



## Indonesia's Efforts in Developing Halal Tourism through the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT)

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### [ *Abstract* ]

This research aims to comprehend the progress of Halal tourism in specific Indonesian regions, including Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands. It investigates ways to boost this progress through collaboration within the IMT-GT. Majority of the population in these areas, as in Malaysia and Southern Thailand, is Muslim. Consequently, developing Halal Tourism within the IMT-GT framework poses a challenge for them. While the IMT-GT framework already encompasses the Tourism and Halal Product sectors, it doesn't explicitly mention Halal Tourism aspect. Despite this, efforts to develop Halal Tourism in Indonesia offer opportunities for both domestic growth and taking advantage of proximity to two more advanced neighboring countries, Malaysia and Thailand, in this aspect. This research employs explanatory analysis, examining Indonesia's opportunities and approaches to developing the Halal Tourism sector, both domestically, designed by the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2021-2024, and within the IMT-GT framework itself. A new aspect of this study involves assessing the

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readiness within Indonesia and its correlation with the opportunities provided by the IMT-GT. Indonesia should actively embrace opportunities presented by its two neighboring countries. The recognition through various awards that Indonesia has received can strongly motivate efforts to enhance the preparedness of regions designated for Halal Tourism. The economic corridors established by the IMT-GT among these three countries can serve as a conduit for Indonesia's advancement in developing Halal Tourism.

**Keywords:** Halal tourism, Indonesia, IMT-GT, subregional cooperation

## **I . Introduction**

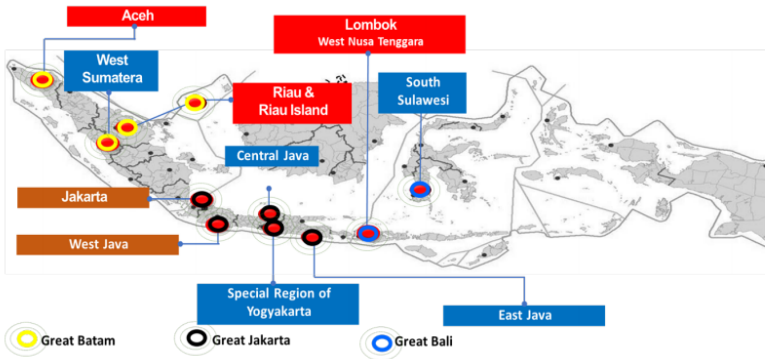
The Muslim population across 57 countries forming the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is increasingly engaging in travel with their families and friends, leading to the development of Halal tourism to accommodate this trend (Henderson 2010). The consistent growth of Halal tourism is now a global phenomenon in the tourism industry. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 24% of the world's population, equivalent to around 1.7 billion people, are Muslims and thus potential targets for the Halal tourism industry (Pew Research Center 2017). This sizable potential Muslim tourist demographic has captured the attention of academia, government bodies, and tourism agencies, fostering efforts to enhance Halal tourism. This industry is not only rapidly growing in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia but is also gaining traction in non-Muslim countries such as Thailand, Australia, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan.

Being the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia holds tremendous potential for the development of Halal tourism, presenting a substantial opportunity. The tourism sector has consistently made a significant contribution to the country's economic growth, emerging as one of the foremost generators of foreign currency profits (Ollivaud & Haxton 2019). Since 2016, the Indonesian government has played a crucial role in advancing the Halal tourism

industry, primarily through the Ministry of Tourism, subsequently renamed the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif - Kemenparekraf). The government has identified ten provinces as key Halal tourism destinations, including Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, Riau Islands, Jakarta, West Java, Central Java, Yogyakarta, East Java, Lombok (Nusa Tenggara Barat), and South Sulawesi (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019). Lombok, beginning with its victory at the World Halal Tourism Award in Abu Dhabi in 2015, has emerged as a model for Halal tourism development in other Indonesian regions. During that period, Lombok received recognition as the World Best Halal Destination and World Best Halal Honeymoon Destination (Chotijah 2017).

Receiving global recognition, Lombok is expected to motivate other tourist destinations to actively improve their standards. The key is not Lombok's ability to consistently uphold its global recognition, but rather its potential to inspire other tourist destinations to enhance their standards. These standards include fundamental criteria like Halal food, prayer facilities, water-friendly washrooms, and an environment free from Islamic phobia. In essence, Lombok serves as a model, motivating all stakeholders to enhance and elevate tourist areas to higher standards. The achieved status is a motivating factor for the Local Government of Lombok to uphold Lombok as a comfortable tourist destination, and the continual preservation of its reputation is crucial both on a global and national scale.

The ongoing government initiatives to develop Halal Tourism are currently part of the broader implementation of regional tourism improvement programs in Indonesia. Unlike focusing on the concepts of "Islamization" or "Arabization," the Halal Tourism program aims to enhance the preparedness of tourist destinations, ensuring they meet at least the essential "Need to have" criteria. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy has implemented a comprehensive strategy to enhance the industry. In 2019, the ministry set a target that 5 million foreign tourists visiting Indonesia should be Muslim tourists (Patriella 2019). To achieve this goal, the 10 designated provinces have been actively competing to advance the Halal tourism industry.



Sources: *Rencana Strategis Pengembangan Pariwisata Halal 2019-2024 (Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024)*, Kementerian Pariwisata, 2019.

<Figure 1> Ten Designated Provinces for Halal Tourism in Indonesia

Among the designated provinces, Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands are situated on Sumatra Island, sharing borders with Malaysia and Thailand. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand collaboratively participate in sub-regional cooperation known as the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). Within this cooperation, the three countries aim to develop their border regions through economic collaboration, including the advancement of Industry and Halal Product, as well as in the tourism sector. The Halal Product program is an initiative under the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) to amplify the potential of the sub-region as a tourist destination. IMT-GT, functioning as a sub-regional collaboration, contributes to ASEAN connectivity (ASEAN Economic Community) alongside the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). The three types of sub-regional cooperation act as a foundation for ASEAN.

Areas with a predominant Muslim population in Indonesia, Malaysia, and southern Thailand are now incorporating their distinctiveness into tour packages to attract more visitors. From a business standpoint, this could serve as a potential source of regional income with proper support from regulations and infrastructure. However, the social readiness of the local community must be carefully considered and prepared. This paper, utilizing the

qualitative explanative method, seeks to comprehend how Indonesia is developing Halal tourism in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands, and how it can further enhance this development through cooperation in the IMT-GT. This article starts by examining documents and writings from scholars who focus on Halal Tourism issues. Additionally, we analyze issues that have arisen in the three IMT-GT countries since 2016, specifically related to connectivity concerns [infrastructure, institutions, and people-to-people] among these nations, including aspects of social life. In the context of Halal Tourism development within the IMT-GT, each member country is actively working on implementing this program. Indonesia is focusing on the development of this sector, recognizing its substantial potential to contribute to the advancement of the national tourism industry.

## **II . Halal Tourism and Cross-border Tourism Cooperation**

Halal tourism is defined by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as Muslim travelers who do not seek to jeopardize their essential faith-based demands while traveling for a valid purpose (COMCEC Coordinator Office 2016). Halal tourism is a relatively new concept in the tourism industry that tries to cater to Muslim faith-based needs, such as Halal cuisine, Halal transportation, Halal hotels, Halal logistics, Islamic finance, Islamic holiday packages, and Halal spas (Satriana & Faridah 2018). The Halal tourism industry must meet six requirements for Muslim tourists: (1) Halal food and products; (2) prayer facilities; (3) toilet with washing facilities; (4) Ramadan service or fasting; (5) management of tourist attractions and inns ensuring the absence of immoral activities; and (6) provision of facilities for certain activities by men and women (Perbawasari et al. 2019). The terminology of Halal tourism varies in some countries, such as Islamic tourism, Halal travel, Muslim-friendly tourism, and others. Halal tourism and Muslim-friendly tourism are used interchangeably in several IMT-GT documents. In this article, Halal tourism is used because it conforms with the terminology used officially by the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy.

A study by Yusuf, et al., titled "The Determinants of Tourists' Intention to Visit Halal Tourism," (2021) reviews Aceh's readiness for tourism, considering its Islamic ambiance, accessibility, communication, and services as variables that influence tourists' likelihood to visit. Unlike the current article under discussion, this article does not explore external relationships, such as sub-regional cooperation within the IMT-GT. It identifies service quality and the Islamic environment as crucial factors influencing tourists' decisions to visit Aceh. Although not directly related to the ongoing article, these two variables provide important insights when discussing Aceh as a destination for Halal Tourism.

A 2018 report from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), referenced in the Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024, highlighted the tourism sector's significant positive impact on the global economy. As depicted in <Figure 2>, the tourism sector surpassed other industries, contributing 4.60% to global economic growth and providing 9.9% of total employment, amounting to 313 million jobs. Furthermore, the travel and tourism sector accounted for 10.40% of the global GDP. Based on the information presented, it is suggested that fostering the development



Source: "Travel and Tourism Economic Impact World Report" (WTTC), 2018, cited in *Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024*

<Figure 2> Impact of Tourism on Global Economy

of the travel and tourism sector can contribute to "three macro variables such as the GDP, economic growth, and reducing unemployment," as indicated by the Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning in 2019.

The growth of the travel and tourism sector is closely tied to the substantial influx of both domestic and international visitors. This progress is notably influenced by the expanding market share of Muslim tourists. According to the 2018 Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) Report, the expenditure by Muslim travelers has surged from USD 220 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach approximately USD 300 billion by 2026. Starting from 2016, the number of Muslim tourists has increased from 121 million to 131 million in 2017 (MasterCard & Crescent 2018), with a continued upward trend in 2018 and 2019, until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021.

The 2018 GMTI report identified seven factors contributing to the rapid growth of global Halal travel, including the increasing Muslim population, growth of the middle-income Muslim demographic, millennial Muslims, better access to travel information, more travel service providers, Ramadan travel, and travel businesses (MasterCard & Crescent 2018). According to the Global Islamic Economy Report 2018/19, the Halal travel sector is expected to reach USD 274 billion in 2023, up from USD 177 billion in 2017 (Thomson Reuters and Dinar Standard 2018). The report highlighted that many Muslim travelers come from the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. These trends are prompting Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, to develop Halal-standard tourist destinations to attract Muslim tourists and seize emerging opportunities. In ASEAN, initiatives like IMT-GT are working on Halal Tourism programs covering Peninsular Malaysia, Southern Thailand, and Sumatra, Indonesia.

According to Pasaribu (2019), the tourism arrivals from Singapore, China, Australia, and Germany to North Sumatra during January-July 2019, for example, exhibited a decline compared to the same period in 2018. Specifically, Singapore saw 10,263 visitors [a reduction of 1,663], China 4,611 visitors [a decrease of 24], Australia

2,980 visitors [a decrease of 83], and Germany 3,186 visitors [a decrease of 478].

Additionally, in July 2019, Malaysian tourists were the most prominent, totaling 9,549 visitors to North Sumatra, followed by the Netherlands with 1,124 visitors, Singapore with 1,023 visitors, China with 777 visitors, Germany with 701 visitors, and Australia with 636 visitors (Pasaribu 2019). The Chief of BPS Aceh, Ahmadriswan Nasution, reported that in December 2022, the number of foreign arrivals in the Aceh Province was at 1,856 individuals. This marked an increase compared to November 2022, which had 457 foreign visitors, and October 2022, with only 266 arrivals. According to data recorded by BPS Aceh, the highest number of foreign tourists in Aceh in 2022 came from Malaysia, totaling 1,447 individuals. Following this were visitors from the United States (203 individuals), the United Kingdom (321 individuals), Germany (41 individuals), Australia (34 individuals), France (30 individuals), Singapore (14 individuals), the Netherlands (7 individuals), New Zealand (4 individuals), Thailand (2 individuals), and 524 tourists from other countries in the Middle East and Africa (Infoaceh.net 2023).

The plan for developing cooperation in Halal tourism within the IMT-GT can be seen as a type of collaboration in cross-border tourism. Cross-border cooperation is when countries or regions work together across shared or non-shared borders to achieve common goals (Gerfert, 2009). In this case, the usual idea of borders as barriers is reduced, and neighboring regions collaborate for sustainable development in border areas. Tourism always involves crossing borders in some way. Even though tourism can change how borders look and work, it's often the border that affects the landscapes, functions, and types of tourism. Some activities, like shopping and tourism, do well in border regions when prices and taxes are lower on one side, or when exchange rates are favorable. From the perspective of people living near borders, tourism growth can change how border regions are set up. For example, in some border areas, tourism facilities have developed near major crossing points so that visitors from other countries can easily enjoy without traveling far into the country.



In the realm of cross-border tourism development, technology and consumer behavior significantly influence how tourists choose their destinations. The contemporary era has become a benchmark for the transformation of consumers' general consumption behaviors. The abundance of information accessible through various technological options provides consumers with numerous choices, but their attention spans are brief. Technology and infrastructure advancements enhance connectivity, enabling travelers to swiftly search for information and make decisions. Many middle-class travelers embark on "once-in-a-lifetime" journeys, often exploring entire countries or even continents. Throughout their travels, they tend to switch between destinations or options, preferring short trips encompassing multiple destinations, whether near or far. In a short timeframe, they aim to maximize the value and enrich their experience. In response, cross-border tourism destinations are adapting to facilitate traveler access and movement, thereby increasing the diversity and value of travel. Short-distance travel is becoming more convenient due to proximity and accessible transport networks. Additionally, combining multiple destinations usually offers better value for money, making efficient use of time and resources. Given these trends, cross-border collaborations like the IMT-GT are deemed essential. Countries may consider combining various sites or tourist attractions with neighboring countries to enhance the overall travel experience.

To boost cross-border tourism, it's crucial to enhance coordination and cooperation in building connectivity among all the involved countries (Guo 2015). Various trends are fueling the growth of cross-border tourism (UNWTO 2014), including 1) making travel easier for more tourists to cross borders; 2) simplifying visa and cross-border formalities; 3) improving transportation networks and offering flexible transport options; 4) encouraging shorter and more frequent active travel; 5) diversifying experiences; 6) allowing access to information through technology; 7) and collaboration among cross-border partners and the development of ecotourism.

As per Kozak and Buhalis (2019), collaboration in cross-border tourism has the potential to create opportunities for all involved parties. Firstly, everyone can benefit by developing innovative

products and marketing strategies, gaining a competitive edge. Secondly, their joint efforts in positioning and branding may boost the yearly influx of visitors and tourism revenue in each destination. Thirdly, mutual assessments can lead to the exchange of new strategies. Fourthly, a wider range of attractions and activities can be offered to customers. From a sociological perspective, both sides can gain a better understanding of each other's values through the exchange of industry practices or cultural visits.

Nevertheless, it's important to underscore certain challenges in cross-border tourism. Firstly, obstacles may arise due to variations in management culture, leadership styles, entrepreneurship, and the historical context of industries and nations. Secondly, the unpredictable nature of political connections might impede the development of effective organizational structures and cross-border networks. Thirdly, cross-border destinations fall under the jurisdiction of multiple administrative organizations with conflicting goals and budgets. Fourthly, managing the sentiments of residents and involving local communities poses difficulties. Furthermore, the lack of financial resources or uneven distribution among member states or destinations could be a root of problem. Lastly, successful cross-border tourism cooperation requires a smart vision, good leadership, and solid teamwork. The development of cross-border tourism between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand is significant in this context, serving as a catalyst for connectivity within the IMT-GT and contributing to the overall strengthening of the ASEAN Economic Community. As IMT-GT, along with other sub-regional cooperation frameworks (GMS, BIMP-EAGA), is integral to ASEAN collaboration, cross-border tourism plays a role in enhancing economic interactions between nations, fostering cooperation within the broader ASEAN context.

### **III. Indonesia's Efforts to Develop Halal Tourism in Sumatra Islands**

#### **3.1. Indonesia's Halal Tourism Concept and Strategy**

In his article "Islamic Tradition and Religious Culture in Halal

Tourism: Empirical Evidence from Indonesia," Sholehuddin draws connections between Islamic traditions and the religious-cultural aspects of halal tourism. He explores how the culture of mutual forgiveness, both outwardly and inwardly, for example, contributes to building harmonious relationships within the community. The Sekaten tradition in Yogyakarta is also highlighted as being linked to the implementation of Islamic values in society. Sholehuddin's work underscores the interplay of traditional cultures with embedded Islamic values in the lives of specific communities. The research provides empirical findings, emphasizing the importance of delineating the relationship between Islamic religious values and halal tourism in Indonesia through Islamic traditions and religious culture. In his article, Sholehuddin lays the groundwork for understanding Halal Tourism by connecting it with traditional cultural practices that inherently contain religious values. Sholehuddin's viewpoint adds depth to our article as we examine it from a different perspective.

In the article by Cipta, Hatamar, and Indrawati, Islamic Sharia serves as the underpinning for community life, as encapsulated in the Minangkabau proverb "*Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah*" (Minangkabau custom is based on Islam and Islam itself is based on the Qur'an). In exploring Minangkabau, West Sumatra, they reinforce our article's comprehension of the direct application of religious values in traditional life. However, their article does not establish a connection to a broader framework, whereas our article aims to explore its relevance within the context of IMT-GT as a sub-regional cooperation.

To promote Halal tourism in 10 specified provinces, the Indonesian government has released the Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024 and the National Committee for Islamic Economic and Finance (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah-KNEKS) Work Plan for 2020-2024. These documents act as guiding frameworks for the advancement of Halal tourism in the country. Additionally, the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, published by the Deputy for Industrial and Institutional Development of the Ministry of Tourism in 2019, further supports the development of Halal tourism in Indonesia.

In the master plan, Halal tourism is identified as a component of the broader Halal value chain (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning 2019). The Masterplan recognizes that the increasing number of destinations and investments in tourism has elevated this sector to a significant contributor to foreign exchange earnings, employment, business growth, and infrastructure development. Furthermore, within the tourism industry, it stands out as one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors when compared to others (UNWTO 2014). The awareness of numerous potential tourist attractions that can positively impact the local economy, particularly through Muslim-friendly tourism, motivates Indonesia to foster the development of Halal tourism. According to the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, the prospective areas for Indonesia's Halal tourism include 1) Natural attractions such as beaches, mountains, waterfalls, lakes; 2) Cultural tourism; 3) Educational tourism; 4) Heritage tourism, encompassing structures associated with Islam, such as mosques; and 5) Historical tours, covering the history of Islam's growth in Indonesia (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019).

Halal tourism, as outlined in the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, is described as a comprehensive array of services, facilities, attractions, and accessibility designed to provide and cater to the experiences, needs, and desires of Muslim travelers (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019). The precise definition of Halal tourism is crucial to reduce any potential confusion. The initiation of Halal Tourism by Arief Yahya, Indonesia's tourism minister, in 2015 led to protests in various locations, including Lake Toba, Tana Toraja, Bali, Labuan Bajo, and South Sulawesi, with people opposing government programs (Purba 2019). Bali and other provinces also resisted Shariah Tourism in 2019, resulting in its cancellation (Mardiastuti 2019). Non-Muslims in Lake Toba, North Sumatra, expressed skepticism about Halal tourism.

The rejection from certain regions reflects a lack of continuous socialization about the meaning of Halal Tourism by stakeholders before the plan is implemented. Because it is not easy for tourist areas with a majority non-Muslim population to accept the concept of Halal Tourism. It is not wrong if they interpret the concept of

Halal Tourism as the government's intention to carry out Islamization or Arabization. On the other hand, tourist areas with a majority Muslim population, such as Aceh, also cannot escape the question of why Aceh should implement the Halal Tourism program when its region already adheres to Islamic (Shariah) values. Once again, this reflects the ambiguity in interpreting the intended concept of Halal Tourism. If we look at what the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy means, it emphasizes Halal Tourism as an effort to provide, improve, and enhance services, facilities, and everything needed for Muslim travelers, which should be a standard fulfillment for a tourist destination. Therefore, the aim is not to transform tourist destination regions by way of "Islamization" or "Arabization" but to establish standardized facilities for tourist destinations, ensuring comfort for all travelers, regardless of the predominant religious composition in those areas.

To address the challenges, the government needs to communicate that the development of Halal tourism is aimed at providing essential facilities for visitors, such as places of worship, clean and well-maintained toilets, separate wudhu/ritual ablution areas, Halal food options and restaurants, hotels equipped with Qibla signs in each room, and so forth. This initiative has nothing to do with the concept of "Islamization." The government's responsibility is to clarify the Halal tourism concept to those who hold misconceptions. Furthermore, with the incorporation of Muslim-friendly facilities, the destination could be highly appealing to Muslim tourists seeking extended stays at this beautiful lake. It's worth noting that the Halal tourism program currently excludes Lake Toba due to potential challenges that may not be quickly resolved.

Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga Uno, is introducing Halal tourism to rejuvenate the tourism industry in various locations. The government is reinforcing the purpose of the Halal tourism concept, emphasizing that it does not involve transforming tourist spots into religious areas. Instead, the focus is on establishing facilities catering to Muslim tourists, including Halal dining options, Shariah-compliant accommodations, and well-maintained prayer spaces. This aligns with Vice President KH Ma'ruf Amin's statement, who, as the chairman of the Advisory Board of MUI

(Indonesian Ulama Council), emphasized that the perspective of Halal Tourism does not entail converting tourist attractions into Halal spaces but rather ensuring the provision of Halal food in restaurants, the availability of places of worship, and meeting worship standards among accommodations (Sugianto 2021).

Similarly, Sandiaga Uno clarified that Halal Tourism represents an "opportunity and a government focus on enhancing the creative economy sector and does not imply the Islamization of destinations." He stated, "Halal tourism is more focused on being Muslim-friendly. This concept centers on expanding service efforts or providing additional services during travelers' journeys, rather than zoning destinations or creative economy centers" (Muhammad, 2021). Uno emphasized that the implementation of Halal Tourism in Indonesia should involve additional service efforts based on three criteria aligned with GMTI's Halal Tourism Standard: Need to have, Good to have, and Nice to have.

<Table 1> The Gradual Three Criteria of Halal Tourism Standard (GMTI)

	Need to Have	Good to Have	Nice to Have
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Halal Food</li> <li>· Prayer Facility</li> <li>· Water-friendly washrooms</li> <li>· Environment with No Islamic phobia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Unique Islamic Culture (Local Muslim experiences)</li> <li>· Ramadhan Facilities</li> <li>· Social Causes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Recreational spaces with privacy</li> <li>· No Non-Halal Services</li> </ul>

Source: Arranged and compiled from Global Moslem Travel Index

<Tabel 1> illustrates that the primary criteria labeled as "Need to have" are essential for the development of Halal Tourism. The second set, categorized as "Good to have," serves as a complement to the initial criteria, although it does not carry specific qualifications. Simultaneously, the third set adds more value to the Halal facility but does not constitute an immediate requirement. In the context of Halal Tourism in Indonesia, it is imperative for all suggested tourist destinations to meet the initial "Need to have" criteria.

The Indonesian government envisions positioning Indonesia as

a world-class Halal tourism destination. To realize this vision, the government, through the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, has outlined nine strategies, which include: 1) enhancing facilities and services for the convenience of tourists; 2) enhancing the appeal for Muslim travelers; 3) improving connectivity among Halal tourist destinations; 4) implementing targeted marketing based on destination, origin, and time, tailored to the preferences of the Muslim travel market; 5) developing promotions and marketing communications for the promotion of Halal tourism; 6) promoting the use of digital media in marketing efforts; 7) enhancing the quality and quantity of human resources; 8) fortifying policies and institutions, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and conducting research; and 9) enhancing industry competence through the development of Muslim-friendly tourist destinations (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019). The effective implementation of these nine strategies requires collaboration and coordination among the government and all stakeholders to promote the 10 designated Halal tourist attractions. Before the Master Plan for Halal Tourism and other government policies, Indonesia already had the "Halal Product Assurance Law" (Government Regulation No. 31 of 2019 and Law No. 33 of 2014). This law is crucial for Halal Tourism, especially for food and beverage products. The importance lies in ensuring that the nine strategies proposed would be ineffective without this Halal Product Assurance.

### **3.2. Halal Tourism Development in Sumatra Islands: Challenges and Opportunities**

Concerning the development of Halal tourism in IMT-GT, the designated Halal tourism destinations in Indonesia, which are also directly linked to the IMT-GT, are the provinces on Sumatra Island. Sumatra Island is part of Indonesia's territory and is a member of sub-national cooperation in IMT-GT. Regarding Halal Tourism, the Government has decided that three provinces of Sumatra, namely Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands, are prioritized regions. West Sumatra and Aceh have achieved international awards in the Halal Tourism Industry. West Sumatra earned the World Halal Tourism Award in 2016 in terms of

being the World's Best Halal Destination, World's Best Culinary Destination, and World's Best Tour Operator. In the same year, Aceh also achieved the World Halal Tourism Award as the World's Best Airport for Halal Travelers and the World's Best Halal Cultural Destination (MasterCard & Crescent Rating 2019). Furthermore, Aceh has successfully secured its position as the second Muslim-friendly tourism destination at the Indonesia Muslim Travel Index (IMTI) Award 2023 (Safrina 2023).

These achievements significantly encouraged Indonesia to promote and improve the Halal tourism industry over the assigned preference zones. However, efforts to make Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands become favorite Halal tourism industry destinations are still facing some challenges. Sharia principles such as cleanliness, qualified products according to established standards, and amenities [hotels, restaurants, travel agents, souvenir shops] for travelers have to be an essential requirement that must be implemented in all tourism sectors (Rozalinda and Nuhasnah, 2021).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, tourist arrivals to Indonesia have decreased. This trend has prompted the Indonesian government to increase the Halal value chain through Halal tourism. The development of Halal tourism in Indonesia has not been smooth since the country seems not too eager to compete in the Halal tourism industry. It had a slower start than other countries, particularly behind Malaysia which is frequently considered its main market competitor. The Halal Tourism Indonesia Association (Perkumpulan Pariwisata Halal Indonesia, PPHI) was only founded in 2012, and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy just published its Halal Tourism Implementation Guideline in 2019, five years after Malaysia (Putri 2020).

The absence of a legal basis as the regulation for Halal tourism implementation could challenge Halal tourism development in Sumatra. The current legal framework for Halal tourism is Law No. 10 of 2009 on Tourism and Act No. 33 of 2014 on Halal Product Guarantee. However, because there is no single item specific to Halal tourism. The two regulations are only sufficient to be utilized as a supplementary legal basis for Halal tourism. The DSN-MUI



(Dewan Syariah Nasional, Majelis Ulama Indonesia) Fatwa Number 08/DSN-MUI [National Sharia Council of the Indonesian Ulama]/X/2016 or The Guidelines for Organizing Tourism Based on Sharia Principles contains comprehensive Halal tourism arrangements. Unfortunately, as is well known, the DSN-MUI fatwa does not have binding legal authority (Susilawati 2019). In 2018, the Minister of Tourism issued a Decree of the Minister of Tourism No. KM.40/UM.001/MP/2018 regarding the Halal Tourism Indonesia Logo, followed by the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan in 2019 (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning 2019). These documents are insufficient to become a legal umbrella for implementing Halal tourism in Indonesia.

Several regions have issued regional regulations regarding halal tourism, such as West Nusa Tenggara Province Regional Regulation No. 2 of 2016 concerning Halal Tourism, West Sumatra Province Regional Regulation No. 1 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Halal Tourism, and Riau Governor Regulation Number 18 of 2019 concerning Halal Tourism. Aceh Province already has local regulations based on sharia law which is called Qanun. An example is the Qanun of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province No. 11 of 2002, concerning the implementation of Islamic law related to *aqidah*, worship and *syi'ar Islam*, and Qanun No. 8 of 2013 concerning tourism. Qanun that specifically regulates the implementation of halal tourism was issued by the Mayor of Banda Aceh through Banda Aceh City's Qanun Number 3 of 2022.

However, these local government regulations still require comprehensive technical guidance and standardization. This indicates that the development of halal tourism has not been considered crucial in some Indonesian regions. It is not supported by the issuance of local regulations and comprehensive standardization of technical policy that can be a reference for tourism stakeholders. The shortage of regulations and guidance from the central government has made some provincial governments afraid of issuing a policy to develop halal tourism. This problem will hinder local governments and the business community from developing Halal tourism destinations in the long term. Halal tourism will receive more attention if mandated by the central government. To achieve

Indonesia's goal of becoming the best Halal tourism destination, a breakthrough in the process of developing and ratifying the Halal tourism law is required.

Looking specifically at how Indonesia developed Halal tourism in some provinces, in 2020, the National Committee for Islamic Economic and Finance published a report entitled: "Report on the Development of Muslim-Friendly Tourism in the Region, 2019-2020." This report contains an assessment of the readiness of several priority destinations for Halal tourism development at the provincial level, assessed from four aspects, namely Access, Communication, Environment, and Services. In this assessment, the scoring for each aspect ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the worst condition and 5 indicating the best condition. <Table 2> shows the assessment for three destinations on Sumatra Island.

<Table 2> Assessment of the Readiness of Halal Tourism in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands

Aspect		Aceh	West Sumatra	Riau and Riau Islands
Access	Air	5	5	4
	Rail	1	3	1
	Sea	5	4	1
	Road	3	4	1
Communication	Muslim Visitor Guide	4	3	1
	Stakeholder Education	5	3	3
	Market Outreach	5	5	5
	Tour Guide	5	5	5
	Digital Marketing	5	5	5
Environment	Muslim Tourist Arrival	5	5	3
	Wi-Fi Coverage	4	4	3
	Commitment to Halal Tourism	4	2	4
Services	Halal Restaurants	5	5	5
	Mosque	5	5	5
	Airports	5	5	5
	Hotels	5	4	5
	Attraction	5	5	1
Total Score		76	72	57

Source: *Laporan Perkembangan Pariwisata Ramah Muslim Daerah 2019-2020 (Report on the Development of Muslim-Friendly Tourism in the Region, 2019-2020)*, Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah, 2020

According to <Table 2>, Aceh and West Sumatra have relatively good conditions, while Riau and Riau Islands are still lagging. Aceh has the highest score in air and sea connectivity in the aspect of access. Aceh has a strategic geographical position on Sumatra Island, a gateway in the Strait of Malacca from Indonesia's side. This advantageous geographical connection made Aceh easily connect with neighboring countries. Besides, Aceh has also been exposing its economic corridor within the ongoing Halal Tourism project of IMT-GT since Aceh is included in one of the IMT-GT Economic Corridor (EC).

The Sultan Iskandar Muda International airport in Aceh is listed as the 23rd busiest airport in Indonesia and awarded the World's Best Airport for Halal Travelers in the World Halal Tourism Awards 2016 (Airlineshq.com 2017). The availability of air connectivity enlarges the opportunity for Aceh to attract many tourists worldwide via Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga S. Uno, stated that many foreign tourists who come to Aceh are not from the Middle East but mainly from Malaysia. Singapore comes in as second (Stuka Aceh 2021).

Apart from tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, another potential group to tap for Aceh Halal tourism are those coming from Thailand. Aceh can benefit from the Ranong-Phuket-Aceh connection in EC 5 IMT-GT. Aceh should consider Phuket a source of foreign tourists, as Phuket has become the most popular destination for global tourists. In this case, Sabang (Aceh) is the one who can profit from the connectivity in the EC 5. Unfortunately, there is still no direct flight between Aceh and Phuket, and connectivity is only through cruise and yacht routes. The Sabang International Regatta, which has been held since 2011 and has been changed into to the Sabang Marine Festival in 2015, is an annual festival that attracts yachters from Asia and Europe to Aceh. One of the yacht routes used is the Triangular Sailing Passage between the three points of Sabang-Phuket-Langkawi (JPNN.com 2017). This route was opened in 2017 and takes place on an annual basis, but in 2023 it was not implemented due to unfavorable weather conditions.

Connectivity among Aceh, Malaysia, and Thailand is an excellent opportunity for Sabang because Phuket is one of the world's yacht centers. Apart from the Sabang-Phuket-Langkawi corridor, another corridor, the Aceh-Krabi-Langkawi, is also an important spot for cross-border tourism. The air connectivity from Sabang to Phuket or Sabang to Langkawi will undoubtedly stimulate a flow of tourists coming to Sabang.

Further efforts that need to be developed by the government are how to market Sabang not only for marine tourism but also for Halal tourism, which is also an advantage of Aceh as it is well known as "Serambi Mekkah" (the Veranda of Mecca). Thus, Aceh also needs to improve infrastructure and connectivity within the region. As shown in <Table 2>, land access and rail transport in Aceh have not yet reached a satisfactory level. Aceh still does not have rail access, and only 46 percent of the total 1,781.72 km of roads are in good condition. Access to tourist attractions requires more attention (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020).

In developing Halal tourism in Aceh, all the existing connectivity will also depend on the readiness of Aceh to meet the Halal tourism industry standard with all proper hospitality, medical services, food and beverage, clean water supply. Take Sabang for example. Sabang has frequently been conducting World Yacht Competition and has become a cruise ship destination. Based on field research conducted by the authors in 2016, tourists in Sabang only come and take a few days to stay before they return to cruise. When the authors conducted fieldwork in Sabang in 2016, the Sabang Area Concession Agency (Badan Pengusahaan Kawasan Sabang-BPKS) explained that it has not been fully equipped with proper accommodations. Only backpacker tourists could stay longer and check in at hotels rated as three stars or below. This needs to change.

However, since Sabang plays the role of one of the tourism preference destinations, the government has been improving all the needed tourist attractions by enforcing coordination among the private sector, government, and community. Currently, many hotels

and resorts are in much better condition in Sabang. Sabang has already been growing its tourism industry, being known to be "the Golden Island" [one of 501 "Golden Islands" according to Great Britain Publishing] (Afif, 2018). Even though Sabang is not directly focused on Halal tourism, progress in the tourism industry will positively impact the efforts of the Halal tourism industry in Aceh.

Moreover, to develop an international network with neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand, Aceh has already played soft diplomacy by exposing its unique culture, culinary tours, and historical sites. In 2017, the province of Aceh had declared its vision to become a world-class tourism destination, with Halal tourism as a priority, following the government program of "the 3As" (Amenities, Accessibility, and Attraction) to make an excellent and Muslim-friendly environment in Aceh (Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata Aceh 2017). The government also published five visitor guidebooks in English and Arabic to accommodate Muslim tourists worldwide. The Aceh local government shows a reasonably good commitment compared to the West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands. The local governments are actively holding workshops to improve Halal tourism in their respective regions, such as FGD for Formulation of Halal Industry-Based Islamic Economic Masterplan, FGD for Synchronizing Development of Muslim Friendly Tourism Programs in Aceh Province, Muslim Friendly Tourism Campaign for Families, and Technical Guidance for Muslim Friendly Tourism Development (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020).

Compared to Aceh, West Sumatra does not have a geographical advantage because it is not directly connected to Malaysia and Thailand. Besides, it is also not yet included in IMT-GT's economic corridors. Therefore, air flights from Minangkabau International Airport to Phuket, Thailand, or Alor Setar Malaysia, Malaysia, have connected West Sumatra to neighboring countries. Furthermore, international flights from Padang Pariaman to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Padang Pariaman to Singapore provide convenient access for foreign Muslim tourists from other countries to visit West Sumatra via Singapore and Malaysia. This connectivity can become an opportunity for West Sumatra to develop its Halal tourism. West

Sumatra has a better condition than Aceh and Riau/Riau Islands in terms of connectivity within the region.

Together with Aceh, West Sumatra is also one of the mainstays in implementing Halal tourism in Sumatra. Rahmayanti, et al. (2021) conclude that there are 27 criteria of opportunities for West Sumatra in improving Halal tourism, including a growing creative industry, plenty of cultural and historical tourist destinations, specific culinary destinations, beautiful mountains and beaches, and comfortable hotel accommodations. They mentioned that “the population of West Sumatra, which is almost 100 percent Muslim, has great potential for development of Halal tourism” (ibid.). Halal tourism is a part of the general tourism industry, which aims to facilitate the needs of Muslim tourists by referring to Islamic rules (Rozalinda and Nurhasnah, 2019). These opportunities can be captured and implemented if various challenges faced by West Sumatra can be addressed and overcome.

Based on the assessment in <Table 2>, West Sumatra still lacks stakeholder education and commitment to Halal tourism. This assessment is in line with the result of the study of Rahmayanti et al., which stated that lack of public understanding of the concept of Halal tourism, socialization from the government to the community, facilities for the development of Halal tourism, and travel agencies that provide services to tourists are challenges for Halal tourism in West Sumatra (Rahmayanti et al. 2021). According to Yenita and Widodo (2021), the level of people's awareness of the tourism sector's critical role, which can contribute significantly to the local economy, remains low. There remains concern about the large number of tourists visiting West Sumatra, which will negatively impact local morals and customs (Yenita and Widodo 2021). The government's task is to provide continuous understanding and socialization on the purpose of Halal tourism implementation to the community in West Sumatra.

However, it does not mean that the West Sumatra government is not trying to increase halal tourism in its respective region. West Sumatra has published an English-language guidebook for Muslim tourists. They have also conducted halal tourism socialization,

though not as frequently as in Aceh, primarily through a Muslim-friendly tourism campaign and several tourism events such as the Minangkabau Fashion Festival, Nusantara Marandang, Sumarak Syawal, and the Tabuk Festival (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020).

Among the three designated provinces in Sumatra, Riau and Riau Islands are provinces where readiness levels lagged. The main problems in these provinces lie in the inadequate connectivity and infrastructure as seen in the assessment in <Table 2>, only the air access got a score of (4), while sea, rail, and road access only got (1). There are two international airports in Riau and the Riau Islands, namely Sultan Syarif Kasim Airport in Pekanbaru and Raja Haji Fisabilillah Airport in Tanjung Pinang. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sultan Syarif Kasim Airport has direct flights to and from Malaysia, Singapore, Malacca, and Medina. Meanwhile, Raja Haji Fisabilillah Airport has direct flight routes to five cities in China, namely Chongqing, Hanzhou, Ningbo, Chengdu, and Wenzhou.

In fact, Riau and Riau Islands have considerable halal tourism potential. As the Malay homeland in Indonesia, Riau and Riau Islands have a rich Islamic culture, customs, and literature. Malay Arabic letters are widely used and Malay teaching guidebooks are available. In addition, several historical heritage sites of the Riau Malay kingdom, such as Kesultanan Siak Sri Inderapura in Riau and Kesultanan Lingga-Riau in the Riau Islands, strengthen the role of Islam in the lives of society, government, and organizations in those two provinces (Suryani and Bustaman 2021). Riau and Riau Islands' geographical location close to Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore are beneficial for Halal tourism development.

Nonetheless, inadequate access and facilities in Riau and the Riau Islands are significant challenges. No matter how wonderful the attraction is, it is ineffective if tourists cannot reach it in a reasonable amount of time and without inconvenience. There is no rail transportation in this area, and road access is limited compared to Aceh and West Sumatra. From the whole province's road area of 1,374 kilometers, only 391 kilometers have been paved (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020). Moreover, access to

and from the tourist attractions is inadequate, as some of which cannot even be reached by four-wheeled vehicles. Even if it is reachable by car, it will take a long time due to the road quality. Even some tourist attractions cannot be reached by road and must be accessed by motorboat (Suryani and Bustaman, 2021). Aside from road infrastructure, adequate accommodation following halal tourism standards, such as separate toilets and ablution facilities for guests, and separate swimming pool facilities for men and women, must also be considered. The local and the central government need to work hand in hand to improve the existing infrastructure and accommodation in these provinces to support a more effective promotion of halal tourism.

Aside from the lack of a regulation from the central government to serve as a guide as well as the limitations of infrastructure and accommodation to meet the needs of foreign Muslim tourists, another issue encountered in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands is the lack of awareness and support for halal tourism from the people. The government faces a challenge because there is still a lack of awareness about obtaining Halal certification (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning 2019). In an area where most of the population is Muslim, the general perception is that all products provided and sold are perceived as Halal products. Only a few realize that Halal certification can provide reassurance for inbound Muslim tourists. Many entrepreneurs continue to face challenges in carrying out standard Halal procedures. There is a belief that obtaining Halal certification necessitates extensive and time-consuming bureaucratic paperwork. According to the result of field research conducted by Mastan East Java in 2018-2020, many local businesses think that they are already Muslim, thus they do not need to convince others about the Halal status of their products and services or they simply take a shortcut by printing out a Halal label and sticking it on their products. In contrary, both Malaysia and Thailand have demonstrated a high level of awareness and commitment to Halal certification, making significant progress in promoting and catering to the needs of Muslim consumers. In comparison to Indonesia, both Malaysia and Thailand have made significant strides in promoting Halal certification and awareness.



Malaysia established the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) which plays a crucial role in instilling Halal awareness and certification. Similarly, Thailand has a Central Islamic Council of Thailand (CICOT) responsible for determining and announcing Thai Halal standards, indicating a high level of awareness and regulation (Mawardi et al. 2021).

Even though Aceh is one of the provinces that follow Islamic sharia law, many local businesses do not obtain a Halal certificate. Twelve eateries in Aceh have already been certified as Halal, but 1,448 restaurants do not have Halal certificates and are only self-proclaimed Halal restaurants. West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands experienced the same thing. Simply 20 restaurants in West Sumatra have Halal certificates, while the remaining 1,300 restaurants are only self-declared Halal. There are 16 Halal-certified restaurants in Riau and the Riau Islands, while 2,321 eateries are only self-proclaimed Halal (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020). Aceh already has Aceh Qanun Number 8 of 2016 which is governing the Halal Product Guarantee System. However, some people still may not grasp the regulations; this may be due to the government's insufficient communication with the people.

Another obstacle is a scarcity of qualified human resources, which will impact the quality of service in Halal Tourism destinations. People working in popular tourist destinations must be knowledgeable about tourism, the provisions, and the standards of halal tourism and have adequate language skills. The availability of high-quality human resources will eventually affect tourist satisfaction. To address the issues, the central government can collaborate and coordinate with the local government, business sector, and the people to encourage each region to increase the competitiveness of halal tourism in their respective regions. Besides, central and local governments can benefit from existing international cooperation, such as the IMT-GT, to help promote and improve the quality of halal tourism in their regions.

## **IV. Indonesia's Halal Tourism Development and the IMT-GT Cooperation**

### **4.1. Halal Tourism Development Under the IMT-GT's Framework**

After taking off in 1993, IMT-GT became a strategic international economic cooperation for Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, involving education, culture, human resources, trade and investment, tourism, and Halal industry. IMT-GT effectively assists, promotes, and encourages economic growth through integration and economic innovation between countries and regions. As a growth triangle, IMT-GT is a unique form of international cooperation that takes advantage of untapped cross-border complementarities within geographical proximity. In the IMT-GT, there are seven strategic pillars, namely, agriculture and agro-based industry, tourism, Halal products and services, transport and ICT connectivity, trade and investment facilitation, environment, and human resource development, education, and culture. The seven pillars have been identified as key focus areas that will produce the most significant economic and social impact on the IMT-GT (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2017a).

One of the IMT-GT's strengths is tourism development, since the sub-region is gifted with a diversified geographic landscape and cultural history that attracts visitors. IMT-GT aims to bring 109 million foreign tourists to the region by 2036 (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2017b). To achieve this goal, IMT-GT has launched the IMT-GT Tourism Strategic Framework 2017–2036 and Action Plan 2017–2021. The program's implementation is carried out under the Working Group on Tourism (WGT), which aim to maximize and promote the tourism potential in the sub-region. The programs of WGT are consolidated with the strength of IMT-GT and strategic directives. IMT-GT Tourism programs persistently revolve around cross-border tourism. The geographical and cultural proximity among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand allows IMT-GT to market this region as a tourism package/hub with specific thematic tourism, such as medical, marine, and heritage.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> IMT-GT Tourism Forum held in Langkawi, Kedah, in

October 2018, the IMT-GT Tourism Packages were completed and launched (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2021). In the 29<sup>th</sup> IMT-GT Ministerial Meeting held in Batam, Riau Island, on September 29, 2023, the ministers of the three countries acknowledged the progressive recovery of the subregion's tourism following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To promote the Visit IMT-GT Year 2023-2025 initiative, the IMT-GT countries launched a campaign on promoting Muslim-friendly tourism. Part of this effort is publishing guidelines on their website (<https://imtgt.org/visit-imtgt/>) for Muslim-friendly tourism and gastronomy tourism routes. The guidebook provides comprehensive information on Muslim-friendly travel routes and highlights notable attractions in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. It includes detailed recommendations for halal dining options and accommodations that cater to the needs of Muslim tourists.

Halal tourism in IMT-GT has the potential to expand in the future. Halal products and services are essential for the IMT-GT as the subregion has a sizeable Muslim population. The increasing awareness of Muslims towards the importance of living a life in conformity with Islamic law makes the demand for Halal products and services grow. The IMT-GT countries have acknowledged the need to set internationally recognized Halal standards for current products and services, including tourism (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2021). With the rise in Muslim travelers, the IM-GT accommodated this upcoming tourism trend and niche market and initiated Muslim Friendly Tourism (MFT) as a new proposed program in WGT. The development of this program will be incorporated with WG of Halal Products and Services (WGHAPAS).

The IMT-GT cooperation aims to address the demands of Halal tourism by expanding the market and meeting the needs of Muslim tourists from all over the world by establishing a hub in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Regrettably, the IMT-GT Tourism Strategic Framework 2017–2036 and Action Plan 2017–2021 have yet to classify Halal tourism as a cross-border thematic circuit and route. In the document, the potential cross-border thematic circuits and routes only covered marine, cultural heritage, and ecotourism adventure circuits. However, the Tourism Strategic Framework

mentioned that developing and implementing a new Halal Destination Standard is categorized as one of the IMT-GT projects, to raise the tourism sector's competitiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness (IMT-GT 2017).

Among IMT-GT member countries, Malaysia was the first to standardize Halal tourism and successfully promote Halal tourism globally. Thus, Malaysia contributes to Halal tourism in IMT-GT by sharing its experiences and strategies for developing Halal tourism. For instance, on August 19, 2021, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) of the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture held the "IMT-GT Webinar: Understanding Muslim-friendly Tourism." The webinar showcased Malaysia's commitment to developing and promoting Islamic Tourism by introducing the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality concept. In the webinar, Datuk Wira Dr. Noo Zari, the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, & Culture Malaysia, and the Chairman of ITC, emphasized that Malaysia is willing to support Halal tourism in IMT-GT through the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC). Webinars, training sessions, research, industry consultation, and standards and certification development will help promote growth in the Islamic tourism market through more robust regional economic integration and innovation (ITC 2021).

The future development of Halal tourism in IMT-GT will require the commitment of the three members countries and the collaboration of several IMT-GT working groups (WGs) since the development of Halal tourism involves other Halal production value chains, such as the availability of Halal food and beverage, hospitality, and transportation that following the Islamic Sharia. Moreover, the availability of infrastructure that supports connectivity among the three countries and the improvement of the quality of tourism operators are essential in developing Halal tourism in the region. Thus, effective consultation and coordination must be established, not only between WGT and WGHAPAS, which are the two main WGs for developing Halal tourism projects in IMT-GT, but also with the WG on Transport and ICT Connectivity (WGTIC) and WG on HRD, Education, and Culture (WGHREDEC).

#### **4.2. Developing Indonesia's Halal Tourism through the IMT-GT**

The Indonesian National Committee for Islamic Economic and Finance Work Plan 2020-2024 recognized the need for international cooperation initiatives to advance the Halal industry and tourism in Indonesia. Even though the work plan emphasizes the importance of international cooperation, it does not explicitly mention IMT-GT's role in developing Halal tourism in Indonesia, particularly in Sumatra. In fact, in the National Development Plan of Indonesia (RPJMN 2020-2024), IMT-GT has been identified as one of the international cooperation initiatives that are beneficial to expanding investment, trade, and diversifying regional and global markets for Sumatra Island.

In the previous section, nine strategies for developing Halal tourism in Indonesia have been described. The implementation of the nine strategies is still primarily focused on domestic development, with little consideration is given to the use of international cooperation as part of the strategy. Sumatra Island's inclusion in the IMT-GT opens the opportunity for Indonesia to take advantage of the physical and institutional connections within the IMT-GT to promote Halal tourism in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands. The cross-border cooperation in IMT-GT is carried out to complement each member's needs to add value to the development of Halal tourism in the IMT-GT.

According to the principles of comparative advantage and mutual complementarity, cross-border cooperation could greatly benefit all participants in the area (Guo 2015). Given that Indonesia has the world's and Southeast Asia's largest Muslim population, the country has a sizable Halal market. Malaysia has a well-developed Halal ecosystem and a strong Halal brand, while the strength of Thailand is its Halal science and technology. In carrying out Halal tourism programs, particularly in Sumatra, Indonesia can utilize the complementarities among the three countries. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have sufficiently put their concern to Halal tourism as one of many potential economic fields for their national economic growth.

Cooperation for Halal tourism development in IMT-GT can be started by leveraging each other's strengths. Knowledge sharing, technology transfer, cross-border value chain development, and regulatory harmonization related to Halal standardization in the region are all critical. In IMT-GT, Malaysia is a country with a relatively developed Halal ecosystem and strong Halal branding capabilities. Meanwhile, Thailand leads the way in research and the application of digital technology to the development of Halal tourism. Through collaboration in the IMT-GT, Indonesia can learn from Malaysia and Thailand. To improve its Halal tourism destination branding, for example, Indonesia can participate in Halal tourism exhibitions held by Malaysia, such as the Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS), as Indonesia did in 2018 (Maria 2021). This effort is consistent with Indonesia's Halal tourism work plan, which emphasizes the importance of participating in sustainable Halal tourism exhibitions both at home and abroad.

In addition, from Thailand, Indonesia can learn how to increase awareness of the importance of Halal standardization and certification. Although Thailand is not a Muslim majority country, it is the world's fifth largest exporter of Halal products. In 2015, approximately 3,600 Thai companies held the overall Halal certification, covering 120,000 different products, with an export volume increase of 10% per year (Wiryapong 2015). Thailand believes that standardization and Halal certification are essential because tourism activities must include values that are in accordance with the needs of Muslim tourists. In addition, this is also related to Thailand's vision to establish itself as a hub for scientific research and testing of halal product certification. To promote halal tourism, Thailand launched a branding initiative called "Thailand Diamond Halal" to promote all halal products and services from Thailand, including halal tourism. The brand was created through a collaboration between the Halal Science Center of Chulalongkorn (HASCI) at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand, and the Thai Halal Standards Institute. All hotels with Muslim-friendly facilities, tour operators offering Muslim heritage tour packages, and Muslim-friendly tours

must apply for this brand. Indonesia can adopt this strategy to enhance awareness of halal certification among businesses.

Aside from information sharing, another collaboration that Indonesia can do through the IMT-GT is to use the economic corridor that has been established in the IMT-GT to promote Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands through its connectivity with Malaysia and Thailand. The geographical and cultural proximity of the Sumatra Islands to Malaysia and southern Thailand encourages collaboration to establish IMT-GT as a Halal tourism package/hub. Due to their geographical proximity, the three countries have potential tourism products that can be sold as a cross-border Halal tour package. However, there is one thing that also needs to be taken into consideration. As many Halal tourism activities are located in southern Thailand, the conflict in the locality could create problems as a result of ongoing conflicts and violence related to separatist movements. This instability and security concerns could deter Muslim tourists from visiting the region, impacting the overall appeal of the sub-region as a Halal tourism destination.

On the other hand, if Thailand can successfully develop Halal tourism, it can potentially help manage the conflict in the southern part of the country by promoting economic growth and stability in the region. By investing in Halal-friendly facilities and services, the government and private sector can create job opportunities and stimulate the local economy, providing an alternative source of income for communities affected by the conflict. This economic development can contribute to reducing poverty and addressing some of the underlying grievances that fuel the conflict in Southern Thailand. Furthermore, the promotion of halal tourism in the sub-region can also foster greater cultural understanding and tolerance. As Muslim-friendly facilities and services are established, it can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for both local Muslim communities and Muslim tourists, potentially fostering greater social cohesion and harmony in the region. Additionally, the focus on halal tourism development can also attract international attention and investment in the region, potentially leading to increased infrastructure development and improved connectivity,

which can benefit the overall development and stability of the southern provinces.

Overall, the development of Halal tourism in the IMT-GT has the potential to contribute to economic growth, social cohesion, and international investment for provinces that are included in IMT-GT cooperation, particularly through the development of the economic corridors. Currently, Aceh is included in the two economic corridors (EC) in the IMT-GT, namely EC 3 (Banda Aceh-Medan- Pekanbaru-Palembang Economic Corridor) and EC 5 (Ranong-Phuket-Aceh Economic Corridor). EC 5 has already started promoting this area for marine tourism. As mentioned in the previous section, Aceh, in particular Sabang, benefits from the existing connectivity in EC 5. In addition to Aceh, Riau is also part of EC 4 (Dumai - Melaka Economic Corridor), a maritime corridor that connects Sumatra Island and the Malay Peninsula through the two strategic ports of Dumai and Melaka. This maritime corridor has a long freight and passenger traffic that traverses Sumatra and Malaysia. Connectivity in EC 4 is primarily used for trade purposes. Indonesia needs to see this connection as an opportunity to develop Halal tourism in Riau. Unlike Aceh and Riau, West Sumatra has not yet joined the EC in the IMT-GT, but it has the potential to be included in EC 3, which will cover the entire mainland Sumatra, both west and east coasts. It is hoped that the existence of EC 3 will facilitate the development of land infrastructure in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands.

The long COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the economic corridors of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). Travel restrictions and border closures hindered the flow of goods, services, and people across the corridors, reducing trade volume, and foreign direct investments. The tourism industry has been severely impacted in the three countries, particularly affecting tourist destinations within the economic corridors. However, the long-term impact of the pandemic on IMT-GT economic corridors has undoubtedly triggered a period of adaptation and transformation. Recovery efforts focus on strengthening physical and digital connectivity, fostering innovation, and promoting cross-border collaboration to build a more resilient and adaptable economy in the region. As acknowledged during the



29th IMT-GT Ministerial Meeting in September 2023, the Ministers expressed satisfaction with the subregion's economic recovery, which saw a trade value of US\$727 billion in 2022. This represents a US\$109 billion gain compared to the US\$618 billion recorded in 2021. The Ministers acknowledge the advancements achieved in the halal industry and express their approval of technology-based initiatives including Halal Blockchain, Online Halal Registration Systems, and Halal Integrated Information Systems, which contribute to the development of IMT-GT Halal cooperation.

Cultural diversity, natural beauty, and the unique ecosystem in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are IMT-GT tourism assets. Combined with physical connectivity, adequate infrastructure, and transportation, it has the potential to make IMT-GT one of the best tourist destinations in the world. Aceh, Penang, Melaka, Phuket, and Krabi have always been popular destinations for IMT-GT visitors. For example, in 2018, seven cruise ships and 96 yachts called on the port of Sabang. Tourist arrivals in Sabang Port have been increasing, reaching over 6,000 international visitors and close to 737,000 domestic visitors in 2017 (Guina 2023). Meanwhile, in Aceh, the total number of foreign tourists who visited in 2019 reached 34,465 visitors. The numbers declined in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but has begun to increase and reached 20,467 in 2023 (BPS Provinsi Aceh, 2023).

The preservation of local wisdom rich in Islamic lifestyles in developed tourist destinations can also encourage the involvement of all elements of society in economic development along the border. Other factors that also need to be considered in marketing IMT-GT as a Halal tourism package is the ease of travel throughout and to the IMT-GT region, which can support the mobilization of foreign tourists to halal tourist destinations in three countries. Therefore, the IMT-GT member countries' regulations must be coordinated and harmonized to ease foreign tourists' mobilization.

Infrastructure and institutional improvements that can support halal tourism must then be assisted by integrated tourism development among its components. The IMT-GT Implementation Blueprint 2017-2021 stated that the Halal products and services

cooperation is built to promote and transfer capacity and develop networking among Halal research centers in universities in the IMT-GT. On September 25-29, 2017, the University of Bangka Belitung (UBB) in Indonesia hosted the University Network (UNINET) meeting, a cooperation network between universities in IMT-GT member countries. At the event, Dr. Nor Lelawati Jamaluddin, a lecturer from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia, shared the experiences of Malaysia in managing their Halal tourism development from which Indonesia and Malaysia may learn (Maria 2021).

Cooperation through the IMT-GT's UNINET can support one of Indonesia's nine Halal tourism development strategies, namely improving the quality and quantity of human resources. UNINET has become a strategic forum for various sciences and technicalities among IMT-GT members in applying the Halal concept to many businesses and products. Collaboration can be carried out through UNINET in the form of training for business sectors and communities in halal tourist destinations and joint research on the demand characteristics of Muslim tourists and their behavior to design tourism products and services that meet the needs of Muslim tourists globally.

Given that Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand are all concerned about developing Halal tourism, a collaboration between these three countries will be able to promote IMT-GT as a hub that focuses on leveraging the combined strengths of the three countries in the Halal tourism and industry for the global market. However, how IMT-GT institutionalizes its halal tourism cooperation at the subregional level must be considered in the future, given that halal tourism is not explicitly mentioned in the IMT-GT Tourism Strategic Framework 2017–2036 and Action Plan 2017–2021 as part of Potential Cross-Border Thematic Circuits and Routes. Moreover, the program's implementation is highly dependent on effective coordination and collaboration between WGT and WGHAPAS. Meanwhile, for Indonesia, the synergy between domestic halal tourism strategies and projects with existing IMT-GT programs is required to support the success of halal tourism development, particularly in Sumatra.

## V. Conclusion

The Halal tourism effort in Indonesia has been conducted despite the limitations. Indonesia has identified 10 halal tourist destinations, each appealing to foreign visitors. In addition, Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy has developed nine strategies to support the development of halal tourism in the country. According to the MasterCard & Crescent Rating on Global Muslim Travel Index 2018, Indonesia is the second most visited country by Muslim tourists worldwide. This factor shows how Halal tourism can be potentially beneficial for its border development and national economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although there are opportunities to develop halal tourism, Indonesia still faces several challenges, such as the unavailability of the highest regulations for the implementation of halal tourism in Indonesia, inadequate connectivity and access to tourist destinations, poor facilities such as the restrooms and prayer rooms at several local halal destinations, lack of qualified human resources, as well as the low awareness of the importance of halal certification for the food and beverage in the Halal tourism destinations.

To improve its Halal tourism development, Indonesia can benefit from international cooperation, such as IMT-GT. Within the scope of its collaboration, IMT-GT focuses on developing thematic cross-border tourism, and Halal tourism has the potential to be developed in this region. In this context, Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands are included in Indonesia's ten designated Halal tourism destinations and part of the Indonesian border area in Sumatra Island that participates in IMT-GT.

Even though the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy is a member of the IMT-GT's WGT, IMT-GT has not been identified as a potential opportunity to develop Halal tourism on Sumatra Island. Indonesia can benefit from the comparative advantages between the IMT-GT member countries. Indonesia has a sizable Halal market, Malaysia has a well-developed Halal ecosystem and a strong Halal brand, while Thailand has scientific and technological advantages for the Halal tourism industry. Furthermore,

the geographical and cultural proximity of the three countries can be leveraged to create a halal tourism destination product that is appealing to foreign tourists.

Cooperation that can be carried out through IMT-GT, for instance, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, may use existing mechanisms such as working groups in IMT-GT to share information and experience in developing halal tourism. To market halal tourism destinations in IMT-GT as a package, they can optimize the connectivity existing in the economic corridors. Moreover, Indonesia can also utilize networks between universities in UNINET IMT-GT to support the development of halal tourism through business and public training and joint research to improve the quality of halal tourism in each country. To face the challenges of developing halal tourism in the future, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand need to establish effective coordination and work together to ensure that the development of halal tourism in this sub-region can be properly institutionalized through the IMT-GT.

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