Transformation of Muslim Friendly Hospitality: An Overview of Shariah Compliant Tourism Development in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Malaysia has consolidated its position as a leading destination for Muslim-friendly tourism through an integrated mix of policy direction, standards development, and industry adoption. The study aims to review the evolution of Shariah-compliant tourism governance by focusing on Malaysian Standard MS 2610 and the Islamic Tourism Centre, Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) scheme under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, while also comparing Malaysia's approach with the OIC/SMIIC Halal Tourism Services standard to identify convergence and locally specific innovations. Methodologically, the research applies a policy and standards review, supported by documentary analysis of MFAR criteria and listings, and uses illustrative cases of recognised hotels to evaluate service quality, market signalling, and consumer assurance. The findings suggest that MS 2610 functions as a foundational benchmark that clarifies operational requirements and expected practices for Muslim-friendly hospitality services. MFAR, in turn, translates these requirements into an assurance and recognition mechanism that is visible to the market, supported by training, branding, and structured guidance for service providers. The interaction between standards, certification pathways, and capacity-building initiatives helps reduce information asymmetry, strengthens consumer trust, and encourages the hospitality sector to institutionalise Muslim-friendly service delivery within a broader tourism ecosystem. At the same time, the study identifies persistent implementation gaps, including uneven standardisation across service segments, inconsistent competency levels among frontline staff, and limited readiness among small and medium enterprises due to resource constraints, documentation burdens, and the demands of continuous compliance. The article concludes that Malaysia's leadership in Muslim-friendly tourism can be strengthened through policy and industry measures that more explicitly align service delivery with Maqasid al-Shariah, expand competency development, and provide targeted support for SMEs to adopt standards progressively. It also recommends enhanced harmonisation with OIC/SMIIC benchmarks and improved transparency in MFAR reporting to reinforce credibility and competitiveness in post-pandemic tourism strategies.

Keywords: Muslim friendly, Hospitality, Shariah, MFAR, Islamic Tourism Centre

INTRODUCTION

The Global Muslim Travel Index has estimated that the number of Muslim travellers would reach 230 million and contribute US$300 billion to the world economy. In the past few years, many Muslim and non-Muslim destinations and service providers in tourism have launched their plans to attract Muslim travellers and become Muslim friendly destinations. To meet the needs of destinations and tourism and hospitality service providers on how to deal with this emerging market, Muslim tourism and its related issues have captured the attention of academic researchers (Mohajer et al., 2022).Muslim-friendly hospitality has matured from a niche offering into a structured field of practice in which faith-based needs are anticipated within mainstream tourism services. In this context, Malaysia has emerged as a reference point for policy articulation, standard setting, and industry mobilisation that align service delivery with Shariah requirements through the Islamic Tourism Centre's programmes (Islamic Tourism Centre). Rather than treating "Muslim-friendly" as a marketing label, current Malaysian practice treats it as a governance question that links values, rules, and verifiable assurance across the

tourism value chain via recognition mechanisms like MFAR. This article examines that trajectory as a case of Shariah-compliant tourism development, with a specific focus on how national instruments translate normative principles into operational criteria that can be implemented and assessed. (Alam et al., 2023)

The conceptual lens for the study is *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, which frames regulation and service design around the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property, read alongside *uṣūl al-fiqh* to attend to both the clarity of commands and prohibitions and the outcomes of service provision (AUDA, 2008) In the hospitality setting, this lens guides the design of facilities and processes that enable worship, preserve wellbeing, and protect guests' interests, while disciplining contracts, pricing, and information to avoid harm Social implications: This study will assist Sharīʿah scholars, policymakers and Islamic financial institutions to develop the financial system and to implement the Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah to improve macro policy and shaping Islamic institutions.

Malaysia's policy architecture provides fertile ground for such an enquiry. Two instruments now anchor the ecosystem. The first is MS 2610, a national standard for Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services that sets implementable requirements across accommodation, tour operations, and tourist guiding. Malaysia has now positioned itself as a global halal hub, and now it is moving forwards to becoming the preferred tourist destination for Muslim tourists by establishing a new standard namely MS 2610:2015 Muslim-friendly hospitality services Requirements. It has been developed to ensure the quality of tourism products and services provided for Muslim travellers is in line within the parameter of Shariah principles. (Amer Nordin & Abd Rahman, 2018). The second is the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition programme administered by the Islamic Tourism Centre, which functions as an official recognition scheme that signals readiness and provides a measure of external assurance. Together, these instruments seek to convert abstract values into routines that are observable, auditable, and communicable to travellers and partners.

Standardisation beyond the national context is also relevant. The OIC framework for Halal Tourism Services offers general requirements that many jurisdictions use as a benchmark. Positioning Malaysia's MS 2610 and recognition scheme against this international reference enables a structured assessment of convergence, local adaptation, and opportunities for harmonisation(Al-Ansi & Han, 2019). Such benchmarking matters for cross-border recognisability, for the portability of training, and for reducing compliance friction for international brands operating across multiple jurisdictions. Halal certification is one way to operationalize halal standards, hence protecting Muslim consumers (Al-Mahmood & Fraser, 2023). Muslim consumers need products with halal status and good quality. Halal products are obtained if the company implements the Halal Assurance System (HAS). Good quality products are one of the results of implementing a Quality Management System (QMS).(Shinta Diah Puspaningtyas et al., 2023)

Despite these advances, persistent questions remain about implementation depth and consistency. At the level of enterprises, managers must integrate Muslim-friendly requirements into existing quality systems, supplier arrangements, and staff competencies without degrading efficiency or guest experience for diverse audiences. At the level of policy, authorities must balance flexibility for varied business models with the need for credible assurance that travels well across distribution channels. At the level of market signalling, information provided to travellers must be both accurate and sufficiently granular to support confident choice.

This article addresses these questions through a qualitative review of policy and standards documents, complemented by a descriptive audit of publicly available recognition listings. The study maps the evolution of Malaysia's Muslim-friendly hospitality framework, translates key clauses into practical criteria, and compares national requirements with international benchmarks. It then synthesises implications for regulators and industry actors, including proposals for strengthening measurement, capability building, and information transparency.

The contribution is threefold. First, the article clarifies how Shariah compliant tourism has been operationalised in Malaysia through the interplay of standards and recognition. Second, it offers a *maqāṣid* oriented rubric that links compliance tasks to the higher objectives of the law, making the case for outcome-sensitive indicators that complement facility checklists. Third, it identifies priorities for policy refinement and enterprise practice that can improve consistency of delivery while preserving local fit. The analysis sets the stage for a discussion of findings and recommendations intended to consolidate Malaysia's leadership in Muslim-friendly hospitality and to inform comparative work across other destinations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative documentary design centred on a policy and standards review. The corpus comprises the Malaysian Standard MS 2610:2015 and its publicly available explanatory materials, the Islamic Tourism Centre's MFAR documentation including recognition criteria, sectoral scopes, applicant guidance, training outlines, and public directories of recognised entities, as well as the OIC or SMIIC 9:2019 Halal Tourism Services general requirements.

Supplementary materials include official communications that contextualise Malaysia's positioning,especially Mastercard and CrescentRating GMTI releases and ITC policy notes relevant to recognition and training. Documents were included if they described standards content, recognition criteria, implementation guidance, or listed recognised entities, while opinion pieces without operational detail were excluded. Public MFAR listings were extracted into a simple spreadsheet capturing sector, recognition tier, and stated Muslim friendly features to support a light descriptive audit. The review window spans 2015 to 2025, covering the promulgation of MS 2610 and subsequent development of MFAR.

Analysis proceeded via directed content analysis. A clause crosswalk aligned MS 2610 requirements with OIC or SMIIC 9 to identify areas of convergence, local adaptation, and opportunities for harmonisation. Coding focused on three construct families reflected in the article's discussion. First, Shariah aligned service requirements included prayer facilities, Qibla indication, water friendly amenities, halal food access, and staff competence. Second, assurance mechanisms covered recognition processes, re assessment or readiness evidence, internal checks, documented procedures, and training. Third, market signalling examined the visibility and consistency of information across official channels and directories. Descriptive tabulation of MFAR listings illustrated sectoral coverage and provided illustrative cases of recognised hotels to ground the analysis of service quality, signalling, and consumer assurance. Given the documentary scope, findings are interpreted as evidence of communicated readiness and governance design rather than as a direct audit of back of house practice or guest outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Malaysia's Muslim-friendly hospitality framework rests on two core instruments. MS 2610:2015 sets generic, implementable requirements across accommodation, tour packages, and tourist guiding, including prayer facilities, Qibla indication, water-friendly amenities, access to Halal food, and staff competency provisions. Malaysia is far advanced in introducing the Muslim friendly hotel segment as an Islamic tourism product. Malaysian hoteliers refer to three standards when offering Muslim friendly hotel services, which are namely the MS 2610: 2015 Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services Requirements, Crescent Rating Standard and Salam Standard(YAHAYA et al., 2020a). OIC or SMIIC 9:2019 provides general requirements for managing Halal tourism facilities and services across countries, which makes it a practical benchmark for convergence and harmonisation. Clause-by-clause comparisons show high conceptual alignment on accommodation expectations. Both frameworks require clear faith-based facilities and documented procedures, while MS 2610 uses national terminology and examples and OIC or SMIIC 9 frames requirements for cross-border use, a pattern frequently noted in external reviews of the Malaysian case.

Recognition mechanisms translate these standards into visible assurance for the market. The Islamic Tourism Centre administers the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition scheme as an official recognition for businesses that satisfy Muslim-friendly guidelines. ITC has defined ten business sectors for MFAR, beginning with tourist accommodation premises and expanding to travel operating businesses, shopping centres, and transportation hubs as guidelines mature.

Capability building underpins adoption. ITC provides industry-wide literacy on the Muslim travel market and on the operational translation of standards into service delivery. In parallel, MFAR competency training targets specific sectors, with recent cohorts focused on accommodation premises and travel operating businesses. These training rounds help applicants interpret criteria, prepare documentation, and embed internal checks prior to formal recognition, thereby improving readiness and consistency.

Halal tourism has grown significantly over the past few decades in terms of the number of tourists and tourism receipts. This has prompted many countries, whether Muslim or not, to introduce tourism products related to the halal concept. Unsurprisingly, halal tourism is predominant in Muslim-majority countries. Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam ranked in the top nine destinations in 2024 based on the four key areas of the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI)—ease of access to the destination; communication, internal and external, by the destination; environment at the destination and services provided by the destination(Sumardi et al., 2025).ITC also points to a decade of leadership in the index, which reinforces destination branding and confers policy legitimacy for continued investment in standards, recognition, and training.

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This policy and training architecture supports Malaysia's market positioning. The country continues to rank at the top of the Mastercard CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index 2025, with official communications highlighting an estimated 176 million international Muslim arrivals in 2024 and strong growth projections to 2030. ITC also points to a decade of leadership in the index, which reinforces destination branding and confers policy legitimacy for continued investment in standards, recognition, and training.

Documentary sources and comparative presentations nevertheless identify three recurring implementation constraints. Voluntary adoption produces uneven uptake because MS 2610 functions as guidance rather than a certifiable management system, which can limit uniform diffusion without incentives. Process clarity and supplier assurance remain challenging as operators work to map MS 2610 clauses onto existing hotel procedures and to verify suppliers, particularly in food and beverage and housekeeping. Information visibility is inconsistent, since public recognition directories exist but the depth and consistency of Muslim-friendly information on individual hotel websites vary, weakening market signalling and potentially dampening consumer confidence.

DISCUSSION

A maqāṣid-oriented reading of standardisation and assurance clarifies why minimum standards and credible recognition are not merely administrative devices but moral instruments that protect travellers' interests.

Facilities and protocols that enable prayer, safeguard bodily wellbeing, respect family and privacy needs, and secure property and transactions correspond to the objectives of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth. In this frame, MS 2610 translates value commitments into operational controls that can be planned, resourced, and verified at the enterprise level, while MFAR converts compliance into public trust through visible recognition and searchable directories. Taken together, these instruments support consumer protection and fair market signalling without insisting on a single rigid model of service delivery, since maqāṣid admits multiple lawful means when ends are preserved.

A maqāṣid lens provides a practical bridge between naṣṣ and day-to-day operations in Muslim-friendly hospitality. The persistent tension between the prohibition of ribā and common market practices shows that fidelity to revelation requires concrete operational criteria rather than citation alone. Read this way, pricing, deposits, financing, and supplier arrangements should be evaluated for their capacity to secure genuine maṣlaḥah and avert mafsadah for guests, employees, owners, and surrounding communities (. et al., 2016)

Al-Shāṭibī's framework can be translated directly into governance (. et al., 2016)ools for hotels and tourism operators. First, clarity of commands and prohibitions should be codified into standard operating procedures, procurement rules, and financial policies that make the prohibition of ribā actionable. Second, attention to ʿillah requires testing whether contemporary booking, payment, or franchise forms replicate prohibited causes, followed by redesign where necessary. Third, observation of maṣlaḥah shifts assessment toward outcomes, including worship facilitation, safety, information clarity, and price fairness. Fourth, scrutiny of forms and motives guards against nominal compliance that reintroduces prohibited elements under new labels.

Ibn Taymiyya's emphasis on ethical interiority complements checklist compliance by orienting service culture toward sincerity, truthful communication about facilities, and respectful guest engagement. Ibn Taymiyyah attached great importance to the examination of Prophet Muhammad's Quran and Sunnah to understand what is forbidden and allowed in various areas of Muslim life.(Maevskaya & Aga, 2024) These soft systems strengthen trust, reduce information asymmetry for Muslim travelers, and support durable compliance that is lived in daily interactions, not only documented in manuals.

Moving from guidance to measurable quality requires attention to the point of service where guests experience standards in practice. Clause alignment shows that MS 2610 and OIC or SMIIC 9 converge on substance, yet gaps persist in measurability. MFAR partially closes this gap by requiring applicants to evidence facilities, procedures, and readiness before recognition and by publishing recognised entities for public scrutiny. Deeper progress depends on specifying auditible indicators such as the uptime of dedicated prayer spaces, documented food provenance checks, routine verification of Qibla direction, availability and maintenance of water-friendly amenities, and time-bound staff competency records. Determination of the Qibla direction and the beginning of prayer times is very important for the community, especially Moslems community(Masturi et al., 2023) Iterating MFAR criteria by sector and embedding simple, outcome-sensitive metrics would move the ecosystem beyond policy statements toward consistent guest experience.

Durable compliance rests on human capital. Written standards often fail when staff do not understand the rationale for requirements or how to implement them within existing workflows. The MFTH and MFAR competency programmes signal a shift from promotion to capability building by translating standards into role-specific skills for front office, housekeeping, food and beverage, and security teams. However, many hospitality programs underemphasize hotel real estate finance and asset management, creating a competency gap between education and industry needs (Jackson, 2025) Scaling these programmes through partnerships with hotel associations and local governments can reduce regional variance, while micro-credentials, refresher cycles, and on-the-job assessment create evidence of competence over time. When training is aligned with internal audit, nonconformity reporting, and corrective action routines, organisations are more likely to sustain compliance beyond the initial recognition event.

Market signalling and data transparency determine whether recognition generates value for travellers and distribution partners. Public MFAR listings are a strong foundation but they must be complemented by consistent, granular disclosures at the property level. Hotels should present Muslim-friendly features clearly on official websites, booking engines, and in-room materials using standardised descriptors that match registry

entries. Most hotels maintain a neutral impression by avoiding "Islamised gender" and not overly emphasising Islamic images. Otherwise, halal-friendly certification level is positively correlated with the disclosure level(Muharam & Asutay, 2022). A lightweight digital badge that links directly to the MFAR record, supported by a QR code at reception and prayer spaces, would reduce information asymmetry and enable online travel agencies to display reliable filters. Where disclosures are structured and machine-readable, platforms can surface recognised properties more accurately, which rewards compliant operators and nudges the market toward clearer communication.

Harmonisation without loss of local fit is feasible through disciplined cross-referencing rather than uniformity. A maintained MS 2610 to OIC or SMIIC 9 crosswalk, updated as criteria evolve, would help international partners understand equivalence, support joint training modules, and smooth recognition across borders. Explanatory notes can map Malaysia-specific examples to the relevant OIC or SMIIC clauses, while documenting areas where local fiqh choices or regulatory context justify calibrated differences. For multinational chains, a concise set of interpretive guidelines showing how corporate standards interface with MS 2610 and MFAR would lower compliance friction and reduce duplicated audits. In this way, Malaysia can lead pragmatic harmonisation that preserves doctrinal integrity and operational realism.

At the policy level, Malaysia can strengthen credibility and consistency by codifying renewal cycles for MFAR recognition and conducting routine re-assessments that sustain standards over time. Targeted incentives for SMEs, such as small grants, tax deductions on eligible upgrades, or bundled training credits, would accelerate diffusion where voluntary uptake is slow, a pattern highlighted in broader adoption studies and guidance such as COMCEC's work on Islamic tourism. Authorities should also deepen sector coverage beyond accommodation by prioritising high-traffic nodes like transport hubs and shopping centres, where network effects improve end-to-end Muslim-friendly journeys. An anonymised compliance dashboard that aggregates MFAR data by region and sector would allow policymakers to track adoption, identify bottlenecks, and direct training resources with greater precision.

At the industry level, providers can reduce compliance friction by embedding MS 2610 requirements into mainstream quality systems, mapping clauses to existing hotel SOPs and certification schemes so that Shariah-aligned practices become part of routine operations rather than add-ons. This alignment will raise internal accountability, simplify audits, and make recognition renewal less burdensome, while clearer signals at high-traffic sectors identified by the Islamic Tourism Centre help guests make confident choices across the travel chain.

A social-justice performance test further aligns enterprise practice with destination policy. Using the five essentials of maqāṣid as metrics allows regulators and firms to check whether Muslim-friendly hospitality advances freedom of worship while traveling, protects wellbeing, supports learning and family needs, and safeguards property and transactions. Evidence from halal and Shariah-compliant hospitality research indicates that such integrity improves guest trust and destination competitiveness (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Auda, 2008; Absori et al., 2016). It highlights practical implications for hospitality providers to enhance service quality and atmosphere tailored to Muslim tourists' preferences.(Hariani et al., 2024)

For Malaysia's instruments, standards should flow into visible assurance. MS 2610 provides substantive content, while the Islamic Tourism Centre's MFAR converts that content into recognition and market signaling through public directories. OIC/SMIIC 9 offers a scaffold for harmonisation that eases cross-border recognition and training. At the operational level, guidance notes should map ribā-sensitive points in hotel financing, cash management, and supplier credit and propose viable alternatives consistent with Sharīʿa objectives and commercial constraints. A most prominent characteristic of Islam's economic system is the prohibition of ribā while providing legitimate financing alternatives; one of which is financing integrated with sale for a deferred price. Here the seller as trader provides commercial financing that includes a profit as part of the deferred price which is a debt on the buyer(الزرقا, 2022). Measurement should complement facility checklists with outcome indicators, for example the ability to perform ṣalāh without hardship, clarity of ḥalāl provenance, and transparent charges. Capability building should scale MFTH and MFAR competency programmes with industry associations and local authorities to reduce delivery variance across regions and property types (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015; Islamic Tourism Centre, n.d.; SMIIC, 2019; Auda, 2008; Al-Shāṭibī, 2011/2015).

A focused research agenda can consolidate these advances. Future studies should combine doctrinal analysis with empirical audits, staff interviews, and guest surveys to test causal links between recognition, guest trust, and market performance, and they should include comparative work across other OIC destinations to identify where Malaysia's model can be refined or adapted for export.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped how Malaysia operationalises Shariah-compliant tourism through two anchor instruments, MS 2610 and the MFAR recognition scheme, and situated them against OIC/SMIIC 9 within a maqasid-oriented frame. The evidence indicates strong conceptual alignment between national and international requirements, growing sectoral coverage through MFAR, and a deliberate pivot from promotion to capability building via ITC-led training. The remaining challenges are less about the existence of principles and more about consistent measurability at the point of service, supplier assurance, and clear market signalling to travellers.

For policymakers, the path forward is to convert guidance into durable practice. Priority actions include codifying MFAR renewal cycles, publishing an anonymised adoption and compliance dashboard, linking MS 2610 requirements to commonly used hotel SOPs, and offering targeted incentives that lower adoption costs for SMEs. Maintaining a live crosswalk between MS 2610 and OIC/SMIIC 9 will improve recognisability across borders and support joint training and assessments.

For industry, value creation depends on visible assurance and reliable delivery. Providers should embed Muslim-friendly features into routine quality systems, formalise staff competency and internal audits, and make information depth consistent across official websites, booking engines, and in-room materials. A verifiable digital badge that links directly to an entity's MFAR entry can reduce information asymmetry and improve conversion with distribution partners.

This review used publicly available documents and listings, which limits insight into back-of-house practices and guest outcomes. Future research should pair standards analysis with mystery audits, staff interviews, and guest surveys, and test the causal effects of recognition on bookings, pricing, and ratings. Comparative studies across OIC destinations and cost benefit analyses for SMEs would also sharpen policy design.

Aligning maqasid values with measurable, auditable practice strengthens trust, protects consumers, and enhances destination competitiveness. Malaysia is well placed to consolidate its leadership by deepening adoption, improving consistency across sectors, and harmonising with international standards while retaining local fit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen standard harmonisation and interoperability**

Clause alignment between MS 2610 and OIC or SMIIC 9 to reduce interpretive ambiguity and support cross border comparability, mutual recognition pathways and equivalence guidance for international hotel groups operating in Malaysia standardised terminology and audit evidence templates so that Shariah aligned requirements are consistently applied across accommodation, tour operations, and guiding.

2. **Professionalise competency building as a core governance instrument**

National competency framework for Muslim friendly hospitality roles, including frontline service, food and beverage, procurement, and management; microcredential and continuous professional development modules linked to Maqasid al Shariah outcomes such as wellbeing protection and harm prevention; auditor and assessor training to improve reliability of recognition decisions and reduce inconsistent interpretations.

3. **Accelerate SME readiness through phased adoption and targeted support**

Tiered compliance roadmap that allows gradual implementation without diluting integrity; financial and technical assistance for documentation, facility upgrades, and internal control systems; shared service models

such as pooled halal verified supply chains, standard operating procedure toolkits, and mentorship programmes led by recognised operators.

4. Enhance assurance integrity through monitoring, re assessment, and risk based oversight

Clear reassessment cycles and risk based audit prioritisation based on sector, scale, and complaint history; transparent grievance and corrective action mechanisms that protect consumers and strengthen trust; outcome sensitive indicators that complement facility checklists, including service responsiveness, information accuracy, and ethical transaction practices.

5. Improve market signalling and consumer transparency across channels

Unified national directory with consistent feature disclosure, recognition tier explanations, and evidence based claims that travellers can verify standardised communication assets such as icons, multilingual descriptors, and minimum information fields for online travel agencies and hotel websites integration of traveller feedback loops to support continuous improvement while ensuring claims remain accurate and not purely promotional.

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