

Normalization of Saudi Arabia- Thailand Relations: Advancing Political, Social, and Economic Ties

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Abstract

This study examines the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand after more than three decades of estrangement, focusing on its strategic drivers, benefits, and enduring challenges. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and secondary data, the research situates the rapprochement within the broader context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Thailand's foreign policy priorities. The findings demonstrate that normalization has created significant opportunities in trade, investment, labor mobility, and tourism: Thailand's manufacturing, services, and human capital can contribute to Saudi Arabia's diversification agenda, while Saudi investment offers Thailand access to new markets and development financing. At the same time, the study identifies structural obstacles—particularly economic asymmetry, which limits Thailand's bargaining power, and differences in legal and regulatory frameworks rooted in Islamic principles—that continue to shape the trajectory of the partnership. Addressing these constraints requires both countries to strengthen institutional mechanisms, including the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council, invest in targeted skills development, and establish joint platforms for regulatory alignment and innovation. By integrating empirical findings with existing scholarship, the study argues that normalization represents not only a restoration of bilateral relations but also an evolving partnership that can reshape economic, political, and socio-cultural engagement between Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia–Thailand relations, Diplomatic normalization, Vision 2030, Bilateral cooperation, Economic diplomacy, Trade and Investment, Tourism cooperation

Introduction

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Thailand has historically oscillated between cooperation and conflict. Diplomatic relations were officially established on 1 October 1957, following a period of cordial engagement between the two kingdoms. By 1966, the relationship had been elevated to the ambassadorial level, with the appointment of H.E. Prasong Suwanpradhes as Thailand's first ambassador to Saudi Arabia and H.E. Abdulrahman Al-Omran as Saudi Arabia's first ambassador to Thailand. High-level visits, including a Thai delegation to Riyadh in 1984, strengthened ties and underscored the two countries' shared interests in promoting global peace and security (Royal Thai Embassy, 2022). Historically, Saudi Arabia

and Thailand often adopted similar positions on international issues, particularly those relating to multilateral diplomacy and global stability, and they consistently supported one another in various international forums and at the United Nations (Aree, 2024). As Aree (2024) notes, bilateral cooperation during this period extended across trade, politics, society, and culture.

However, the relationship entered a prolonged period of crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s following a series of incidents that severely undermined diplomatic trust. These included the 1989 assassination of a Saudi diplomat in Bangkok, the subsequent killing of three more diplomats in 1990, and the unresolved

disappearance of Saudi businessman Muhammad Al-Ruwaili. The “Blue Diamond Affair,” involving the theft of Saudi royal jewels by a Thai worker, further exacerbated tensions. The cumulative effect of these events prompted Saudi Arabia to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Thailand, impose travel restrictions on Saudi citizens, and curtail cooperation across multiple sectors (Aljazeera, 2022; Thai PBS, 2023; The Nation, 2022).

The resulting freeze in relations significantly reduced trade and mutual investments. Although indirect trade continued—driven by Saudi Arabia’s structural dependence on imported food, with imports valued at USD 23,299.92 million in 2021 (Wasawong & Santisart, 2023)—formal diplomatic and economic engagement remained stalled for more than three decades.

A shift began to emerge in the 2010s as Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy was reshaped by internal reforms, a new line of succession, and the economic pressures caused by fluctuating oil prices. The launch of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, spearheaded by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, became a key driver of this recalibration. Vision 2030 is a comprehensive strategy that aims to diversify the Saudi economy beyond oil dependence, improve governance, expand the private sector, and transform the Kingdom into a global hub for investment and innovation (Saudi Vision 2030, n.d.; Akrapisit, 2022). Building on its geographic position at the crossroads of three continents, its role as the center of the Islamic world, and its considerable financial resources, the Vision outlines a three-phase roadmap structured around three pillars: (1) fostering a vibrant society, (2) building a thriving economy, and (3) creating an ambitious nation. These priorities include reforming governance, promoting cultural engagement, supporting women’s participation in the workforce, and enhancing global competitiveness, all of which create new avenues for international partnerships (Phetcharat, 2022, as cited in Akrapisit, 2022).

In this context, Saudi Arabia began to re-engage with countries with which ties had previously been strained. In late 2014, the Saudi Foreign Minister visited Thailand to discuss potential steps toward normalization. These talks were facilitated by diplomatic mediation from Saudi business leaders, Thai

envoys, and friendly states such as Bahrain, whose Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa played a notable role in the process (Aree, 2024). These efforts culminated in January 2022, when the Prime Minister of Thailand made an official visit to Riyadh—the first in more than three decades. The visit signaled a major breakthrough: both sides agreed to restore full diplomatic relations, exchange ambassadors, establish a consultation mechanism, and pursue cooperation in commerce, energy, digital transformation, and other sectors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

In November 2022, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to Bangkok, coinciding with the APEC summit, further reinforced this rapprochement and marked the full restoration of relations to pre-crisis levels. This visit underscored a shared commitment to advancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation (The Nation, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the dynamics of Saudi Arabia-Thailand normalization, focusing on its drivers, opportunities, and enduring challenges. By integrating qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews with secondary data, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how normalization can reshape bilateral relations and offer actionable insights for sustaining cooperation between Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Research objectives

1. To identify potential benefits and challenges of normalized relations for Saudi Arabia and Thailand.
2. To propose recommendations on strengthening the relationship and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Thailand.

Research questions

1. What are the potential benefits and challenges of normalized relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand?
2. How can the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Thailand be strengthened?

Literature review

Normalization of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand

Recent studies exploring the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and other nations reveal

a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and political factors. Al Tamimi (2023) argues that a key driver of the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Thailand was the change in executive power, with both His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Prayut Chan-o-cha pursuing foreign policy and internal reforms that align with shifting global dynamics, particularly in response to tensions between China and the United States. This reflects a broader trend where Saudi Arabia's foreign policy adapts to new geopolitical realities, similar to its efforts to normalize relations with other countries, including Turkey and Israel, as explored by Salsabila et al. (2022) and Nawaz (2022). These studies emphasize Saudi Arabia's strategic pursuit of economic and technological benefits and regional stability despite ongoing challenges, such as the unresolved Palestine conflict and competition with Iran for regional influence.

El Kurd (2023) and Hussain (2024) further illustrate the broader regional implications of normalization efforts. El Kurd points out the paradoxical nature of peace initiatives in authoritarian contexts, where normalization might bolster authoritarian practices, as seen in the Arab world's engagement with Israel. Hussain discusses the potential stability that could arise from improved Saudi-Iran relations, though such a shift could challenge existing alliances, particularly with the United States. These insights underscore that Saudi Arabia's diplomatic strategies, including its rapprochement with Thailand, are part of a nuanced approach to enhancing regional and international partnerships. By navigating these complex dynamics, Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen its geopolitical standing and economic prospects, which are mirrored in its renewed ties with Thailand through collaborative efforts in various sectors such as energy, tourism, and investment. This reflects a strategic realignment that aims to leverage new opportunities while managing historical tensions and regional uncertainties.

Asae and Japakeeya (2024) highlight the significant opportunities and challenges following the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Thailand, applying the National Interests Theory and PEST Analysis framework to reveal avenues for cooperation across political, security, economic, social, and technological sectors, in alignment with Saudi

Arabia's Vision 2030 and Thailand's Bio-Circular-Green Economy. Despite these prospects, they note lingering social challenges stemming from historical misunderstandings that call for deeper mutual understanding. Building on this, Akarapisit (2022) emphasizes that the renewed relations have opened valuable labor market opportunities for Thai workers in Saudi Arabia—particularly in service and construction—while cautioning that cultural adaptation and political sensitivities remain key challenges to sustainable collaboration.

Complementing these views, Chaziza and Lutmar (2025) situate the Saudi–Thai rapprochement within Riyadh's "niche diplomacy" under Vision 2030, which leverages mediation, economic diversification, and soft power to extend middle-power influence beyond material capacity. This approach is further exemplified by the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement mediated by China, which reduces regional tensions and allows Saudi Arabia to redirect diplomatic and economic resources toward Southeast Asia, reflecting both neorealist power balancing and neoliberal aspirations for cooperative regional integration (Shahzad & Mashwani, 2024). Collectively, these studies underscore that as Saudi Arabia and Thailand deepen their strategic alignment, mutual benefits arise from shared goals of economic diversification and regional stability—positioning both nations to capitalize on their evolving partnership for broader geopolitical and economic gains.

Bilateral diplomatic initiatives: Political cooperation and normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand

The official visit of Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to Thailand, where he was welcomed by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha at the Government House, marked a pivotal moment in the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand. The two leaders emphasized their commitment to strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation across various sectors, including politics, security, economics, and investment. This collaboration aims to enhance ties between the two kingdoms and between the broader regions of the Middle East and Southeast Asia in light of ongoing global economic challenges. A series of five key memoranda of

understanding signed during the visit laid the foundation for institutionalized cooperation:

1. Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC): Establishment of a permanent bilateral mechanism to facilitate dialogue and promote multi-sectoral cooperation.

2. Promotion of Direct Investment: Strengthening mutual investment opportunities between both countries.

3. Energy Cooperation: Joint initiatives between the respective Ministries of Energy.

4. Tourism Cooperation: Programs to enhance mutual tourism flows and cultural exchanges.

5. Anti-Corruption Cooperation: Collaborative frameworks to combat corruption through information sharing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

In the realm of political and security cooperation, both sides expressed interest in the defense industry, combating transnational crimes, including terrorism and extremism, enhancing cybersecurity, and improving information-sharing capabilities. Additionally, they are prepared to increase consular cooperation. Within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) framework, Saudi Arabia, as a moderate Islamic nation, can contribute to long-term solutions for issues in Thailand’s southern border provinces, facilitating security information and counterterrorism collaboration (The Nation, 2022; BBC News, 2022).

As of November 2024, Saudi Arabian citizens can travel to Thailand without a visa for stays of up to 60 days under the Visa Exemption Scheme. This arrangement facilitates tourism and short-term business visits, with the option to extend the stay for an additional 30 days through the Thai Immigration Bureau (Wego Travel, 2024). Conversely, Thai citizens seeking to visit Saudi Arabia can utilize the newly introduced e-visa system, which streamlines the application process. The e-visa permits multiple entries within a one-year validity period, allowing stays of up to 90 days per visit for tourism, family visits, or Umrah (excluding Hajj) (Saudi Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).

On 16 January 2025, the inaugural session of the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC) was jointly presided over by Thailand’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maris Sangiampongsa, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, marking a formal institutionalization of bilateral

dialogue mechanisms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025; Bangkok Post, 2025).

The Saudi–Thai Coordination Council has been created as the primary mechanism to structure and expand bilateral cooperation. Organized into five committees—covering political and consular, security and military, economic and trade, investment, and cultural and tourism affairs—the Council introduces a systematic framework for engagement. The endorsement of over 70 initiatives for its inaugural session reflects a proactive agenda-setting process, signaling a shift from ad hoc diplomacy toward a more institutionalized and strategic partnership. Moreover, both governments reaffirmed their commitment to deepen cooperation across all sectors, noting the substantial progress achieved since the normalization of relations in 2022. This includes a growth in bilateral trade, cumulative investments exceeding USD 3.5 billion, and a sixfold increase in reciprocal tourist flows over the past three years, underscoring the accelerated pace of engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2025).

Economic partnerships: Trade deals and investment opportunities

Beyond diplomatic initiatives, economic partnerships are vital to enhancing cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Thailand. The Thai government has designated Saudi Arabia as one of ten strategic partner countries under its proactive economic diplomacy policy. Thailand places high importance on fostering comprehensive relations with Saudi Arabia, as evidenced by the remarkable progress in bilateral ties since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 2022. This includes high-level official visits, growing people-to-people connections, an increase in tourist flows, and notably, a surge of over 30% in bilateral trade. These developments reflect the growing momentum and multidimensional nature of the partnership between the two nations (Royal Thai Government, 2025).

Many Thai companies have already begun investing in Saudi Arabia, with firms like SCG involved in construction projects aligned with Saudi Vision 2030 (SCG International, 2023). In return, Saudi Arabia has invested in Thailand, notably through Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), a major chemical manufacturer. SABIC is exploring investments in green

hydrogen in Thailand. In 2024, Thai exports—dominated by automobiles—totaled USD 2.8 billion, while imports from Saudi Arabia, largely crude oil and petroleum, reached USD 5.56 billion. The Thai Foreign Minister also highlighted the planned negotiations for a Thailand–GCC free trade agreement in 2025 and the strong interest of Thai businesses in sectors such as food processing, health, and wellness (Arab News, 2024).

Moreover, in July 2024, Thailand inaugurated its first Board of Investment (BOI) office in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, marking a significant advancement in economic relations between the two nations. This strategic move aims to enhance bilateral cooperation across sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, healthcare, and automotive industries. The establishment of the BOI office is expected to facilitate increased trade and investment, leveraging both countries' strengths to achieve sustainable economic development. This development reflects a renewed commitment to strengthening ties and exploring mutual growth opportunities (Thailand Board of Investment, 2024).

Between January and November 2024, trade between Saudi Arabia and Thailand totaled approximately USD 7.19 billion. Over the preceding five-year period (2019–2023), the annual average value of bilateral trade was around USD 7.68 billion. In 2023, total trade peaked at USD 8.88 billion. Thailand's primary exports to Saudi Arabia comprised automobiles, wooden goods, and canned seafood, while major imports included crude oil, chemical products, and fertilizers (Royal Thai Government, 2025).

In exploring opportunities for Thailand, Kongnoom (2024) suggested areas of opportunity, which include an increase in Thai exports across diverse sectors, encompassing agricultural products such as fruits and specialized rice varieties, processed seafood, and critical construction materials vital for large-scale Saudi development projects like NEOM. Another opportunity she pointed out that after the certification of Thai halal products approved by the Saudi Food and Drugs Authority (SFDA), Thai food with the halal certificate from the Central Islamic Council of Thailand (CICOT) is permitted for the Saudi Arabian market. For instance, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand has authorized the issuance of Halal certification for chicken products destined for export to Saudi Arabia.

This certification facilitates access to a significant Saudi market, which is estimated to generate an annual trade value exceeding 40 million baht (Bangkok Post, 2025). Moreover, the established reputation of Thai medical services and the burgeoning tourism sector are also anticipated to attract greater Saudi investment and visitor numbers, contributing significantly to Thailand's service economy (Kongnoom, 2024).

These growing economic ties also mirror Riyadh's application of niche diplomacy, where economic diplomacy serves as a key tool for influence and diversification. By institutionalizing bilateral mechanisms such as the STCC, Saudi Arabia combines its economic vision with strategic partnerships to project middle-power influence in Southeast Asia (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Tourism has become a significant pillar of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Thailand, generating opportunities for cultural exchange and economic growth. The sector is projected to contribute at least 5 billion baht annually to the Thai economy, driven by the high purchasing power of Saudi tourists, who spend considerably more per trip than many other international visitors. This trend has been especially beneficial to medical and wellness tourism. Expanding direct flight connections between the two countries is viewed as essential to accommodate the rising number of visitors (BBC News, 2022; Infoquest, 2023).

As Winaisathian (2023) notes, Saudi arrivals—which were previously concentrated on medical and business travel—have evolved into a broader leisure market with high spending potential, creating substantial revenue opportunities for Thailand. In response, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has strengthened cooperation with Saudia Airlines to expand routes, including Riyadh–Phuket, and has launched joint marketing initiatives such as the “Two Kingdoms, One Happiness” campaign, linking the Dead Sea with Phuket. TAT also plans to open a dedicated office in Riyadh and promote participation in the “Thailand Travel Mart Plus” trade show to increase engagement with Gulf tourists.

Recent statistics confirm this upward trend, as of April 22, 2025, 162,790 Middle Eastern tourists had already visited Thailand, with Saudi arrivals recording a 15.26% year-on-year increase (Pattaya Mail, 2025). For the full year 2025, TAT aims to attract 1.1 million

visitors from the Middle East and Africa, with projected revenues exceeding THB 98 billion (Pattaya Mail, 2025). On the reciprocal side, Saudi Arabia has set a target of attracting 150,000 Thai visitors, focusing on religious tourism and facilitating access through an expanded e-visa scheme (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023; Infoquest, 2023).

This economic dimension of Saudi–Thai relations also exemplifies Riyadh’s broader niche diplomacy, where economic statecraft and institutionalized mechanisms such as the STCC are leveraged as tools of influence and partnership building (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Furthermore, the labor sector presents a significant opportunity for Thai workers to contribute to Saudi Arabia’s development following the lifting of a 30-year visa suspension. In alignment with Saudi Vision 2030, there is a growing demand for skilled labor to support the Kingdom’s ambitious projects, a need that Thai workers are well-positioned to address. Initially, the deployment of Thai workers to Saudi Arabia will be facilitated through a government-to-government framework, with the Ministry of Labor taking direct responsibility for managing the process. This structured approach is designed to prevent issues such as excessive recruitment fees and deceptive practices while ensuring robust protection of workers’ rights and welfare (Akarapisit, 2022). The Ministry plans to dispatch the first cohort of semi-skilled workers, including welders, construction workers, carpenters, masons, metalworkers, and chefs, as these positions offer higher wages compared to unskilled labor (The Nation, 2022).

Riyadh’s use of niche diplomacy is reflected in its expanding economic relations, with economic diplomacy functioning as a strategic instrument for exerting influence and advancing diversification efforts. By institutionalizing bilateral mechanisms such as the STCC, Saudi Arabia combines its economic vision with strategic partnerships to project middle-power influence in Southeast Asia (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Challenges in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Thailand

Realizing the full potential of this economic partnership necessitates addressing several critical challenges. A primary concern for Thailand is the

imperative to manage increased tourist arrivals effectively, ensuring that the existing infrastructure can accommodate the surge without compromising service quality or environmental integrity. This requires strategic planning for sustainable tourism development. Concurrently, the escalating demand for Thai exports mandates rigorous quality control and adherence to international standards to maintain market confidence and competitiveness (Kongnoom, 2024).

From Saudi Arabia’s perspective, the “Saudization” policy, designed to prioritize national employment, poses a challenge to the sustainability of labor migration programs. Thai workers must therefore enhance their skills and qualifications to remain competitive within an evolving Saudi labor market (Kongnoom, 2024).

These bilateral challenges are also influenced by broader regional dynamics. As Shahzad and Mashwani (2024) caution, unresolved structural tensions in the Middle East—such as intra-GCC divisions, ongoing proxy conflicts, and sectarian fault lines—may affect the predictability of Saudi foreign policy. The ability of Riyadh’s niche diplomacy to balance domestic transformation with outward engagement will be critical to sustaining its deepening relations with Southeast Asia (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Methods

Research design & data collection

To comprehensively address the research objectives, this study employed a qualitative research design drawing on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews aimed at eliciting nuanced perspectives and experiential insights into the normalization of Thai–Saudi relations. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who were either directly involved in or had substantial experience with the normalization process. A total of ten participants were recruited, comprising three senior diplomats, three officials from foreign relations agencies, two Thai business owners with operations in Saudi Arabia, and two international relations scholars with direct exposure to Thai–Saudi relations.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure that all key themes related to participants’ firsthand experiences, observations of transitional

relations, challenges, opportunities, and assessments of the bilateral process were systematically addressed, while still allowing flexibility to explore emerging issues. Interviews were conducted individually, either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability and geographical constraints. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. With the consent of participants, all interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed field notes. The audio data were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were checked against the recordings for accuracy, with triangulation using field notes to enhance completeness and reliability.

To complement and contextualize the primary data, secondary data were gathered through extensive documentary research. This included a systematic review of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic reports, conference proceedings, official government documents, press releases, policy statements, and reputable news sources. The integration of these two datasets allowed for a multi-layered analysis and strengthened the study's validity through methodological triangulation, providing a balanced understanding of the normalization process that incorporates both lived experiences and documented evidence.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling, guided by clear inclusion criteria designed to ensure credibility, diversity, and relevance to the research objectives. Eligible participants were required to be over 30 years of age and have a minimum of five years of professional experience to ensure that their views reflected both maturity and sustained involvement in the field. The selection focused on individuals who were either directly engaged in the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Thailand or had substantial professional or academic expertise in diplomacy, foreign affairs, international business, or Thai–Saudi relations.

As shown in Table 1, the final sample consisted of ten participants: three officials from foreign relations agencies (A, B, C) with 5–10 years of experience, three diplomats (D, E, F) with 5–8 years of service, two independent scholars (G and J) with 18–20 years of research and field experience, and two business

practitioners (H and I) who have operated in Saudi Arabia for 10–15 years. The group reflects diversity in gender (seven males and three females), nationality (Thai and Thai/Saudi residents), and professional background, which enriches the variety of perspectives. This composition was considered adequate for reaching data saturation and generating rich insights into the dynamics and implications of Thai–Saudi normalization. While the sample size of ten participants is sufficient for exploratory qualitative research, it remains relatively small and thus limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could address this by expanding the dataset to include a larger and more diverse group of participants—such as policymakers, private-sector actors, and additional community representatives—to provide broader and more comprehensive insights into the evolving dynamics of Thailand–Saudi Arabia relations.

To ensure confidentiality and comply with research ethics, all participants were anonymized using alphabetical identifiers (A–J) and no identifying details beyond those in Table 1 are disclosed in this study. While this study focuses on a deliberately selected group of experienced professionals, the scope is intentionally qualitative and exploratory; therefore, future research could extend these findings by incorporating the perspectives of younger professionals, emerging entrepreneurs, or grassroots actors to broaden the understanding of this evolving relationship.

Data analysis

The study employed a thematic analysis approach to examine and interpret both primary and secondary data. For the interview data, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and carefully checked against recordings and field notes to ensure accuracy. Analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity, followed by open coding in which significant phrases were labeled with concise codes that captured their meaning. These codes were refined into broader categories reflecting shared ideas, such as perceptions of normalization, economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and bilateral challenges. Through iterative comparison and synthesis, recurrent themes and sub-themes were identified, and variations across different participant groups were also noted.

Secondary sources—books, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, official documents and materials from reputable news agencies—were analyzed through document analysis to extract historical, political, and economic context. Findings from these sources were then integrated with the interview results through

methodological triangulation, enabling convergence and comparison of multiple forms of evidence. This combination strengthened the validity and depth of the study and ensured that the themes emerging from the interviews were corroborated and contextualized by documentary evidence.

Table 1 Demographic and professional characteristics of interview participants

No.	Participant ID	Gender	Nationality/Residency	Primary Role	Years of Experience
1.	A	Male	Thai	Foreign Relations Staff	7 years
2.	B	Male	Thai	Foreign Relations Staff	5 years
3.	C	Male	Thai	Foreign Relations Staff	10 years
4.	D	Male	Thai	Diplomat	6 years
5.	E	Male	Thai	Diplomat	5 years
6.	F	Male	Thai	Diplomat	8 years
7.	G	Female	Saudi Resident	Independent Scholar	20 years
8.	H	Female	Thai/Saudi Resident	Business Owner	10 years
9.	I	Female	Thai	Entrepreneur	15 years
10.	J	Male	Thai	Independent Scholar	18 years

Findings

The findings from interviews with ten participants reveal that the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia Thailand has produced three key outcomes. First, it has generated broad strategic and mutual benefits, including renewed political engagement aligned with Saudi Vision 2030, expansion of economic and labor cooperation, growth in tourism, and new opportunities in education, research, and cultural exchange. Second, several structural challenges persist, notably economic asymmetry, limited Thai capacity in advanced sectors, and legal or procedural barriers arising from differing institutional frameworks. Third, sustained progress has been supported by strengthened diplomatic mechanisms, such as the appointment of a new ambassador, establishment of the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC), visa facilitation measures, and high-level political leadership. Together, these themes illustrate both the opportunities and constraints shaping the evolving bilateral partnership.

Strategic interests and mutual benefits of normalization

The interviews with key participants reveal that the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi

Arabia and Thailand offers wide-ranging strategic benefits for both countries. Participant J emphasized that Thailand’s political efforts to re-engage with Saudi Arabia were initiated at an opportune moment, coinciding with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 strategy, which aims to diversify its economy and strengthen connections with new markets, including Thailand. According to Participant J, this rapprochement also aligned with Riyadh’s campaign to secure international support in its successful bid to host the World Expo 2030, during which Saudi Arabia specifically sought Thailand’s vote—a request to which Thailand responded favorably.

From an economic perspective, interviewees consistently highlighted that bilateral relations have gained significant momentum since the official visit of former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha to Riyadh, which resulted in the signing of multiple Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). Participant D noted that approximately twelve MoUs have been concluded, with additional agreements under negotiation, covering areas ranging from trade and investment to technology and human resource development. Participant F underscored that normalization has opened substantial opportunities for both countries in economic and diplomatic spheres.

As he explained (personal communication, April 7, 2024), the relationship positions the two nations as “complementary markets and investment destinations,” observing that “Saudi Arabia could become a strategic re-export hub for Thai goods entering the Middle East, while Thailand could similarly facilitate Saudi exports to Southeast Asia.” Supporting this perspective, Participant G, a Saudi resident, observed that Thai products such as processed and canned foods, auto parts, and rubber products are increasingly visible on supermarket shelves in Saudi Arabia. She further opined that future Saudi–Thai collaboration can expand into educational exchanges, joint scholarships, and research partnerships in areas like halal industry, public health, and sustainability. Establishing co-authored research, innovation hubs, and student mobility programs would deepen mutual understanding and strategic cooperation.

Participant F further drew attention to the interest expressed by Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF)—one of the world’s largest sovereign wealth funds—in investing in Thailand as a gateway for future collaboration. Beyond the economic dimension, he highlighted the diplomatic advantages of strengthening ties with a leading member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), suggesting that enhanced relations with Riyadh could elevate Thailand’s image as a pluralistic and open society, facilitating broader engagement with Muslim-majority nations and contributing to deeper multilateral cooperation.

Tourism was also widely identified as an area of mutual benefit. Participants A, B, E, and H agreed that tourism represents a key growth sector. With Saudi Arabia striving to develop its own tourism industry, it can draw on Thailand’s established experience and expertise, while Thailand stands to gain from an increasing flow of Saudi tourists with high purchasing power. As Participant B noted (personal communication, April 3, 2024), “The normalization of relations has significantly increased the number of Saudi tourists to Thailand, positively impacting our tourism industry.” Participant H further observed that the ongoing reforms under Vision 2030, including fewer restrictions on tourists and a more open social environment, have positioned Saudi Arabia to welcome visitors—including non-Muslim tourists—from across the world, which in turn creates new opportunities for

tourism cooperation and cultural exchange between the two countries.

Labor mobility and cooperation emerged as another theme of shared interest. The rising demand for skilled Thai workers in Saudi Arabia—particularly in tourism and healthcare—offers higher wages and improved professional opportunities. Participant C (personal communication, April 4, 2024) remarked, “Thai workers, especially in tourism and healthcare, can help restore Saudi Arabia’s regional status while benefiting from higher wages compared to what they earn in Thailand.” Similarly, Participant H observed that Thai expertise in massage and beauty services could find a ready market in major Saudi cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, noting that normalization has eased the hiring process for Thai workers in these sectors, replacing other foreign labor.

Finally, several participants discussed the social and cultural dimensions of normalization, particularly in relation to religious travel. Participant I noted that Thai Muslims now benefit from the ability to perform Umrah (minor pilgrimage) in Mecca using a tourist visa, a possibility that was previously unavailable. However, she emphasized that challenges remain concerning the Hajj pilgrimage, including high travel costs and the mismanagement of some tour operators, which continue to pose obstacles for Thai pilgrims. While she acknowledged some improvements in Hajj services in recent years, she attributed these changes primarily to Saudi Arabia’s broader reforms in pilgrimage management rather than to the normalization of bilateral relations. In her view, the clearest impact of normalization has been the greater openness for Thai students to participate in study trips, with Saudi authorities warmly welcoming them to significant educational and cultural sites in the Kingdom. To further narrow gaps in this area, she suggested that Thai authorities take a more proactive role by fostering closer collaboration between the Saudi and Thai Hajj management agencies to improve coordination and enhance services for pilgrims.

Challenges in the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Thailand

While the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand has opened important avenues for cooperation, interviews reveal that several

structural challenges continue to impede the full realization of this partnership.

A recurring theme across interviews concerns the asymmetry in economic capacity between the two countries. As one of the world's largest oil producers and a leading economy in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia possesses significantly greater financial resources and bargaining power. Participants A, B, and C repeatedly pointed out that this imbalance creates a structural constraint for Thailand, limiting its ability to negotiate from a position of strength. Participant A elaborated that Thailand currently lacks the capacity to fully meet Saudi Arabia's strategic expectations in areas such as energy, advanced technology, and specialized labor. Without deliberate investments in industrial upgrading, research and development, and innovation, Thailand risks being perceived as an underprepared and less competitive partner. This imbalance may, in the long term, erode Thailand's influence in shaping the agenda of bilateral cooperation. The comments from interviewees underscore that normalization alone is insufficient: Thailand must also prioritize domestic capacity building to position itself as an attractive and credible counterpart in a relationship that remains inherently asymmetrical.

The second challenge lies in legal and procedural complexity. Saudi Arabia's regulatory environment is deeply influenced by Islamic principles and exhibits a high degree of specificity in its laws on trade, investment, and labor. Participant C (personal communication, April 4, 2024) noted that Thailand's limited familiarity with these frameworks can hinder smooth economic engagement, emphasizing that "a nuanced understanding of Saudi Arabia's customs, temperaments, and legal requirements is essential for effective cooperation." Inadequate knowledge of these rules not only slows negotiations but may also result in compliance failures that could undermine trust and damage long-term diplomatic and commercial relations.

This concern was echoed by Participant H, a business owner with experience in the Saudi market, who stressed that newcomers must exercise caution by ensuring detailed and deliberate contractual arrangements with Saudi counterparts. Such attention to formal business processes, she argued, is crucial for avoiding misunderstandings and ensuring that ventures

operate smoothly in an environment where procedural rigor is highly valued.

Collectively, these challenges point to a need for structural adjustment on Thailand's part. The interviews suggest that for normalization to translate into sustainable gains, Thailand must develop a more sophisticated strategy—one that reduces dependency, builds expertise on Saudi Arabia's institutional context, and strengthens its own economic competitiveness. Without these adjustments, the current gains risk being constrained by an underlying imbalance of power and capacity in the relationship.

Strengthening diplomatic ties

The interviews also show that normalization has been reinforced by deliberate institutional mechanisms. One of the earliest steps in this process, as participant J pointed out, was the appointment of Mr. Darm Boontham as Thailand's new ambassador to Riyadh, a move widely viewed as symbolic of the high priority placed on this relationship.

An especially significant institutional mechanism emerging from this rapprochement is the creation of the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC), a platform for structured, multi-sectoral dialogue. Participant J mentioned that the inaugural STCC meeting, convened in January 2025, brought together senior representatives from both countries who endorsed a comprehensive agenda of initiatives spanning political, economic, security, and cultural domains. This council embeds a systematic framework for bilateral cooperation and marks a decisive shift from previous ad hoc engagement toward a more institutionalized and strategic partnership.

Visa liberalization further illustrates the tangible benefits of normalization. As Participant C explained, Saudi citizens can now travel to Thailand without a visa under specific conditions, while Thai nationals benefit from a streamlined e-visa process when visiting Saudi Arabia. These policy changes have significantly improved mobility, business exchanges, and cultural interaction between the two nations.

Finally, Participant J noted that strong leadership within Thailand's foreign policy apparatus played a crucial role in accelerating the normalization agenda. In particular, the dual role of Mr. Don Pramudwinai—who served as Foreign Minister from 2015 to 2023 and as

Deputy Prime Minister from 2020 to 2023—was identified as instrumental in prioritizing and facilitating closer ties with Riyadh. Table 2 describes key trends

and events in Thailand-Saudi Arabia Normalization (2022-2025).

Table 2 Key Trends and Events in Thailand–Saudi Arabia Normalization (2022-2025)

Themes	Highlights
Strategic Interests & Mutual Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alignment with Vision 2030 and World Expo 2030; 2022 PM Prayuth visit led to 12 MoUs and PIF investment interest. - Expanded cooperation in tourism, labor mobility, education, halal, and sustainability sectors. - Easier Umrah travel with ongoing efforts to improve Hajj coordination.
Challenges in Normalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic imbalance and limited Thai capacity in technology and R&D. - Legal, procedural, and compliance challenges in navigating Saudi systems and business culture. - Need to strengthen domestic capacity to sustain and balance the partnership.
Strengthening Diplomatic Ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appointment of Ambassador Darm Boontham and leadership of Don Pramudwinai drove normalization efforts. - Establishment of the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC) with its first meeting in January 2025. - Visa facilitation measures enhanced mobility and people-to-people exchanges between both nations.

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings in relation to the research questions and situates them within the broader body of literature on the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand. Drawing on both interview data and secondary sources, the discussion highlights three key themes: (1) the potential benefits of normalization for both countries, (2) the challenges that continue to shape the trajectory of relations, and (3) the pathways to strengthening bilateral relations.

The potential benefits of normalized relations for both countries

The normalization of diplomatic relations marks the end of more than three decades of strained ties and has opened a new era of engagement with significant strategic, economic, and sociocultural implications for both Saudi Arabia and Thailand. The interviews confirm that normalization is perceived by stakeholders

in both countries as a timely and mutually beneficial development, aligning with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and Thailand’s long-term economic and diplomatic aspirations.

Trade and investment

Interviewees consistently highlighted trade and investment as a primary area of mutual benefit. The findings indicate that Saudi Arabia sees potential in leveraging Thailand’s geographic and economic position to enhance its outreach in Southeast Asia, while Thailand identifies opportunities to utilize Saudi Arabia’s market access to expand its footprint in the broader Middle East region. This dynamic was emphasized by Participant F (personal communication, April 7, 2024), who argued that “Saudi Arabia could become a strategic re-export hub for Thai goods entering the Middle East, while Thailand could similarly facilitate Saudi exports to Southeast Asia.” These findings resonate with Al Tamimi’s (2023)

argument that Saudi Arabia's recalibration of foreign policy is driven by the need to expand economic partnerships in response to shifting global dynamics, particularly U.S.–China tensions. Similarly, as observed by Salsabila et al. (2022) and Nawaz (2022), such diversification mirrors Saudi Arabia's attempt to normalize relations with other countries, including Turkey and Israel.

A major driver of this trade–investment synergy is the interest shown by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia—one of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world—in exploring opportunities in Thailand. This institutional engagement, along with the approximately twelve MoUs signed since 2022, illustrates a strong trajectory toward enhanced bilateral trade, investment in renewable energy, petrochemicals, logistics, and infrastructure.

Tourism

Tourism has emerged as one of the most visible indicators of normalization. Saudi Arabia's new visa regulations and Thailand's reciprocal facilitation measures have significantly increased travel between the two countries. As Winaisathian (2023) notes, the surge of Saudi tourists—once limited mainly to medical and business visits—has become a high-spending market segment that contributes to Thailand's economy. These observations were reinforced by Participant B, who remarked on the noticeable growth of Saudi tourist arrivals and its positive impact on Thailand's tourism industry. Importantly, Participant H emphasized that Vision 2030's policies to open up Saudi society and reduce restrictions on tourists, including non-Muslims, have started to transform the Kingdom into an emerging destination for global visitors. This shift also creates space for collaboration and exchange in tourism management, training, and cultural interaction between the two countries. Conversely, Thai citizens now benefit from an e-visa scheme that enables multiple entries within a year, supporting travel for leisure, family visits, and religious purposes such as Umrah (Saudi Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). These developments not only contribute to economic growth but also foster people-to-people links.

Labor cooperation

After more than three decades of suspension, Saudi Arabia's reopening of its labor market to Thai workers represents another significant opportunity. The signing of two Memoranda of Understanding between the Thai Ministry of Labor and Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has paved the way for the deployment of both general and domestic workers. Participants C and H noted that skilled Thai workers, particularly in healthcare, hospitality, beauty, and wellness services, are in high demand due to their professional reputation and cultural compatibility. Akarapisit (2022) further supports this observation, emphasizing the potential of this cooperation while cautioning that adaptation to Saudi cultural norms and regulatory frameworks remains critical.

Beyond these direct economic and social gains, the interviews reveal a broader strategic value: improved relations with Saudi Arabia—an influential member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—provide Thailand with a stronger platform for engagement with the Muslim world, which may also have indirect benefits for addressing long-standing challenges in Thailand's southern border provinces.

Social, cultural, and educational exchanges

Beyond these direct economic and social gains, the interviews reveal a broader strategic value: improved relations with Saudi Arabia—an influential member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—provide Thailand with a stronger platform for engagement with the Muslim world, which may also have indirect benefits for addressing long-standing challenges in Thailand's southern border provinces. Participant I pointed out that although Saudi Arabia has improved its Hajj services in recent years, these reforms were part of internal operational changes rather than a result of normalization. Instead, she identified a direct benefit of normalization in the form of expanded educational opportunities: Thai students now have greater access to study trips and academic exchanges in Saudi Arabia, where they are warmly welcomed to significant cultural and religious sites. These exchanges not only strengthen mutual understanding but also add a new dimension of soft-power diplomacy that had been absent during the decades of strained relations.

Challenges in the normalization process

While the findings confirm significant progress, they also highlight structural obstacles that could slow or complicate the deepening of Thai–Saudi ties. These challenges can be grouped into two interrelated areas.

Economic asymmetry and negotiating leverage

Participants A, B, and C stressed that the asymmetry in economic capabilities remains a key constraint for Thailand. Saudi Arabia's larger economic size and financial power grant it considerable leverage in negotiations, a dynamic that can limit Thailand's ability to shape the terms of bilateral cooperation. This echoes neorealist interpretations in the literature (Shahzad & Mashwani, 2024), which highlight how structural power imbalances affect the distribution of benefits in international partnerships. Without concerted efforts to enhance national competitiveness—through innovation, capacity building, and diversification—Thailand risks being viewed as a less prepared partner, thus reducing its influence over the future agenda.

Legal and procedural complexity

The second key challenge concerns the legal and regulatory environment in Saudi Arabia, which is shaped by Islamic principles and is considerably more stringent than Thailand's. Participant C emphasized that a lack of understanding of these principles can pose significant barriers, both diplomatically and commercially. Failure to align with these frameworks risks undermining trust and creating compliance-related setbacks. Participant H reinforced this point, emphasizing the necessity of clear and detailed business contracts to navigate the Saudi market successfully. These insights align with the literature on international legal-cultural adaptation, which underscores that misunderstanding institutional environments often leads to friction in economic diplomacy.

Strengthening bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand

The findings suggest that Thailand can consolidate the benefits of normalization by addressing two strategic priorities: enhancing national competitiveness and aligning with Saudi Arabia's legal-regulatory frameworks.

Enhancing national competitiveness

Thailand must strengthen its domestic capacity to meet Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 demands. This includes developing expertise in energy, advanced technology, and service sectors, while also positioning Thai tourism and hospitality expertise as exportable services. The interviews also indicate that balanced engagement with multiple Middle Eastern partners will help Thailand ensure that its relationship with Saudi Arabia contributes to a coherent and diversified foreign policy.

Aligning legal and regulatory frameworks

A recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of cultural and legal intelligence in sustaining the relationship. As noted by Participant C, understanding Saudi Arabia's Islamic legal principles is essential for avoiding diplomatic missteps and ensuring smooth commercial partnerships. This involves investing in institutional capacity, training for officials and businesses, and formal mechanisms for knowledge exchange.

Institutional mechanisms such as the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC), established to manage these relations, are likely to play an increasingly critical role. Participant J observed that the inaugural STCC meeting, held in January 2025, endorsed a comprehensive agenda of initiatives across political, economic, security, and cultural domains. Combined with leadership from both sides, such mechanisms provide a structured foundation for sustaining the momentum of normalization. Moreover, both countries can strengthen their ties further by pursuing a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to enhance economic integration and mutual benefit.

The normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Thailand in 2022 has led to a surge of bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) across multiple sectors. These formal arrangements reflect both countries' commitment to transforming their partnership from one rooted in labor and trade toward broader strategic cooperation. Table 3 provides a comparative overview of key Saudi–Thai Agreements and MoUs signed between 2022 and 2025, highlighting their main focus areas, outcomes, and current implementation status.

Table 3 Comparative overview of Saudi–Thai agreements/MoUs (2022–2025)

No.	Agreement / MoU	Signatory agencies / Parties	Key focus areas	Main outcomes / Progress achieved	Current status (as of 2025)
1	Establishment of the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand) & Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Saudi Arabia)	Institutional mechanism for bilateral dialogue and coordination across five committees (political, security, economic, investment, cultural/tourism).	First STCC session convened in January 2025; 70 joint initiatives endorsed; platform now serves as the primary channel for bilateral cooperation.	Operational and expanding. Regular meetings planned annually.
2	MoU on Promotion of Direct Investment	Board of Investment (BOI) Thailand & Saudi Ministry of Investment	Facilitation of mutual investment and business partnerships.	Thai BOI office opened in Riyadh (July 2024); multiple Thai firms (e.g., SCG) operating in Saudi Arabia.	Active and institutionalized. Increasing B2B activities.
3	MoU on Energy Cooperation	Ministry of Energy (Thailand) & Ministry of Energy (Saudi Arabia)	Collaboration in oil, gas, and renewable/green energy sectors (hydrogen, petrochemicals).	SABIC exploring green hydrogen investment in Thailand; joint feasibility studies ongoing.	In progress. Projects under technical review.
4	MoU on Tourism Cooperation	Ministry of Tourism and Sports (Thailand) & Saudi Ministry of Tourism	Tourism promotion, flight connectivity, and marketing.	Launch of ‘Two Kingdoms, One Happiness’ campaign; new Riyadh–Phuket route; 15% rise in Saudi arrivals.	Ongoing. Targeting 1.1 million visitors by end of 2025.
5	MoU on Anti-Corruption Cooperation	National Anti-Corruption Commission (Thailand) & Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority (Saudi Arabia)	Exchange of best practices, information sharing, capacity building.	Joint training and liaison channels established; first workshop held in Bangkok 2024.	Active. Institutional coordination sustained.
6	Labor Cooperation Agreements (2 MoUs)	Ministry of Labor (Thailand) & Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (Saudi Arabia)	Deployment of skilled and semi-skilled Thai workers; welfare protection framework.	First batch of Thai workers sent in 2023 (healthcare, construction, hospitality); high demand continues.	Operational. Expansion to professional sectors planned.
7	Roadmap for Comprehensive Cooperation (draft framework)	Joint Thai–Saudi working group under STCC	Covers education, innovation, security, digital economy, agriculture, and culture.	Draft circulated 2023; awaiting formal signature and endorsement by STCC.	Pending. Under review by both governments.

No.	Agreement / MoU	Signatory agencies / Parties	Key focus areas	Main outcomes / Progress achieved	Current status (as of 2025)
8	Visa Facilitation and E-Visa Agreement	Immigration Bureau (Thailand) & Saudi Ministry of Tourism	Simplified travel for citizens of both countries.	60-day visa-free entry for Saudis; e-visa for Thais allowing 90-day stay.	Fully implemented. Boost in travel and people-to-people links.

Conclusion

Following a 30-year period of strained relations, Saudi Arabia and Thailand have successfully normalized their ties, driven primarily by mutual economic interests. One of the most significant benefits of this renewed relationship is in the area of trade and investment. The normalization of relations has facilitated smoother trade between the two countries. Notably, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund has shown interest in investing in Thailand, potentially positioning Thailand as a key regional investment hub. This enhanced economic cooperation could lead to substantial growth and development for both nations.

Tourism is another sector that has seen a significant boost due to improved relations. Both countries have implemented free e-visas to attract more tourists, resulting in a considerable increase in the number of Saudi tourists visiting Thailand. In 2022, Thailand welcomed a record 96,389 Saudi tourists, generating over 8,000 million baht in revenue. This tourism surge benefits Thailand economically and fosters cultural exchange and mutual understanding between the two countries.

Labor cooperation is another area in which Saudi Arabia and Thailand have made progress. After 32 years, the two countries have signed agreements to collaborate on labor initiatives. Thai workers, particularly in the health service sector, will be deployed to Saudi Arabia, taking advantage of cultural and religious similarities and meeting the high demand for skilled labor. This cooperation benefits both countries, providing Saudi Arabia with the necessary workforce while offering Thai workers valuable opportunities.

Despite these benefits, several challenges remain. Social and cultural differences, rooted in historical issues, may pose challenges in fully restoring trust and understanding between the populations of both countries. Overcoming these cultural barriers will require sustained efforts and dialogue. Additionally,

ensuring regulatory compliance presents another challenge. Both countries must carefully navigate their legal and regulatory frameworks, particularly regarding trade and labor agreements, to ensure mutual adherence and avoid potential conflicts.

Moreover, the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and Southeast Asia could affect bilateral relations. Both countries must maintain a delicate balance in their foreign policies to navigate the complex geopolitical dynamics effectively. This balancing act is essential to preserving and enhancing their bilateral relationship in the face of shifting regional and global alliances.

Recommendation: Establish a joint knowledge and innovation partnership

Saudi Arabia and Thailand should expand their cooperation beyond labor, tourism, trade, and cultural exchange by establishing a Joint Knowledge and Innovation Partnership to promote collaboration among academic institutions, think tanks, and private sectors in research and technology transfer. Managed under the Saudi–Thai Coordination Council (STCC), this initiative would provide co-funded research grants, academic exchanges, and annual forums focusing on renewable energy, smart cities, food security, and health innovation—key priorities under Saudi Vision 2030 and Thailand's BCG Economy model. Such a partnership would shift bilateral relations from a resource- and labor-based framework toward a knowledge-driven alliance, fostering long-term capacity building, soft power, and mutual trust.

Declaration for the use of generative AI

The researcher used AI tools solely for English language refinement. All ideas, analyses, and findings are based on original interview data, with no AI-generated content included.

CRedit author statement

Goddaree Boonmalert: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Investigation. **Jiraroj Mamadkul:** Writing- Original Draft, Writing- Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

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