides a concrete example of such a conversion process. The Kingdom's investments in biometric technology, pre-clearance systems, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms do not remain merely technical capacities. Instead, these resources are translated into increased trust, legitimacy, and positive perceptions among foreign stakeholders. Literature on public policy implementation suggests that successful implementation often contributes more significantly to legitimacy than policy design alone (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). In the case of the MRI, successful operational implementation at Indonesian airports reinforces perceptions that Saudi Arabia possesses the administrative capacity to manage the complexities of Hajj governance in a professional and technologically sophisticated manner. These findings extend the soft power literature by demonstrating that cross-border policy implementation can serve as an important arena for soft power conversion, complementing more traditional sources such as culture, education, and media.

MRI Within the Vision 2030 Framework and Saudi Arabia's Global Repositioning

The findings further reveal that the MRI cannot be separated from the broader strategic objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, particularly efforts to diversify the sources of Saudi Arabia's international legitimacy. Vision 2030 emphasizes bureaucratic modernization, service efficiency, and international openness as key components of national transformation. Scholarship on Gulf states' soft power strategies notes that religious services are increasingly employed as instruments of both symbolic and practical diplomacy (Al-Rasheed, 2019). The MRI supports this observation by demonstrating that Hajj administration has evolved beyond a purely religious function and now carries important political and diplomatic dimensions. Within the context of Saudi Arabia–Indonesia relations, the initiative serves as a non-confrontational diplomatic bridge that strengthens bilateral cooperation without requiring formal political negotiations. This dynamic is consistent with liberal institutionalist arguments that technical and institutional cooperation can generate trust, facilitate collaboration, and contribute to long-term stability in international relations.

Contributions to the Literature and Limitations of Interpretation

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the international relations literature by extending the application of soft power theory to the domain of religious public service diplomacy. Unlike much of the existing soft power literature, which focuses primarily on popular culture, education, or media influence, this research demonstrates that cross-border administrative services can also function as significant sources of attraction and legitimacy. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The soft power effects of the MRI in this study are assessed primarily through perceptions, experiences, and legitimacy rather than through direct changes in Indonesia's foreign policy behavior. This limitation is consistent with the broader soft power literature, which emphasizes that soft power generally operates gradually and over the long term, often producing indirect outcomes that may not be immediately observable in formal political decisions (Nye, 2011). Consequently, while the findings provide strong evidence that the MRI contributes to the enhancement of Saudi Arabia's international image and legitimacy, further research incorporating interviews, surveys, or longitudinal assessments would be valuable for examining the long-term diplomatic implications of this initiative in greater depth.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the Makkah Route Initiative (MRI) functions as an effective instrument of Saudi Arabia's soft power by transforming efficient and human-centered public services into a source of attraction and legitimacy. Through innovations such as immigration pre-clearance, biometric verification, integrated baggage management, and technology-driven service delivery, Saudi Arabia has enhanced the effectiveness of Hajj administration while simultaneously strengthening its international image among Indonesian pilgrims. Using Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the findings demonstrate that MRI serves as a mechanism of power conversion in which technological and administrative capabilities are transformed into positive perceptions, trust, and moral legitimacy.

The initiative illustrates that public service innovation can become a strategic diplomatic resource capable of generating influence without coercion or material incentives.

The study further shows that cross-border public service cooperation contributes to Saudi Arabia's broader Vision 2030 agenda and supports the Kingdom's efforts to position itself as a modern, professional, and globally connected leader of the Muslim world. To maximize the long-term benefits of the initiative, continued institutional coordination, digital integration, and service-quality improvements are required from both Saudi Arabian and Indonesian stakeholders. Future studies are encouraged to incorporate interviews and survey data to further examine the long-term diplomatic implications of the initiative.

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