

# Urban Megaprojects

## Saudi Arabia: Domestic and International Perspectives

[ANNA BLAZKOVA]

### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> The country constitutes the 17<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world,<sup>6</sup> with the overwhelming majority of its wealth coming from its oil industry.<sup>7</sup> Recently, however, the Saudi government has been trying to economically diversify and overall modernize the country, doing so mainly through the Public Investment Fund,<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> These include foreign investments, such as the recent deal to acquire a 10% stake in the Heathrow Airport,<sup>10</sup> and a plethora of domestic investments, including an array of companies involved in

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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, *Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> The term urban megaproject, here, means any "large-scale urban development project,"<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 urban megaprojects that are currently either underway, or planned for construction in the near future, across Saudi Arabia. These include, most importantly, the highly medicalized projects in the region of NEOM in the North-West of the country, including urban spaces such as the iconic city of the Line, tourist destinations like Trojena, or the floating industrial port city of Oxagon. Other examined megaprojects are, like NEOM, connected to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 development plans, again including a variety of residential, recreational and commercial spaces included to cover as wide a variety of cases as possible. The complete list of analyzed megaprojects is: NEOM's Line, Trojena and Oxagon; The Mukaab skyscraper and the adjacent New Murabba neighborhood development; A new development around the UNESCO heritage site of Diriyah; And finally, the tourist resort of The Rig in the Persian Gulf. For data collection, I examined the official websites and promotional materials for these megaprojects, as well as Saudi Arabia government's official website for the Vision 2030 and the project's official brochure available on the same website. To supplement these, I also include some news coverage of the megaprojects, especially sources critical of them, to provide a counterbalance to direct promotional materials. I would however like to acknowledge the limitations of my research here, as English-language reporting on Saudi urban megaprojects centers mainly around the most megalomaniac and

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11 "MENA Investments," PIF, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/Pages/OurInvestments-Local.aspx?Filter=Local>.

12 Saudi Vision 2030, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>.

13 Saudi Vision 2030.

14 Gerardo del Cerro Santamaria, *Urban Megaprojects: A Worldwide View* (Bingley, England: Emerald Insight, 2013), XXIV.

15 Santamaria, *Urban Megaprojects*.

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, the government also has had to find new sources of legitimacy and civic obedience, which were previously achieved through redistribution of precisely this income from oil sales,<sup>16</sup> along with the authority generated by the country's religious establishment.<sup>17</sup> The structures generated by the religious establishment are now also being challenged, however, as they become incompatible with the new leadership and innovations of king Salman Bin Abdulaziz and crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman.<sup>18</sup>

To compensate for these losses in sources of stability of the country's self-image, the Saudi leadership has started pushing a rhetoric of "Saudi first" nationalism<sup>19</sup> with a harsher edge, somewhat removed from the ultra-conservative religious connections and focused on the predominantly young, under 35 years-old Saudi population, with promises of progress attractive for this younger demographic.<sup>20</sup> This rhetoric involves plans to provide more entertainment options and ease restrictions on social life, provide more jobs in the private sector in modern, fast-developing industries such as genetic research or AI technologies, or to ensure nature conservation for future generations.<sup>21</sup> All these ambitions have also been reflected in Vision 2030, a government development plan aiming to diversify Saudi economy with specific targets for the year 2030, which features mainly economic and structural goals, but does so in the language targeted at young Saudis.<sup>22</sup> Some have also questioned whether the project is truly aimed at the Saudi constituency, or rather serves for international, especially Western, consumption.<sup>23</sup>

The nationalist edge goes further than just promises of prioritizing economic prosperity to the younger generation. The ruling Al Saud family is also making an at-

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16 Jane Kinninmont, rep., *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract Austerity and Transformation* (London: Chatham House, 2017).

17 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

18 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

19 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

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

21 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

22 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

23 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030*.

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.<sup>24</sup> This includes an emphasis on the connections between the country's security and general stability and the Al Saud family,<sup>25</sup> as well as strong emphasis on connections between Mohammed Bin Salman and the Saudi founding father and national hero, king Abdulaziz.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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).<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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

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

25 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030*.

26 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

27 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

28 Alhussein, "Saudi First."

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

30 Stephen Graham, "Verticality and Centrality: The Politics of Contemporary Skyscrapers," in *Re-Centring the City* (London: UCL Press, 2020), 169–91.

31 Santamaría, *Urban Megaprojects*: Ali Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolution Egypt," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 71–86; Armelle Choplin and Alice Franck, "A Glimpse of Dubai in Khartoum and Nouakchott: Prestige Urban Projects on the Margins of the Arab World," *Built Environment* 36, no. 2 (July 4, 2010): 192–205.

same context, they try to find a special selling point and a particular clearly defined identity.<sup>32</sup> 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,<sup>33</sup> 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 megaprojects<sup>34</sup> and can affect the image of the nation as a whole by extension.<sup>35</sup> 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 have become propaganda of "disposable images,"<sup>36</sup> where the ultimate execution of the project isn't nearly as important as the initial visionary idea, manifested in computer simulations and flashy brochures,<sup>37</sup> presenting magical realism that testifies the power of the producer of these visions—usually a member of the ruling elite.<sup>38</sup> Even in less extreme cases, though, urban megaprojects serve primarily as sources of symbolic capital,<sup>39</sup> transforming cities into brands projecting prestige, performance and power.<sup>40</sup>

Urban megaprojects unfortunately frequently don't live up to the aspirations and visions which created them, and end up even contradicting the original intentions. Santamaria describes a discrepancy between how urban megaprojects are viewed on global stages, and their actual urban effects, which can be detrimental not only to the general population, but contest the interests of the original orchestrators too.<sup>41</sup> Megaprojects also swallow large investments which manifest in only small, concentrated areas without larger consistent urban planning, therefore resulting in fragmented development and large discrepancies between the individual projects and their surrounding areas.<sup>42</sup>

## Analysis

The first of Saudi Arabia's megaprojects that I'll be examining is a planned new construction of the neighborhood of New Murabba on the edge of the capital city

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32 Katrin Bromber, Steffen Wippel, and Birgit Krawietz, *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region* (London: Routledge, 2018).

33 Bromber et al., *Under Construction*.

34 Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism"; Bromber et al., *Under Construction*; Santamaria, *Urban Megaprojects*.

35 Santamaria, *Urban Megaprojects*.

36 Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism."

37 Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism"; Bromber et al., *Under Construction*.

38 Bromber et al., *Under Construction*.

39 Bromber et al., *Under Construction*.

40 Graham, "Verticality and Centrality."

41 Santamaria, *Urban Megaprojects*.

42 Bromber et al., *Under Construction*; Graham, "Verticality and Centrality."

of Riyadh, along with its central dominant, the Mukaab Skyscraper.<sup>43</sup> The project is in its promotional materials described as “the new horizon for Riyadh”<sup>44</sup> 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,<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup> 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”<sup>47</sup>—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.<sup>48</sup> The only specific numbers we get from the website are the 80 planned entertainment venues, including a Broadway district,<sup>49</sup> 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,<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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-fi 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.

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43 “A Gateway to Another World,” Newmurabba.com, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://newmurabba.com/>.

44 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

45 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

46 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

47 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

48 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

49 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

50 “A Gateway,” Newmurabba.com.

51 “Trojena: The Mountains of NEOM,” NEOM, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/trojena>.

The Vault, a gateway into the resort, is then called a “portal” between the digital and the physical,<sup>52</sup> tying back to Saudi Arabia’s promises of pushing modern industries, such as AI technologies. The project’s website also highlights Trojena’s personal sanctioning by Mohammed Bin Salman,<sup>53</sup> a type of public visibility which helps to associate his public persona with the ideals of progress and prosperity. It is important to note, too, that all of NEOM’s projects are tied to the crown prince very closely, as he’s assumed the role of the chairman of the NEOM company, in addition to all his other positions in the Saudi government.<sup>54</sup> Another theme in Trojena’s promotional materials is the “like no other in the world”<sup>55</sup> rhetoric employed, along with a decidedly young and multi-cultural cast of the promotional video,<sup>56</sup> to attract foreign elites to the project and create an impression of Saudi Arabia as an exclusive world-class tourist destination.

The third of my examined megaprojects is the Diriyah Development Project near Riyadh, which aims to build up hotels, shopping centers, business buildings and entertainment venues in the area surrounding the At-Turaif ancient city, which is currently classified as a UNESCO heritage site, and combine its historical buildings with a new development in a modernized style of the local Najdi architecture.<sup>57</sup> This urban megaproject is again connected to Vision 2030 and featured on its website, as well as directly funded by the Public Investment Fund. Sitting at a predicted investment of \$62 billion,<sup>58</sup> it is one of the cheaper projects which Saudi Arabia plans to build in the next approximately ten years. In this case, the materials presenting the development project put a large emphasis on continuing the Saudi national heritage through architecture, as well as preserving the nation’s pride in its history.<sup>59</sup> This, again, ties back to the efforts to forge a renewed strong nationalist sentiment that anchors itself in Saudi Arabia’s history and its heroes—the At-Turaif city is the original home of the Al Saud dynasty<sup>60</sup>—and at the same time reaches into the future with its rhetoric of modernization and progress.

Next, the fourth subject of analysis, and perhaps the most notoriously known in the media outside of Saudi Arabia, is the city of The Line, again in the NEOM region in the country’s north-west.<sup>61</sup> The project is, on the company’s website, presented as a “evolution in civilization”<sup>62</sup> with its eye-catching vertical structure, counterintuitive linear design and promises of complete sustainability.<sup>63</sup> The project mirrors all

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52 “Discover Trojena,” NEOM, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/trojena/clusters>.

53 “Trojena: The Mountains of NEOM,” NEOM.

54 “Trojena: The Mountains of NEOM,” NEOM.

55 “Trojena: The Mountains of NEOM,” NEOM.

56 “Trojena: The Mountains of NEOM,” NEOM.

57 “Diriyah,” Saudi Vision 2030.

58 “Diriyah,” Saudi Vision 2030.

59 “Diriyah,” Saudi Vision 2030.

60 “Diriyah,” Saudi Vision 2030.

61 “The Line,” NEOM.

62 “The Line,” NEOM.

63 “The Line,” NEOM.



the rhetorical points seen in other previously mentioned megaprojects' promotional materials, pointing to economic diversification, cutting-edge technologies—this time, in a city with services controlled by AI—as well as a particularly strong emphasis on ecological sustainability and 100% renewable energies and water supplies,<sup>64</sup> promising that this city model will serve as a solution to many of humanity's current environmental and urban crises. The Line's promotional materials interestingly feature several videos of other cities reimaged in a vertical configuration,<sup>65</sup> showing how much nature would be “saved” if the urban space was restructured in a fashion reminiscent of the megaproject. The subjects of these videos are Manhattan or Kensington, raising the suggestion that Saudi Arabia aims to position itself as a leading force on issues of sustainability and urban planning, surpassing even global superpowers like the US or UK, and that its designs have solutions for problems even in these older urban areas. Along with hyper-green visuals filled with lush trees and grass inside the city's walls, we hear references to “world-class architects”<sup>66</sup> and fast connectivity to at least 40% of the rest of the world<sup>67</sup>—Saudi Arabia's further positioning as a globally significant economic and cultural player.

However, with The Line's exposure in the foreign media, the megaproject has also become one of the few to face substantial criticism.<sup>68</sup> These critical pieces often highlight the impracticality of the design, which won't be able to adapt well to the changes in the size of its population, and will be, with its singular main high-speed rail, vulnerable to failing infrastructure.<sup>69</sup> The linear design is then, according to the critics, primarily here for the shock value, not for any real practicality. Furthermore, with currently available technologies, promises of complete environmental sustainability seem far-fetched and impossible to fulfill. To illustrate just one of the problems, the city plans to get all its water through desalination from the gulf of Aqaba. However, current desalination technologies end up with a waste product, an extremely salty brine, where the only viable option of disposal at this scale is its release back into the sea.<sup>70</sup> This brine, however, is so salty that at large quantities, it kills ecosystems on the marine floor – an effect directly in contradiction to the Line's promised environmental consciousness.<sup>71</sup> Lastly, many concerns over human rights in association with NEOM projects have appeared, particularly connected to the displacement of the Huwaitat tribes native to the region, who have been forced to leave the area for the development

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64 “The Line,” NEOM.

65 “The Line,” NEOM.

66 “The Line,” NEOM.

67 “The Line,” NEOM.

68 Justin Scheck, Rory Jones, and Summer Said, “A Prince's \$500 Billion Desert Dream: Flying Cars, Robot Dinosaurs and a Giant Artificial Moon,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-princes-500-billion-desert-dream-flying-cars-robot-dinosaurs-and-a-giant-artificial-moon-11564097568>.

69 Smith et al., “The Line.”

70 Smith et al., “The Line.”

71 Smith et al., “The Line.”

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

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.<sup>74</sup> 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,<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup> The megaproject reimagines the aesthetics of the oil industry, looking like a conventional oil rig but serving the function of an unconventional holiday resort.<sup>77</sup> Unlike anything associated with the oil industry, The Rig's website carries a rhetoric of sustainability and innovative family tourism.<sup>78</sup> 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 themselves, exist under his patronage, and his likeness features on the website of all

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72 Scheck, Jones, and Said, "A Prince's \$500 Billion Desert Dream,": Jennifer Holleis and Kersten Knipp, "Saudi Arabia's Neom: A Prestigious Project with a Dark Side," *dw.com*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabias-neom-a-prestigious-project-with-a-dark-side/a-65664704>.

73 Holleis and Knipp, "Saudi Arabia's Neom."

74 "Oxagon," NEOM.

75 "Oxagon," NEOM.

76 "Home," The RIG, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://therig.sa/>.

77 "Home," The RIG.

78 "Home," The RIG.

of the examined developments. Ultimately, however, any more specific information on the urban impact of these projects, their detailed plans, budgets, or expert studies backing up the prominent buzzwords are completely absent from all the explored materials. It seems, then, especially when considering some of the international criticism several that the megaprojects have garnered, that they truly are primarily an image to lend credibility to Saudi Arabia's aspirations domestically and internationally, and that their design often functions on the basis of "aesthetics over function."

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, my research of Saudi Megaprojects confirmed the initial thesis of this project: The Al-Saud family uses urban megaprojects to change the country's image in the international community, as well as to establish a new nationalist sentiment within the country's young population to legitimize its own position of power. The paper, more broadly, also explored the question of how larger domestic and international policies affect specific urban planning decisions in smaller regions of the country, and looked at the strong and symbiotic relationship between a movement to build a new nationalist sentiment and the proliferation of iconic architecture. The research provides an alternative explanation for the existence of urban megaprojects that doesn't primarily point to neoliberal theories, showing that megaprojects can serve as more than just a vessel to funnel international investment into a particular location. Megaprojects can also serve as support for political regimes and visions through their symbolic capital. The main limitation of this paper is its focus on English-language resources exclusively—therefore, one of the suggestions for further research would be a replication with an inclusion of materials in Arabic, to see whether sources targeted at the domestic and regional Arab-speaking audience paint the same picture as their English equivalents. Further, new comparative research could be done by bringing in a country with a non-totalitarian government and a significant number of planned megaprojects, to see whether the mode of governance creates differences in motivations for large urban development projects. Lastly, this research could be broadened to include other similar countries of the gulf, such as Qatar or the UAE, in a comparative study to test whether the same trends are visible elsewhere in the region.