

Urban Megaprojects

Saudi Arabia: Domestic and International Perspectives

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Introduction

In the past years, with increasing intensification, megaprojects have dominated the rhetoric around new urban developments in many cities and countries around the globe, but most prominently perhaps in the region of the Persian Gulf and its oil money-rich economies. This research project tackles this phenomenon specifically as it appears in one of the Gulf countries: Saudi Arabia. It looks at urban megaprojects recently proposed or with construction freshly underway, and examines their political significance, both domestically and in terms of Saudi Arabia's pursuits in the international sphere. Saudi Arabia is already one of the most powerful political and economic players in the region, with a large young population, the 17th biggest economy in the world, and relatively strong ties to countries in the West, including the United States.¹ The Saudi government is furthermore making attempts to increase Saudi influence globally, so it is only natural to ask through what means this is being achieved. While cities that appear seemingly out of nowhere in the middle of the Arabian desert aren't by any means uncommon in the region, Saudi Arabia notwithstanding, their construction and the life in them are often burdened by accounts of extreme inequality and human rights violations.² This applies especially to megaprojects, which are often seen as hostile places to live even by their own residents—yet more of them are still being planned and built. Why is this happening, if these developments aren't hospitable to their residents? If the people living in these areas aren't benefiting from them, who is

1 Elliot Smith et al., "The Line: Ushering in the Future or a Smokescreen for Repression?," *Brown Political Review*, December 9, 2022, <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2022/12/the-line-a-smokescreen-for-repression-in-saudi-arabia/>.

2 Smith et al., "The Line."

and how?

All these queries lead me to the central research question of my research project: What are the political motivations, both domestic and international, for the proliferation of urban megaproject developments across Saudi Arabia? My central thesis is that the Saudi royal family, particularly the crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, support the development of futuristic urban megaprojects across the country in order to establish an image of Saudi Arabia as a forward-thinking, progressive, socially and environmentally conscious, as well as economically well-rounded global player. At the same time, on an internal level, these projects serve to support a renewed nationalist sentiment in Saudi Arabia's young population to back up the country's foreign policy strategies and stabilize the internal political climate in the country.

Background

Saudi Arabia's government is an absolute monarchy, with the currently ruling Al Saud family assuming power at the current state's inception in 1932, after the current king's father, Ibn Saud, now known as Saudi Arabia's founding father and national hero, connected two previously existing kingdoms of Hajaz and Nejd under his rule.³ Presently, the two most prominent personalities in Saudi Arabia's political scene are the current king, Salman Bin Abdulaziz, who assumed power in 2015, and his son, future successor and right hand, the country's crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, who has taken on the role of prime minister in 2017.⁴ Additionally, most of the country's population is Muslim, and the ultra-conservative Sunni religious establishment has also played a prominent role in the country's internal and foreign policy throughout Saudi Arabia's history.⁵ The country constitutes the 17th largest economy in the world,⁶ with the overwhelming majority of its wealth coming from its oil industry.⁷ Recently, however, the Saudi government has been trying to economically diversify and overall modernize the country, doing so mainly through the Public Investment Fund,⁸ which has recently acquired a stake in the Saudi Arabia Oil group in an effort to redirect Saudi Arabia's oil revenue towards other projects.⁹ These include foreign investments, such as the recent deal to acquire a 10% stake in the Heathrow Airport,¹⁰ and a plethora of domestic investments, including an array of companies involved in

3 Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>.

4 Eman Alhussein, issue brief, *Ucwfk'Hktuv<"Jqy"J{rgt/Pcwkqpcnku o"ku'Vtcpuhtq o kpi"Ucwfk' Arabia* (London, United Kingdom: ECFR, 2019).

5 Teitelbaum, Ochsenwald, and Philby, "Saudi Arabia."

6 Smith et al., "The Line."

7 Teitelbaum, Ochsenwald, and Philby, "Saudi Arabia."

8 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

9 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

10 "Public Investment Fund," PIF, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/Pages/Homepage.aspx>.

some of Saudi Arabia's new megaprojects.¹¹ Saudi Arabia's government has outlined its goals for innovation and diversification in the Vision 2030 documents, including specific targets of economic, social and cultural diversification and modernization to be achieved by the year 2030.¹² The framework is under the explicit patronage of the crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, and its website includes a section on urban megaprojects specifically, including ones in the planned NEOM area in the North-West of the country, as well as several around the capital city of Riyadh, in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.¹³ The term urban megaproject, here, means any "large-scale urban development project,"¹⁴ typically with a cost exceeding \$1 billion, that aims in some way to significantly transform a city's part or its overall image, often featuring an iconic design component and pushed by the local urban elites as an indispensable catalyst for urban growth and a means to link the city to the larger global fabric.¹⁵ These include airports, large housing developments, entertainment districts, public transportation systems, and, perhaps most traditionally, skyscrapers.

Methodology

I support this argument by looking at case studies of a variety of city to the larg3a0

futuristic of them – the Line. I will use qualitative analysis of these texts and visuals to examine my sources, and situate my research into the theoretical framework of city branding to evaluate my findings.

Literature review

The theoretical background for my research encompasses two distinct areas of research: Firstly, scholarly work on the changing political climate of Saudi Arabia, and secondly, work on megaprojects as means of branding and image-making. This research project falls into the gap between these two areas and attempts to bridge them.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has made an attempt to dramatically alter the social contract between its citizens and the government. With attempts to diversify its economy away from reliance on oil revenues

tempt to create loyalty to the core personalities of the royal line, particularly the crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, over any other, especially religious, affiliation.²⁴ This includes an emphasis on the connections between the country's security and general stability and the Al Saud family,²⁵ as well as strong emphasis on connections between Mohammed Bin Salman and the Saudi founding father and national hero, King Abdulaziz.²⁶ Most of the campaigning happens on social media where the young population is easily accessible, with Twitter hashtag campaigns, encouragements of displays of nationalism through "emoji allegiance," or medialized visits of Mohammed Bin Salman to remote regions of the country all taking center stage. Here, MBS encourages the young constituency to embody the resilience and strength found in Saudi Arabia's natural landscape.²⁷

Importantly, a large part of this campaign – the hashtag #SaudiFirst also represents changes in foreign policy where Saudi Arabia abandons the role of caretaker of other Arab nations in the region, and instead focuses more on pushing its own individual interests.²⁸ This includes an increased hostility in Saudi Arabia's relationship with countries of the West, although many of the newest reform projects heavily rely on elite Western consultants and investors.²⁹

Urban megaprojects often, like Saudi Arabia's recent policy changes and plans for the country's future, reach for futuristic claims and images to secure legitimacy. They can also function as an attractive option to bring in foreign investment and neoliberal business practices, but this reasoning doesn't shed any light on the reasons for the environmentally conscious, ultramodern and socially progressive aesthetics of Saudi megaprojects. The motivations behind the next generation of urban megaprojects is different: They serve as primarily iconic aspirational images, rather than hubs of neoliberal foreign investment (although this secondary function is also always welcome).³⁰ They transform Saudi Arabia's identity, serve as a form of branding and representational transformation, cultivate illusory urbanism, or as it is sometimes referred to particularly in the Gulf region: the Dubaization of urban development.³¹ Bromber suggests that rather than seeing the processes of urban development in the region as modernization efforts, they are a part of search movements.

As relatively young states, countries of the Gulf are newcomers to nation building, and under a pressure to gain unique advantage over other countries in the

24 Alhussein, "Saudi First"; Kinninmont, *Vision 2030*.

25 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030*.

26 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

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same context, they try to find a special selling point and a particular clearly defined identity.³² In the absence of democratic structures in these countries, these megaprojects can't be legitimized by public participation on political processes, so they're instead legitimized by "visions" of the absolute rulers of the Gulf states,³³ and then in turn weaponized to lend credibility to the current regime in power, transforming rulers into national heroes who bring about a new age of prosperity with their fantastic urban megaprojects³⁴ and can affect the image of the nation as a whole by extension.³⁵ In Saudi Arabia, previous megaprojects have been linked with names of specific royals—the Kingdom tower in Jeddah being sponsored by prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, for example. In some cases, such as in Egypt under the rule of president Sisi, these projects

of Riyadh, along with its central dominant, the Mukaab Skyscraper.⁴³ The project is in its promotional materials described as “the new horizon for Riyadh”⁴⁴ and, indeed, the futuristic visuals most commonly shown in its advertising match this claim with their sheer all-encompassing size. The promotional videos on New Murabba’s website also highlight the inspiration that the Mukaab skyscraper takes in traditional Saudi Arabia’s Najdi architecture,⁴⁵ tying back to the nationalist sentiments king Salman and the crown prince attempt to raise in the younger generations of Saudis. This nationalist sentiment is then highlighted further in slogans associated with the project: “Born from a nation’s vision to create a new way of living.”⁴⁶ Those slogans don’t just highlight the nationalist aspect of Saudi Arabia’s megaprojects, referring back to a unified vision of all Saudi people, but also signal Saudi Arabia’s attempt at pushing itself to the forefront of innovation in thinking about the organization of people’s lives more broadly. Inventing new ways of living, or at least referring to their supposed innovation, will be, as we’ll see in other Saudi megaprojects, another common theme in Saudi visions for the future. The project’s website is also full of compelling buzzwords commonly associated with large innovative projects of the last decades—“immersive,” “experiential,” “walkable”⁴⁷—but those aren’t backed by any substantial data on the neighborhood and skyscraper’s planning proposals, estimated costs, profits, or local urban impacts beyond the previously mentioned slogans.⁴⁸ The only specific numbers we get from the website are the 80 planned entertainment venues, including a Broadway district,⁴⁹ which tie back to Saudi Arabia’s attempt at convincing its citizens and the international community of its progressive turn with easing restrictions on social life. Furthermore, the promotional videos underscore Mukaab’s contribution to the non-oil GDP of the country,⁵⁰ tying back to the efforts to diversify away from oil reliance.

The second examined megaproject is Trojena, located in the NEOM development region in the North-West corner of the country, a hyper-modern luxury mountain resort with ski slopes, wellness hotels, observatories, and an artificial lake.⁵¹ The promotional materials tend to focus less on these material components of the project, however, and aesthetics once again reign supreme. These include visuals reminiscent of sci-f movies like *The Martian*, with futuristic cars driving through the desert or with skiers skiing up a mountain against an avalanche. These images don’t provide information about the resort and its amenities as such, but are here to convey a certain type of vision, conveying ideals of innovation, perseverance and exclusivity.

the rhetorical points seen in other previously mentioned megaprojects' promotional materials, pointing to economic diversification, cutting-edge technologies—this time,

of the megaprojects to begin.⁷² Work on the NEOM projects, then, is largely done by underpaid immigrant workers from countries like Pakistan, who live and work under inadequate conditions.⁷³

Another of Saudi Megaprojects, where the iconic nature of its design seems to dominate over its practicality, is the industrial floating port city of Oxagon, again in the NEOM region.⁷⁴ More than a half of the project is built up on water, despite the plentiful empty areas around the urban development on land, and the fact that building on land instead of water would be much cheaper and less labor intensive. Furthermore, the city's design of a port in the middle,⁷⁵ between Oxagon's floating and land-based areas, means that cargo ships will experience a much more complicated navigation process, with a danger of crashing into some of the floating residential portions of the city. While the megaproject's design is certainly eye-catching, and symbolic of Saudi Arabia's attempts to change its image from that of a conservative exporter of crude oil, the urban plan ends up being fundamentally impractical.

Last, and perhaps most symbolic of Saudi Arabia's attempted change of image, is the offshore tourist destination The Rig.⁷⁶ The megaproject reimagines the aesthetics of the oil industry, looking like a conventional oil rig but serving the function of an unconventional holiday resort.⁷⁷ Unlike anything associated with the oil industry, The Rig's website carries a rhetoric of sustainability and innovative family tourism.⁷⁸ It is the most straightforward that Saudi planned megaprojects get to a direct metaphor of the country's attempted development, with the connotations of a crude industrial site reused and subverted into a desirable modern and innovative destination.

Ultimately, all of the examined megaprojects have some themes in common. Their promotional materials heavily feature buzzwords of technological innovation, exclusivity, sustainability, and transcendental human experience, all mirroring the progressive image which Saudi Arabia attempts to project to both win the nationalist loyalties of its young population, as well as the global elites – those are, in all the promotional videos, represented by the always exclusively young and culturally diverse cast of characters. The projects have a unified futuristic visual language, creating an impression of a larger cohesive scheme and idea, not just individual developments, which works especially well as all the examined megaprojects are tied to the Vision 2030 documents, and all feature on the Vision's website. The megaprojects further serve to solidify Mohammed Bin Salman's image as a competent leader who will bring forth an age of prosperity, as all of the projects, including the Vision 2030 documents

