

**A Tale of Two National Visions:  
Re-Imagining Saudi Arabia Through KAEC and NEOM**

By

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## **Abstract**

Over the past 20 years, the proliferation of new city projects in the Persian Gulf has demonstrated how urban and economic development narratives are being used to strengthen top-down government structures in rentier states. In Saudi Arabia, two new cities have emerged explicitly in response to economic and political concerns over diminishing oil reserves: King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) and NEOM. Despite receiving significant media attention, no scholarship compares these two projects. In this research, I explore the rationales, imaginaries, and politics that underpin KAEC and NEOM and how they are manifested in their designs. In doing so, this thesis highlights how the projects are city-centric expressions of Saudi Arabia's path to a post-oil future by two distinct Saudi regimes. While they vary significantly in terms of funding, governance, and overall scale, they serve the same purpose: to use urban imaginaries to express the promise and legitimacy of the Al-Saud regime as it transitions the kingdom's economy away from oil.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Setting the scene: Building a kingdom of new cities for national development**

On October 24, 2017, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (commonly referred to as MBS) announced his plans for a special economic zone (SEZ) in northwestern Saudi Arabia: the ambitious master planned region of NEOM (“Saudis set \$500 billion plan to develop zone linked with Jordan and Egypt”, 2017). Promotional materials about the city show a ‘world class’ hub powered by clean energy with a floating industrial complex, tourist resorts, and a linear city where women are free to jog in crop tops, AI and robots anticipate residents' needs, and an artificial moon lights up the night sky (McGinley, 2019; NEOM Website). Advocates of the new urban project predict that it will change the course of the kingdom’s history and function as a “display [of] Saudi Arabia’s dedication to becoming [a] more contemporary, inclusive, and progressive” nation (SNC Lavalin, n.d.: Online).

Building this new city is not an isolated project for Saudi Arabia’s ruling elite, but one in a long line of urban projects attempted since the Kingdom’s founding in 1932. Following World War II (WWII), King Ibn Saud developed Riyadh’s infrastructure and encouraged urbanization as a way to stabilize his regime in a region whose political structure had previously been based on nomadism and shifting allegiances (Al-Ankary & El Bushra, 1989). Within just a few decades, his goal was realized: by 1985, 75 percent of the population lived in cities, reflecting the kingdom’s rapid rate of urbanization from just 10 percent in 1950 (Al-Ankary & El-Bushra, 1989). The urbanization process was buoyed by the discovery of oil and Aramco’s subsequent erection of company towns, transportation routes, and industrial infrastructure (Hertog, 2010). This infrastructural base facilitated Saudi Arabian development, laying the foundations for the kingdom to function as a modern state with a developmental philosophy that required a national planning framework.

Since the kingdom’s initial period of urbanization in the decades following WWII, city-building has been revived by the ruling elite during troublesome historical episodes as a strategy to solidify the regime's survival. When King Khalid came to power in 1975 amidst a period of Islamic revivalism in the Arab world, the cities of Jubail and Yanbu were officially recognized in the kingdom’s Second Five-Year National Development Plan as sites for new industrial cities to be developed (Pampanini, 1997). These cities were part of the kingdom’s strategy to create

modern ‘free trade zones’ that incentivized foreign direct investment and midstream industrial activities. Jubail and Yanbu were successful by all measures, as nonpetroleum industries like steel, cement, and agriculture reduced the kingdom’s dependence on imports (Pampanini, 1997).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, uncertainties regarding the kingdom’s oil dependence have led to heightened anxieties about the survival of the Saudi state. Saudi kings have faced a series of challenges concerning royal succession, falling oil prices, the Arab uprisings since 2011, and regional rivalries with Iran and other Gulf neighbours (Al-Rasheed, 2018: 1). The intersection of these circumstances has prompted the government to reconsider its redistributive economy that has shared oil profits among the population since the era of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 60s (Hertog, 2018). Although rent distribution has helped to maintain the regime's stability over half a century by creating networks of patronage and clientelism that effectively depoliticize citizens, the recent period of austerity and dissent has shown that this is no longer a sustainable model to avoid political upheaval in an increasingly globalized world (DeVriese, 2013; Hertog, 2018). Recognizing that the kingdom cannot live off oil wealth forever, the ruling elite has pursued a development programme to overhaul the oil-exporting economy and encourage financial diversification (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

The first attempt to engage in city building as a strategy to expand the kingdom’s economy beyond crude oil export occurred in 2005 when former King Abdullah (reigned 2005-2015) announced his plans for King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC). As an ambitious master-planned city for two million built entirely from scratch, KAEC marks a significant new phase in the kingdom’s national development agenda. Although the domain has engaged in city-building before, efforts like Jubail and Yanbu were conducted in areas with existing population centers and remained heavily petrochemical-oriented. KAEC, however, is representative of the broader global trends of corporate-driven new cities, like Dubai, that were created to “leapfrog” resource-based nations into knowledge economies (Hobday, 1995, as cited by Ewers & Malecki, 2010: 495) and develop a number of highly profitable sectors like finance and tourism. Indeed, its stated purpose is to develop the kingdom’s industrial, research, education, and tourism industries in an explicit attempt to transition the nation to a post-oil future (KAEC Website).

As two cities that have recently been conceptualized in response to concerns of diminishing oil reserves and political unrest, KAEC and NEOM deserve scholarly attention. The neoliberal knowledge networks that appeal to the kingdom’s royal elite differentiate the cities



from previous urban projects. These ‘new cities’ are promoted as a panacea for contemporary social and economic concerns like climate change, ‘Dutch’ disease, urban congestion, and unemployment (Moser, 2020). As state-led initiatives to construct a knowledge-based economy, the urban visions they promote promise a more progressive and secular Saudi society. However, the top-down spatial policies they embody also allow for decision-making to become increasingly concentrated in the hands of powerful individuals. With this in mind, it is vital to consider how urban visions may be a new way for the House of Saud to bolster its political legitimacy by consolidating power and strengthening its authoritarian grip on Saudi society. Further investigation of current development initiatives is required to understand what actions the monarchy takes to fashion a Saudi identity that will either keep the House robust or weaken its role.

This study compares KAEC, announced in 2005, and NEOM, announced in 2017, to evaluate how national diversification ambitions have evolved in the 2000s and how this manifests in new city schemes. Using literal and visual content analysis, I seek to understand how these two private cities in Saudi Arabia are imagined and deliberate on the implications that these projects of “national revisionism and reordering” may have on the kingdom’s sovereign landscape (Bsheer, 2020: 26).



Figure 1.1. The geographic location of KAEC and NEOM

## 1.2. Research aim, questions, and significance

This research project investigates how top-down development imaginaries in Saudi Arabia's new cities, KAEC and NEOM, are employed as national development strategies to maneuver Saudi Arabia to a post-oil future. Three questions stem from this objective that will be used to help guide my literature review, conceptual framework, and methodology. First, what are the main rationales for new city-building in Saudi Arabia? Secondly, how do national development strategies inform urban imaginaries? Third, how are Saudi Arabian politics manifested in new city projects?

The complex political circumstances underpinning corporate-driven cities in Saudi Arabia remain largely unexplored. This research intends to help fill this gap by exploring how urban policies are essential to Saudi Arabia's diversification strategy. In the kingdom's

authoritarian context, the city-centric narratives that accompany such policies effectively legitimize and strengthen top-down government structures.

### **1.3. Thesis structure**

This introductory chapter has set the thesis in a broader context of Saudi Arabian history and urban studies, discussed the rationale and contributions of the research, and outlined my research objective and key questions. Chapter Two, *Literature Review*, provides a critical review of the several strands of literature which I engage with and contribute to in this thesis, organized into three sections: contemporary new city building, globally circulating urban imaginaries for national development, authoritarian spatialities. Chapter Three lays out the methodology that has guided this research: historical, discourse, and content analysis. I also discuss the limitations of this study through a reflection on my positionality and the scope of this research. Chapter Four examines how the Saudi elite established and re-constructed Saudi identity to quell political unrest and maintain power since 1932. By providing helpful background on the Saudi political apparatus, this chapter simultaneously highlights continuities in Saudi nation-building strategies while pointing to significant policy ruptures in recent decades. Chapter Five, *Comparison of KAEC and NEOM*, demonstrates how this concept manifests in the urban sphere. I argue that KAEC and NEOM are city-centric expressions of Saudi Arabia's path to a post-oil future by two Saudi regimes whose approaches to achieving this goal are largely disparate. Chapter 6, *Cities to Save a Kingdom: Re-Branding Saudi Arabia*, highlights how the urban imaginaries for each project create a new narrative of Saudi Arabia that favours the monarchy. This thesis concludes with Chapter Seven, *Discussion and Conclusion*, in which I summarize how each chapter addresses the research questions, review the key findings of the thesis and its contributions to existing literature, and provide several directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The conceptual framework I outline in this section contextualizes my research objectives, topics, and questions within critical urban studies scholarship, which I aim to contribute to in this thesis. By critically reviewing these bodies of literature, I provide relevant background on the theoretical and empirical concepts I will explore in my thesis and a justification for my contributions to the scholarship. My research aims to critically investigate Saudi Arabia's new city-building projects in KAEC and NEOM as top-down national development strategies. I have compiled the literature that informs this thesis into three categories: 1) Contemporary new city building, 2) Globally circulating urban imaginaries for national development, and 3) Authoritarian spatialities. These categories allow me to understand the attraction towards global new city models and how they are often appropriated in authoritarian political contexts to impact decision-making for the built environment.

### **2.2. Contemporary new city building**

More than 150 master-planned cities have been developed from the ground up in the past two decades (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021). This project surge has occurred primarily in the Global South, where new cities are often viewed opportunistically. In my review of this literature section, I aim to explore the phenomenon of contemporary new city-building.

The tradition of developing cities from scratch is hardly new, but recent iterations in the twenty-first century represent a departure from master-planned projects of the past. Markedly, the corporate interests in 21st-century new cities differentiate them from the WWII reconstruction era new towns and post-colonial utopian cities (Moser, 2015; Vale, 2008). In the United Kingdom, France, and many other countries, new towns were “wedded to welfare state ideals” as they sought to confront urban ills and resolve the housing shortages that resulted from the post-war population increase (Freestone, 2021: 19). Similarly infused with socialist ideas, newly independent nations managed urban migration by constructing city complexes anew to promote national identity and bolster anti-colonial sentiments (Vale, 2008). Cities such as Chandigarh (India) and Brasilia (Brazil) were state-led nation-building efforts that employed top-down modernist design principles to differentiate from the British colonial period (Hall, 2014). By contrast, recent projects are far less centralized. New cities today demonstrate a

fragmentation of national interests as developments are informed by globalized networks of entrepreneurialism, supported mainly through private sector engagement, and marketed towards the world's economic elite (Moser, 2015). Characterized by increasing privatization, recent new city-building projects deviate from the reformist theoretical underpinnings of post-colonial new cities.

The current appeals and functions of new cities in the Global South demonstrate the rationales for new city creation promoted by political actors. Moser and Côté-Roy situate the rise in new city projects within broader trends in the world market: the financialization of real estate, deregulation of global economies, growth of capital inflows, and the increasingly influential role of technology companies in development are important occurrences that have made the investment in new cities particularly attractive (2021: 2-3). In this context, urbanization has come to be seen as a “business model” (Datta, 2015, as cited in Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021: 5) through which investors in new city developments can profit. Many new cities are designed to project an elusive ‘international’ aesthetic that will appeal to wealthy foreign buyers (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021). Also, they provide new opportunities to engage in urban governance for increased efficiency. Recent research indicates that most new cities have a corporate management structure in which a CEO oversees city affairs instead of an elected official (Moser, 2020). Indeed, economic rationales underpin realistically private developments at the city scale (Fält, 2019). Political elites respond to these new cities as they represent another means to elevate their status, diversify their economic portfolio, and engineer a prestigious social landscape (Moser, 2020).

The proliferation of new city projects in the context of the Persian Gulf highlights how urban development narratives are being used to strengthen top-down government structures. As post-oil futures loom nearer, local ruling elites must be taken seriously as they strive to maintain statehood and power. Hertog argues that cities provide a “soft power infrastructure” from which Gulf nations can build cultural credibility (2019: 295). Indeed, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have been heavily engaged in constructing ‘instant cities’ to transform their urban landscapes for global integration (Bagaeen, 2007). Place-branding initiatives have generated symbolic images of Dubai and Doha as sites of progress and dynamism where amazing structures are built for world-class talent (Bagaeen, 2007; Shoaib & Keivani, 2015). By cultivating cosmopolitanism, these rentier states seek to distance themselves from their status as

hydrocarbon producers and move towards more international identities that will allow them to continue exerting regional cultural and economic leadership (Hertog, 2019).

These ambitions are reflected in the Saudi Arabian context as well. KAEC has been the subject of many place-branding initiatives to communicate the kingdom's growth and development to a global audience (Shoaib & Keivani, 2015). As Moser's ethnographic fieldwork at the KAEC Cityquest Forums demonstrates, the kingdom uses KAEC's imagined spaces for marketing itself as an expert in new city building, innovation, and policy through a "master class in advanced urbanization" (2019: 223). In this way, Saudi Arabia's experimentation in new city building can be understood as a symptom of more significant trends in the Persian Gulf, but further research has the potential to explain the unique processes of development in the kingdom's context.

Thus, the phenomenon of new city-building is evidence of an increasingly neoliberal world where urban development is seen as an attractive investment opportunity rather than a means for societal improvement. As urban geography scholarship explaining the global city-building trend increases, this honours thesis aims to situate Saudi Arabia's unique national ambitions within the development currents of the Gulf region.

### **2.3. Globally circulating urban imaginaries for national development**

City-centric visions of prosperity in the Global South are inspired mainly by the transnational circulation of ideas (Moser, 2019). In this section, the concept of urban policy mobility will help explain how neoliberal rhetoric about accelerated processes of innovation and entrepreneurialism inspires urban imaginations across the globe. Exploring the rhetorical manifestations of these fantastical urban ideas helps determine the underlying ambitions of new city-building.

First, it is important to differentiate between policy transfer and urban policy mobilities to situate the concept within urban studies literature. McCann states that the term 'policy transfer' is often used in political science scholarship to describe how national policymakers "import innovatory policy developed elsewhere in the belief that it will be similarly successful in a different context" (Stone, 1999 as cited in McCann, 2011:110). However, McCann argues that this perspective often ignores the socio-spatial and scalar elements involved in knowledge transfers. He outlines a view of urban policy mobility that emphasizes how "socially produced and circulated forms of knowledge" are developed across "various spatial scales, networks,

policy communities, and institutional contexts” to inform and produce urban ideas (McCann, 2011: 109). Indeed, a burgeoning body of scholarship investigating the mechanisms of how urban policy is mobilized has demonstrated the active role that politicians (Phelps et al., 2014), global consultancies (Prince, 2012; Rapoport & Hult, 2017), and private international architecture and planning firms (Rapoport, 2015) play in circulating urban visions through policies and services. Scholars have highlighted that these actors’ ideas are bolstered by sophisticated websites, captivating urban models, and digital visualizations that convincingly bring their policies to life (Watson, 2020). These seduction methods shape global policy landscapes by creating urban development pathways informed by a narrow set of precedents and procedures that are widely promoted and appropriated.

The persuasive narratives that global knowledge circulation promulgates inform urban imaginations. McCann defines imaginaries as a socially produced “set of meanings, values, and institutions held in common and constituting the worldview of a particular community or society” (2011: 116). He argues that actors in the urban policy community employ tropes and representational techniques to convince clients that urban policies created and implemented elsewhere apply to their local circumstances (2011: 116). For example, urban policymakers boast ‘green’- or ‘eco’-developments (Moser & Avery, 2021), global- or world-city aesthetics (Ong, 2011), and high-tech ‘smart’ cities (Das, 2019) as all-purpose solutions to urban challenges through elaborate city-branding techniques. These narratives present new cities as an opportunity to sidestep the messy parameters typically involved in developing existing urban infrastructure (Murray, 2015). In this way, new cities become ‘representational spaces’ with infinite possibilities (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974], as cited in Lindner & Meissner, 2018: 5). The built environment is configured as a primary modality through which national development strategies and ambitions can be imagined and achieved.

Recent publications have identified economic development as one of the principal ambitions underpinning many new city builds (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021). The instantaneous development narratives that new city models promote are particularly attractive to pre-industrial economies that seek to diversify by constructing knowledge-based sectors that are sustainable and competitive (Childs & Hearn, 2017). Ewers and Malecki describe the goal of Gulf economies to “catch up” to other nations who have already experienced a period of capitalist industrialization as “leapfrogging” (Hobday, 1995 as cited by Ewers & Malecki, 2010: 495).

This ‘leapfrog’ phenomenon will allow Gulf states to invest their petro-dollars in bypassing the industrial development model of transition and developing high-tech sectors distinguished with research and development. The ‘Four Tigers’ inspired this model: East Asian electronic firms that developed competitive export-oriented industrial economies through government subsidies in the late twentieth century (Ewers & Malecki, 2010). But the economic circumstances of the Gulf States are unique, and they face significant challenges in competitiveness, knowledge accumulation, and labour (Ewers & Malecki, 2010). Whether these rentier states can transform their sudden oil wealth into human capital remains to be seen.

In brief, literature on the highly-mobile circulation of urban imaginaries demonstrates how global perspectives inform development visions and the strategies various nations pursue. Additional research is required to distill how new city imaginations in Saudi Arabia differentiate themselves from other global approaches and the degree to which they are successful at ‘leapfrogging’ the national economy.

#### **2.4. Authoritarian spatialities**

Economically motivated new city projects are frequently associated with planning in authoritarian or non-democratic contexts. Scholarship discusses how new cities are state-led endeavours that aim to express the nation’s “unity, promise, and modernity” by creating an urban spectacle (Koch, 2018: 2) that projects a distinct brand. In reviewing this part of the literature, I intend to understand the highly centralized political dynamics that underpin and exacerbate authoritarian spatialities.

New cities play a central political and ideological role for states. The cultural politics of these master-planned cities can be understood through Vale's (2008 [1992]) book *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, in which he examines the design of parliamentary complexes in capital cities throughout the global North and South. In each case, he argues that architecture and urban planning are used as political instruments to construct a national identity that bolsters the state’s hegemony. More recent place-specific analyses explore how new cities strategically project symbols of modernity, religion, and an ‘authentic’ cultural heritage – among other things – to service nation-building agendas (Koch, 2014a, 2018; Moser, 2011; Vale, 2008). Urban design serves as another sphere through which to strengthen state power and ideology.



Moreover, new city-building projects are seen as a means for leadership to legitimize their role. In her investigation of the sustainability narratives surrounding urban mega-projects in Qatar, Koch (2014b) argues that these discourses have been used to ‘green-wash’ Qatar’s environmentally damaging development scheme but, more importantly, to garner respect for the monarchy and their domestic nation-building agenda. By treating sustainability as an ambiguous strategic discourse, she suggests that researchers need to consider how the various rationales for city-building projects “fit into the leadership’s legitimacy projects – in terms of efforts to secure both domestic *and* foreign approval of the country’s non-democratic political configuration” (Koch, 2014b: 1121).

Ideology and legitimacy projects can have concrete ramifications in the urban landscapes where they are enacted. Koch (2018) explores how the mixed agendas of resource-rich non-democratic states are often represented through extravagant urban projects in *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia*. She states that spectacular urban developments are “lavish[ly] built landscapes [...] that represent a stark contrast with their surrounding context” and that they are developed to show the “government’s prosperity and ostensible benevolence in a manner that contrasts significantly with other forms of state austerity and violence found elsewhere” (Koch, 2018: 2). These urban imaginations are designed to stand apart in a variety of ways: cities such as Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, and Dubai are all examples of statist spectacles that are of a unique magnitude and perceived experience (Koch, 2018: 3).

Koch’s *Spatializing Authoritarianism* (2022) argues that authoritarianism has a spatiality that is imagined and produced at various scales. Tracing case studies on cities overtime in the Global South and North from Nazi Germany (Hagen in Koch, 2022) to Putin’s Russia (Argenbright in Koch, 2022), she argues that authoritarianism is intimately linked to the built environment and the national narratives it expresses. At the same time, Koch prompts researchers to be more reflexive about their ideological orientations and recognize how authoritarian practices can be present in various political circumstances, places, and spaces. Authoritarian spatialities can be found worldwide in democratic and nondemocratic contexts. It is incumbent on researchers to understand how global and domestic actors, institutions, and instruments are mobilized to transform the built environment to serve the agendas of political and economic elites.

Thus, authoritarian spatialities represent the “deeply political understanding of geography” held by nondemocratic actors worldwide (Koch, 2018: 3). Although there is a well-documented discussion of this phenomenon in the Gulf and globally, I seek to provide an in-depth place-specific analysis of this issue in the Saudi Arabian context. A comparison of KAEC and NEOM will explore how authoritarian spatialities can differ between non-democratic leaders, highlighting how space is imagined and transformed by politics.

## **2.5. Chapter conclusions**

Through a discussion of scholarship in urban studies and beyond, I have distilled the key concepts and ideas that will support my analysis and interpretations. Moreover, I have demonstrated the need to examine Saudi Arabia’s contributions to these trends. Although I have divided the literature into different groups in this section, these ideas frequently converge and overlap to form the conceptual framework for my research. From this foundation, I will build my analysis and pursue my research objective of investigating Saudi Arabia’s new city-building projects in KAEC and NEOM as national economic strategies imagined and enacted by two different authoritarian regimes.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction: The principal methods for examining Saudi new city trends**

My examination of the new city-building phenomenon in Saudi Arabia investigates the political dialectics informing the city-building trend in the kingdom, the strategies used to construct these projects, and the distinctness of two local, new city projects in Saudi Arabia through qualitative analysis. The various actors, networks, and narratives marshalled to develop new cities embody the discourse of city-building visions and their consequences. The objective of this project to understand new city-building in Saudi Arabia in the context of its distinctive government paradigm requires a methodological approach that simultaneously considers the local and global political dimensions of the phenomenon in my analysis. As such, textual and visual content analysis form the basis for understanding Saudi authoritarian urban projects and their globally informed rationales.

The selection of new city projects to conduct a focused analysis was guided by my desire to understand how Saudi leadership's ambitions have shifted in the last decade. The two cities I will analyze represent some of the more important city projects conceived by the Al-Saud family (see Fig. 3.1.). Significantly, they differ in terms of their actors, stages of production, promotion tactics, economies, social dynamics, and urban visions.

A global approach to new city studies combined with a localized investigation of Saudi Arabia's national city-building strategy will help explain the dynamics of authoritarian urbanism. The two cities presented will be understood through urban policy mobility theory and evaluated through historical contexts, as well as discourse and content analysis. These methodological steps will be taken to achieve the results, but it is important to stress the challenges and limitations of using such research techniques.



Figure 3.1. Red Sea coastal development projects.  
Source: KAEC Website.

### 3.2. Historical analysis

Understanding Saudi Arabia's political past is valuable to comprehend the recent push for new cities in the kingdom. Chapter four cites histories written by Saudi and international scholars to provide context for the ideologies underpinning Saudi politics and nationhood. It is important to note that this section does not wish to give a 'great man' history of Saudi Arabia. Instead, it seeks to explore the fundamental role of the House of Saud in the nation's decision-making. Schrag argues that "history is the study of people and the choices they made" (9, 2021). A historical context chapter explores the culture of choice amongst Saudi leadership and provides a vital foundation for examining the rationales behind contemporary new city-building initiatives.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of historiographical sources and how they impact the construction of historical narratives. The weaknesses in Saudi Arabia's historical canon lie in the sources used in their analyses. Historical sources are flawed from the time they are

recorded, retained, and retrieved. Moreover, the historian's craft is imperfect: included or excluded information contributes to an interpretation of the past that is inevitably biased (Trouillot & Carby, 2015). Many angles for understanding Saudi Arabia will remain unexplored in my thesis because I build upon these previously constructed narratives.

### **3.3. Discourse analysis**

The other component of the methodology underpinning this research is a focused discourse analysis of KAEC and NEOM's promotional materials (websites, press releases, and brochures) to measure how new city imaginaries are constructed. Following Foucault's philosophical principles, discourse can be understood as "a group of statements that appear to have a common theme that provides them with a unified effect" (Waitt, 2016: 289). I mined the texts on each project's pages to organize and interpret the representations of how new city projects are prescribed for various interests. Coding for these particular 'buzzwords' and situating them within the themes of new city literature demonstrates Saudi approaches to new city-building and how they have changed over time (Boyatzis, 1998). However, it is essential to realize that this process is characterized by subjectivity as it is both "selective and prescriptive" (Waitt, 2016: 309). Websites are valuable "sites of discursive propagation" (Dixon & Jones III, 2004: 91) that can only reveal some of the rationales and goals behind these projects

### **3.4. Content analysis**

Juxtaposing the two website's images enhanced this comparison of initiatives. Images are an instrumental technique for exploring entrepreneurial aspirations in the digital age because they communicate aspects of the online source that cannot be revealed through language (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Examining place branding through images from each site will uncover the internal actors' visions and motives (Wagner & Peters, 2009).

### **3.5. Visual supports**

I constructed visual supports to illustrate my claims throughout this project. Chapter five features a compilation of the two city's masterplans, Google Earth representations, and other website imagery to explore their tacit aims through content analysis. This section also includes a summary table delineating both cities' factual similarities and differences for comprehensive

comparative analysis. Without a quantitative dataset, these maps, figures, and tables made visualizing the information I was analyzing easier.

### **3.6. Chapter conclusions, limitations of the study, and positionality**

When designing my research topic and questions, I focused on the crown jewel projects of two different political regimes to determine how Saudi new-city-building has changed throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While this endeavour required a great deal of data collection, it does not account for every element of Saudi Arabia's new city projects. This study is constrained by its online disposition and limited access to materials. Due to time and money constraints, I could not personally travel to Saudi Arabia to assess the new city-building projects. Nor could I interview Saudi citizens to hear their thoughts and opinions on these developments, which would have generated valuable qualitative data from the 'bottom up' (Davis, 1971). As I am not an Arabic speaker, accessing online materials that may have yielded similar results as in-person fieldwork was difficult. This lack of access to Saudi input has shaped the types of questions I have been able to ask and the scope of what this study covers.

The authoritarian context in which KAEC and NEOM are located creates significant methodological challenges. Both cities are top-down projects where the state is deeply engaged with the private sector in the use of national resource revenue. This high-stakes and high-profile environment surrounding non-democratic development creates a strong incentive for stakeholders to control city narratives (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2022: 5). As such, it can be difficult to gain access to reliable information on the projects. City project websites and social media platforms constantly remove, add, and change content to attract investors and favourable media attention. Without press freedom in Saudi Arabia, it is challenging to obtain on-the-ground, consistent, and up-to-date information on whether this progress has been made or how new initiatives vary from the initial master plan that was promised. The incomplete nature of these sources requires a degree of 'reading against the grain' to uncover other forces driving the creation of master-planned cities in Saudi Arabia (Bigelow, 2020).

Nevertheless, my access to this research is still undoubtedly advantaged by my positionality (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2022: 8). As a Canadian student in a Canadian institution, I am free to write critically about these new city projects and their top-down nature. This shapes how I can conduct my research activities about Saudi Arabia, the questions I can ask, my access to

information, and the interpretation of my results as an undergraduate researcher and non-Saudi. But it can also contribute to an unconscious inclination toward Eurocentric frameworks and teleological narratives (Prakash, 1994). Therefore, reflexivity is an essential process in my research as it allows me to reflect on these factors critically and recognize my positions and assumptions (Valentine, 2002).

## **Chapter 4. Historical Context**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The Saud family has pursued a policy of flexible adaptation to maintain their kingdom's influence over the Arabian Peninsula. Since the kingdom's unification in 1932, Saudi national identity has shifted as the changes imposed by globalization have forced new development strategies. This section focuses on Saudi Arabian history as told by the line of succession (see Fig. 4.1.) to explore how the royal family has been instrumental in fostering a malleable national character. First, I discuss the foundations of the House of Saud to provide background on Saudi national identity and explore the legitimizing forces that led to the kingdom's absolute power. Second, I explore the disparate strategies that Ibn Saud's sons pursued to amass loyalty, emphasizing the dubious character that has helped the House maintain control. Third, I highlight the changes brought by globalization and link them to Saudi Arabia's current reform efforts. Finally, I consider how the lack of a consistent national identity since 1932 has provided the impetus for King Salman's ruthless regime, where state centralization has intensified into MBS' unique modern authoritarianism.

This narrative of Saudi Arabia outlines crucial junctures in the kingdom's history in which leaders of the Al-Saud regime have adapted to changing global circumstances and internal instability to maintain power. It is essential to realize that it is by no means complete and lacks certain descriptions of the region's social and cultural struggles. Therefore, the Al-Saud family's actions are a testament that the future of Saudi Arabia is never guaranteed, and its historiographical representations are constantly in flux.



## Saudi royal family

King Salman, the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, spent more than 2-1/2 years as the Saudi crown prince and deputy premier from June 2012 before becoming king in 2015. The de facto ruler and next in line to the throne is the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

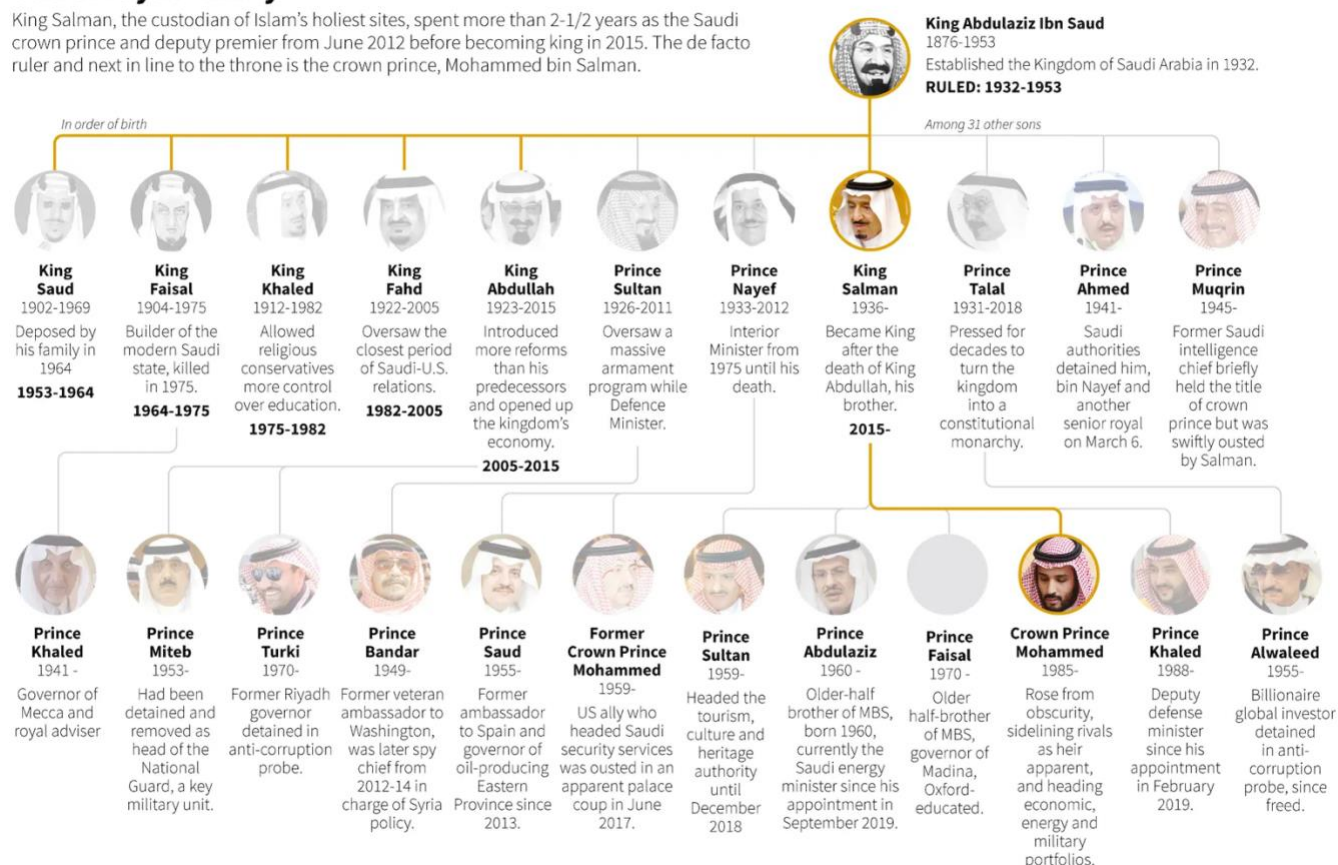


Figure 4.1. Saudi royal family tree demonstrates a complicated line of succession with many princely claimants.

Source: Business Insider adapted from Reuters, Saudi Press Agency.

## 4.2. The house of Saud: Creating and preserving an empire

The House of Saud's creation is intimately linked to the Wahhabi religious institution that helped to support and legitimize the establishment of an absolute monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula.

Following the Golden Age of Islam and before the kingdom's unification, the social landscape of the Peninsula was characterized by fragmented tribes and clans (Safran, 2018). But a pact between Muhammed ibn Saud and the local religious leader, Muhammed Abn al Wahhab, in 1744 was the impetus for a dramatic change in the region (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Muhammed Abn al Wahhab preached a puritanical interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism that is considered ultra-conservative in its contemporary iterations (DeLong-Bas, 2004). The alliance provided Muhammed Ibn Saud with political significance. It bolstered the importance of jihad, an Islamic concept of struggle that can be interpreted to favour waging war against non-Muslim faiths (Al-Rasheed, 2010). In this way, Muhammed ibn Saud engaged in rising religiosity to form a solid

power base that would help impose Saudi political authority on conquered towns throughout the Peninsula.

The legacy of this alliance lasted throughout the Ottoman rule of the 19th Century until a descendant of the Al-Saud family – Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman al-Saud (also known as Ibn Saud) – conquered Riyadh to re-establish the Saud royal family’s legitimacy. Ibn Saud recognized the potential power the Wahhabi idea of the state could provide him. Wahhabi doctrine stipulated that “power is legitimate however it may have been seized, and that obedience to whoever wields this power is incumbent upon all his subjects” (al-Azmeh 1993: 107 - quoted in Al-Rasheed, 2010). As such, two important actors, the religious specialists known as *mutawwa’a* and the Wahhabi militia called Ikhwan, were instrumental in creating the kingdom in 1932 (Al-Rasheed, 2010). The *mutawwa’a* engaged in state formation by enforcing a ritualistic Islam that forced acceptance of Ibn Saud’s political authority. Meanwhile, the Ikhwan conquered various regions in the Peninsula to help Ibn Saud expand Saudi influence (Al-Rasheed, 2010). These two forces supported Ibn Saud if he complied with and enforced the intensified version of Islamic religious law they promoted. Religion provided a powerful impetus for state-building initiatives that the Saud family used to consolidate their power in the emerging state.

Measures undertaken to create and consolidate the Saudi empire were followed by important actions to preserve the empire. Ibn Saud pursued two main processes to consolidate his royal lineage and guarantee the survival of the dynasty: marginalizing claims to the throne from within the Al Saud family and creating an extensive line of descent (Al-Rasheed, 2010: 69). Ibn Saud contained the threat posed by members of his generation by placing them in governmental positions and pacifying their complaints (Al-Rasheed, 2010). These efforts were bolstered by a clever political strategy of polygamy that ensured extensive Saudi kingship. Ibn Saud succeeded: he left forty-three sons and over fifty daughters whose alliances across the kingdom helped to maintain the House of Saud’s autocratic rule until his death in 1953 (Vietor, 2007).

#### **4.3. From Ibn Saud to Fahd: Continuity through ambiguity**

Strategies to amass control and loyalty in Saudi Arabia shifted during Ibn Saud’s reign (1932-1953) after oil was discovered in commercial quantities. Investment in oil extraction by US-controlled companies allowed for the discovery of petroleum and the unprecedented windfall

gains from extraction that followed (Vietor, 2007). The nascent kingdom that had once relied on agriculture and pilgrimage as its primary sources of revenue (El-Ghonemy, 1998) began to receive revenues from oil of \$212 million by 1952 (Safran 2018: 61). No sooner did this happen, however, then did internal instability and the hostility of the Hashemite rulers of Iraq and Transjordan resurge (Safran, 2018: 57). Concerned once again with the security of his creation, Ibn Saud leveraged the newfound wealth and influence that oil had provided to guarantee the future of his kingdom. The oil extraction money used to develop Riyadh's infrastructure helped to quell internal dissent and keep his realm together (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Moreover, Ibn Saud negotiated a security alliance with the United States and neutralized the Hashemite threat in regions of the Arab world (Safran, 2018). Ibn Saud enhanced his hold on the country by using oil's economic and political benefits to silence opposition and guarantee the security of his state in the Arab region.

Nevertheless, the future of the nascent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not guaranteed as divisions within the royal family itself threatened the monarchy's rule. Internal political strife erupted in the Saudi royal family as Ibn Saud's sons, Saud (reigned 1953-1964) and Faisal (reigned 1964-1975), struggled to gain and maintain power after their father died in 1953. Frequently, their contest with each other manifested in "rival policies and programs" that sought to respond to the Hashemite and Nasserite revolutionary threats of the 1950s and 60s (Safran, 2011: 110). Antagonism between the two brothers highlighted the Saudi regime's innate vulnerability to the complications arising from the problem of succession. The brothers responded to external tensions with muddled politics preoccupied with guaranteeing their place as heads of the Saudi state.

The requirements of preserving the realm drove King Faisal to adopt policies that altered the foundations of Saudi society. He confronted the threats of Arab nationalism that emphasized secularist and socialist ideologies by developing a highly centralized plan for modernization within an Islamic framework. In 1970, he launched the first five-year plan, an initiative to develop the country's material infrastructure and lay the foundations for expanded social services (al-Rasheed, 2010: 117). At the same time, he made the senior *ulema* into state functionaries and gave them more control over the country's education system, formalizing the previously "loose holy alliance" between the regime and its religious institutions (al-Rasheed, 2010: 119). The *ulema* endorsed Faisal's social and economic reforms in return for religious concessions, casting

authenticity on his political strategies to counter internal and external threats. Faisal responded to radical and secular dissidence by introducing an economic development plan that was faithful and authentic to Islam.

But King Khalid's reign (1975-1982) demonstrated that discontinuity was the only continuity in Saudi nationhood (Safran, 2011: 215). The dramatic rise of oil prices in the early 1970s allowed Saudi Arabia to enjoy unprecedented affluence that facilitated the internal modernization already underway. As a part of its second development plan, it expanded and created cities like Jubail and Yanbu by building connective infrastructure in power, roads, airports, railroads, ports, and telecommunications. But the contradictions between the increasing materialism of Saudi society and the Islamic rhetoric previously promoted by King Faisal led to domestic tensions. These materialized in the Mecca Mosque siege (1979) and the Shi'a riots (1979-1980), which demonstrated increasing domestic hostility to the House of Saud's rule and its alliances with the United States (al-Rasheed, 2010). Saudi society struggled to reconcile how rapid economic modernization and royal politics were consistent with the religious doctrine that had become more articulate in the country's religious learning centres. Indeed, King Khalid's continuation of Faisal's policies resulted in even more radical political upheaval that altered the regime's strategic posture. The Islamic political rhetoric the regime had previously used to undermine leftist and national political forces in the Arab world now threatened its survival.

A period of austerity and the Gulf War bolstered opposition to the government and created a "crisis of legitimacy" for the Al Saud regime (al-Rasheed, 2010: 159). The US defeat of Iraq, a neighbouring Arab state, gave credence to Islamist opponents who were enraged by King Fahd's "submission" to the West (Vietor, 2007: 155). More generally, critics questioned the Saudi monarchy's leadership capabilities when it could not confront Iraqi threats after decades of overspending on state security and development (Al-Rasheed, 2010). King Fahd responded by introducing reforms in 1992 that pacified and contained opposition voices. Most importantly, he introduced a Basic Law, promised during Faysal's struggle with Saud, reaffirming monarchical rule and Islamic religious principles. But government reforms went hand in hand with increasing state control through greater surveillance and violence against suspected dissidents (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

#### **4.4. Abdullah's reform agenda**

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Crown Prince Abdullah (reigned 2005-2015) entered as the acting King to an internal crisis resulting from decades of inconsistent policy. The economic wealth of the first Saudi oil boom of the 1970s had dwindled throughout the 1980s and 90s due to several five-year development plans that needed better management. Moreover, the global discourse surrounding democratization and human rights in an increasingly globalized world created unprecedented levels of activism in the country (Al-Rasheed, 2010). A fragmented state and strained economy characterized Saudi Arabia and contributed to rising political opposition and domestic terrorism.

King Abdullah countered dissent with various strategies. He followed the kingdom's long-term strategic planning by introducing a seventh Five-Year Plan to restructure the kingdom's economy and make it more open to the global world without diluting the role of the Al Saud (Vietor, 2007). An overhaul of the built environment was an important part of this plan. Mega re-development in Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh, coupled with the creation of entirely new cities from scratch like KAEC and Jizan, demonstrated how the Saudi regime sought to change the country's creed by reconfiguring its space (Bsheer, 2020). Spatial redevelopment and new development created investment opportunities that strengthened the post-Gulf War economy while simultaneously erasing and rewriting the nation's Islamic history to bolster Al-Saud legitimacy. Indeed, Abdullah expanded government budgets to re-assert his role in a modernizing world where the power of the constituency and radical fundamentalists threatened a monarchy whose place in Saudi society was not guaranteed.

#### **4.5. King Salman and his son: Modernizing authoritarianism**

King Salman's (2015-present) ascension to the throne demonstrated the ease with which the ideologies of Saudi rule could be overturned. Although he argued that the nation's unity had depended on the "stability, security, and unity" that Ibn Saud's sons had provided, he undermined many of the pillars on which Saudi rule had been built (Bsheer, 2020: 213). He broke traditional alliances within the Al Saud establishment and connections the Royal family had long held with the country's economic elites and religious leaders (Bsheer, 2020). His pragmatic and ruthless leadership style signalled that the royal regime's political legitimacy was

no longer represented through the prestige of the absolute monarchy but through a paradigm of violent authoritarianism.

Salman's uncompromising political ideologies informed his son Mohammed's dynamism. Although his father remains the Head of State, the Crown Prince has been the de facto ruler since 2017, acting as the kingdom's "overseer and CEO" to continue his father's authoritarian schemes (Hubbard, 2020). That same year, MBS announced his Vision 2030 flagship urban megaproject, NEOM, as a solution to the country's economic ailments but also as a socio-cultural experiment in religious tolerance. This top-down project is, in many ways, a continuation of the royal family's previous attempts to consolidate power through development. But the uniquely authoritarian creed of NEOM's seductive optics demonstrates an era of Al-Saud family politics in which ambition trumps established identities.

#### **4.6. Chapter conclusions: Keeping the house in power**

In its ceaseless quest for dominance and security in the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudi state employed an ideological narrative that promoted the Al Saud family rule as the "only legitimate and permissible form of political organization" (Bsheer, 2020). Distinctive leaders have employed reactive politics since 1932: using religiosity, oil wealth, and infrastructural development to maintain the House's power as they adapted to international and domestic opposition. More recently, urban-specific development has served to create new grounds for legitimacy for the Al-Saud family.

The Al-Saud dynasty must strike a delicate balance between modernization and tradition to improve the kingdom's global standing while maintaining political legitimacy. Decision-making has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the state as previously powerful religious institutions are weakened in the name of development. As such, the regime's ambitious and increasingly authoritarian style of rule has become evident in spatial policies of recent decades.

## Chapter 5. KAEC and NEOM: Competing Visions of Saudi Futures

### 5.1. Introduction

As two new city projects being planned on an unprecedented scale, KAEC and NEOM are city-centric expressions of Saudi Arabia's path to a post-oil future by two distinct Saudi regimes. Although both cities have been imagined to confront the major issues facing Saudi society, their approaches to achieving this goal have varied (see Table 1). This chapter explores each city's conceptualization to distill the major differences and similarities between the two. A comparative analysis will demonstrate how urban goals and imaginaries have evolved to reflect the continuation of strong central leadership.

Table 5.1. Main characteristics of KAEC and NEOM

	KAEC	NEOM
<b>Location</b>	Mecca Province, Saudi Arabia	Tabuk Province, Saudi Arabia
<b>Distance to Nearest City</b>	50 km (Rabigh)	245 km (Tabuk)
<b>Area (km<sup>2</sup>)</b>	181	26,500
<b>Year Announced</b>	2005	2017
<b>Intended Population</b>	2 million	9 million
<b>Current Population</b>	10,000 in 2019	N/A
<b>Urban Concept</b>	Economic City	Innovation City
<b>Legal System</b>	Economic Cities and Special Zones Authority govern the city, but no legal framework has been established.	NEOM authority will enforce an autonomous legal system separate from the Saudi justice system, whose drafts have been written but not yet publicized.
<b>CEO</b>	Cyril Piaia	Nadhmi Al-Nasr
<b>Language of Operation</b>	Arabic, English	Arabic, English
<b>Cost</b>	375 Billion SR (100 Billion USD)	1.8 Trillion SR (500 Billion USD)
<b>Anticipated Economic Drivers</b>	Manufacturing and Logistics, Shipping, Tourism, Real Estate	Manufacturing and Logistics, Shipping, Tourism, Real Estate, Digital Media, Sport, Technology, Clean Energy
<b>Master Plan Zones</b>	Industrial Valley, King Abdullah Port, Hijaz Gate, Coastal Communities: Al Shurooq, Al Waha, Al Talah Gardens, Bay La Sun, Al Murooj	Trojena (Mountain Resort), Oxagon (Logistics and Manufacturing Port), The Line (Urban Development), Sindalah (Luxury Island Destination)

## 5.2. The vision for KAEC

King Abdullah Economic City was announced in 2005 by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the former king of Saudi Arabia. The city and five other economic megaprojects announced around the same time were part of the late King's '10x10' program to launch Saudi Arabia into the top ten ranking of competitive investment destinations by 2010 (Rasooldeen I, 2009; Mouawad, 2008). Each new economic city was intended to create industrial centers that would support job creation and provide housing to the country's young and growing population. But KAEC, the only project to successfully begin construction of the six, has since fallen short in many of the areas that were supposed to make it a success and is widely seen as a failure.

The project's initial budget of \$100 billion was the largest estimated investment for a new city project at the time (Moser et al., 2015). To confront these expenses, the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) partnered with the Dubai-based land and real estate developer Emaar Properties to create a publicly-traded joint stock company called 'Emaar the Economic City' (EEC). This public-private scheme involved the government funding the city's initial development while EEC attracted private investment from abroad and within Saudi Arabia to sustain the city's construction (Abdul Ghafour, 2006; Moser et al., 2015). Indeed, the Kingdom's initial enthusiasm for the project was reflected during its 2006 IPO when more than half of all Saudis bought shares (Euromoney, 2006, as cited in Moser et al., 2015: 74). But credit delays from the 2008 financial crisis combined with insufficient demand for KAEC's real estate, made it difficult for EEC to achieve sustained financing (Moser et al., 2015). More importantly, after King Abdullah died in 2015, the project could no longer rely on the absolute government backing that made it a secure and attractive investment to international financiers. KAEC has since pivoted from mainly using private capital to build projects. In the spring of 2022, KAEC partnered with the kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF), which now holds 25% of EEC shares, to guarantee that the city receives the necessary financing to remain afloat (Abuljadayel, 2022).

The complex financing scheme underpinning KAEC's development has made the city's planning and construction a long process. Initial renderings conceptualized KAEC as a futuristic, glittering metropolis aptly described as a blend of "Blade Runner" and traditional Arabic design (Mouawad, 2008). But with the longstanding ramifications of the global economic crisis amplifying low levels of investment since its initial funding, the project had to be reconsidered.



A more realistic masterplan for KAEC was created to utilize existing assets and pursue a more standard development template. The new plan centres around a logistics and manufacturing hub with a seaport and an industrial zone, as well as residential zones (see Fig. 5.1.). While the port and industrial valley have successfully attracted foreign direct investment, the coastal communities remain largely underdeveloped (see Fig. 5.2.). In denser areas, high-end villas with lavish landscaping, golf courses, and pools comprise resort-like enclaves. The result has been an urban form that is closer in appearance to Fort Lauderdale than that of any science fiction film (see Fig. 5.3.)

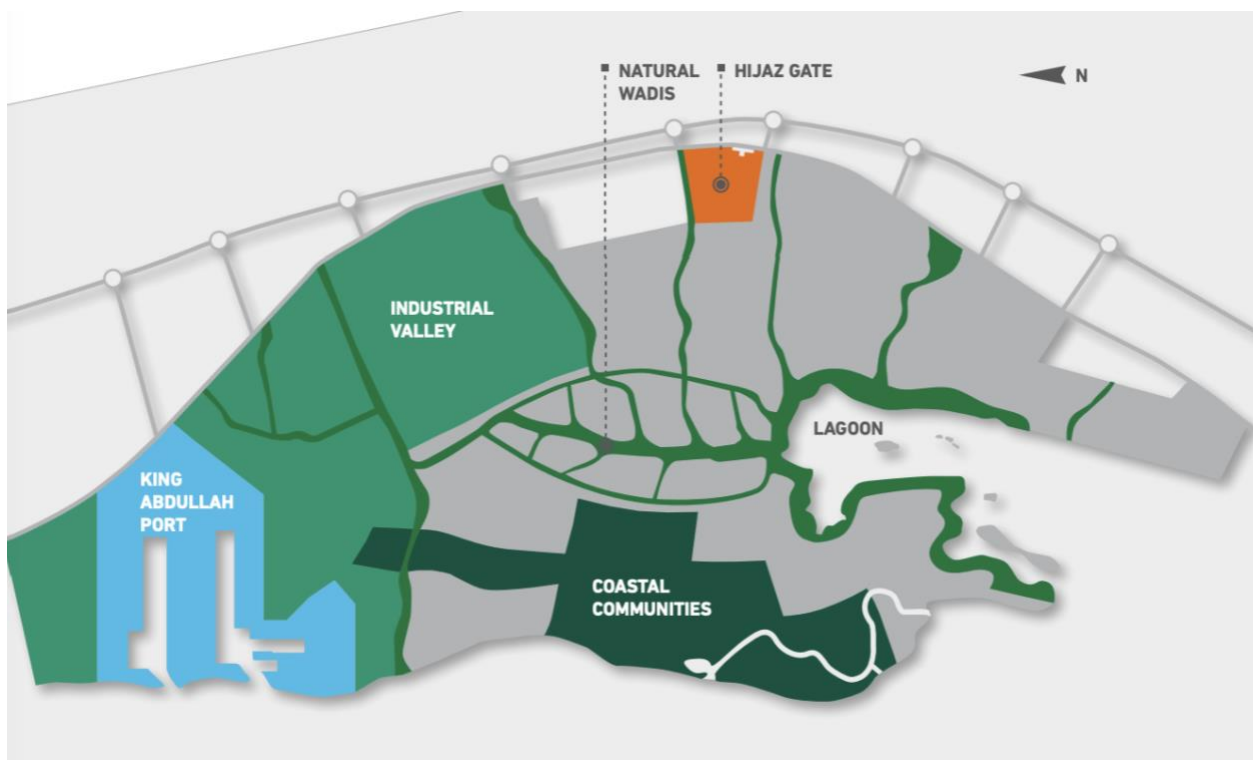


Figure 5.1. KAEC's revised masterplan.  
Source: KAEC Website.



Figure 5.2. Undeveloped residential areas of KAEC.  
Source: Google Earth.



Figure 5.3. KAEC's initial renderings (left) and current appearance (right).  
Source: New York Times and KAEC Website.

KAEC has an area the size of Washington, DC, that is intended to house 2 million people by 2035 (Al Omran, 2018). The city is strategically located along the new Haramain high-speed rail line that connects the west coast cities of Mecca, Jeddah, and Medina to the King Abdulaziz International Airport. But while these locational advantages and established assets are used to justify city-building, they have yet to convince people to move there. Some scholars have pointed to the case of China's 'ghost cities' to illustrate how the speculative urbanization strategies that economically driven new city developments employ often fail to meet actual demographic demand, producing a surplus of under-utilized or vacant residential units (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2020). This phenomenon may be replicating in the case of Saudi Arabia: as of 2019, KAEC's total population was estimated to be 10,000 in 2019 (Debusmann Jr, 2019b).

The issue of governance is one of the significant concerns deterring Saudis and foreigners from investing in or relocating to this enclave. To facilitate its creation and better achieve its urban imaginary, KAEC was envisioned as a socially liberal gated city governed by separate rules from the rest of the country (Moser et al., 2015). This experiment in urban governance promoted a distinct lifestyle for urban residents exempt from the religious norms imposed on the rest of the kingdom (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2020). It also demonstrates how Saudi development strategies conform to contemporary city-making governance trends in which state and corporate power often blend unintelligibly (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2020). Indeed, the city is currently run by a corporate management system that was established by royal decree: the Economic Cities and Special Zones Authority have full administrative and financial supervision over KAEC, and the city is patrolled by private security forces (Moser et al., 2015; Statute of the Economic Cities and Special Zones Authority, ed. 2022). But no legal frameworks have been issued to protect residents should their rights be infringed upon. Without these basic guarantees from the government, many questions remain about how disputes between businesses and citizens will be resolved, how they will be treated, and what norms will be enforced.

Nearly two decades and over 100 billion dollars later (McKinsey, 2017), KAEC stands as a “cautionary tale” (Al Omran, 2018) of the problems that can arise when states engage in ambitious top-down urban projects. The rationale for KAEC’s inorganic creation was to build an explicitly ‘economic city’ to develop Saudi Arabia’s physical and social infrastructure, tap into Red Sea shipping routes, and attract foreign investment in Saudi Arabia to help create jobs. This economic urban concept reflected King Abdullah’s ambitions to reform and diversify the kingdom. But its financial and legal shortcomings highlight his lacklustre commitment to developing the necessary policy structures that would allow KAEC to thrive.

### **5.3. The vision for NEOM**

Just over a decade after King Abdullah’s project was announced, his nephew, MBS, proposed another mega-project for the country’s northwestern corner: NEOM. The NEOM development was launched as the premier urban project in the Kingdom’s long list of undertakings to achieve its Vision 2030 goals (Vision 2030 Website). Its highly ambitious and often lofty aspirations aim to create an iconic development imaginary that re-situates the kingdom at the centre of global new city projects.

Construction has barely begun on NEOM, and its estimated cost of 500 billion dollars dramatically exceeds that of KAEC (Procter, 2022). MBS has pursued a different approach to urban financing for NEOM. Instead of a public-private scheme, MBS has placed NEOM under the sole proprietorship of the country's PIF ("Revealed: The 13 men and women leading Saudi Arabia's PIF", 2022). NEOM's association with the PIF, which has around \$600 billion in assets under management, guarantees that MBS can continuously fund his ambitious project while ensuring its feasibility to investors. Once NEOM is more developed, it will likely be publicly listed and follow a financing structure like that of KAEC, where the PIF still has a significant stake in its development (Nereim, 2022).

The renderings for NEOM make KAEC's master plan seem like an artifact of an ancient past. While KAEC is big, NEOM is massive: 26,500 square kilometres have been allotted for its development in the Tabuk Province, with talks of the project extending into Jordan and Egypt. (Thomas & Venema, 2022). The masterplan boasts four different regions: OXAGON, a floating industrial complex; TROJENA, a year-round mountain destination that will offer tourists skiing in the desert; THE LINE, a 200m wide, 170km long, and 500m tall vertical city; and SINDALAH, a luxury island and yacht club destination (see Fig. 5.4.). Each region attempts to showcase NEOM as being more inventive than any global city, with a heavy emphasis on futurism, technology, and sustainability. It seeks to surpass KAEC in every way, from the physical area reserved for its various regions to the language used to describe and promote it.

The region is envisioned as an advanced international hub that will bring Saudi Arabia to the world. Economic drivers like manufacturing and logistics, biotechnology, robotics, and clean energy are anticipated to establish NEOM as a 'smart city' with cutting-edge technological breakthroughs. Meanwhile, digital media, tourism, and sports investments will create a cultural sector that will give Saudi Arabia a more prominent role in international discourse. Contracts signed between NEOM and McLaren Racing, OceanX, and AFC tether the imagined space to reality and keep its name circulating through global media networks.



Figure 5.4. NEOM's Masterplan: 1. Oxagon 2. Trojena 3. The Line 4. Sindalah.  
Source: NEOM Website.

The Line is NEOM's flagship urban-focused region. This experiment in linear urbanism is set to accommodate the entire population of New York City, 9 million people, in two parallel glass-paned skyscrapers that stretch from within the ocean through to the desert, mountains, and valleys of the Tabuk province (NEOM website). Its interior will include everything one would expect to find in a major city: housing, parks, shops, transit, and hospitals. These facilities are meant to house everyone "from labourers to billionaires," Ali Shihabi of NEOM's advisory board says (Thomas & Venema, 2022). But satellite images reveal a different reality: some of the first construction projects in the area have been mansions, golf courses, and helipads (see Fig. 5.5), indicating that NEOM may be another Saudi megaproject that only caters to the ultra-rich (Thomas & Venema, 2022).





Figure 5.5. A satellite image shows parts of NEOM that have been built.  
*Source: Google Earth.*

NEOM intends to avoid the same mistakes KAEC made concerning governance policy. Reflecting its role as an economic driver for the Saudi economy, NEOM's management has shared that they are developing financial legislation based on international 'best practices' to promote business growth. The city's chief investment officer states that NEOM will be the world's largest Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) initiative, revealing the city's strategy to replicate international corporate governance structures ("NEOM 'fully under Saudi sovereignty, regulations'", 2022). It is likely that residents of NEOM will also enjoy a distinct legal and regulatory status determined by a designated authority. But this authority and its decisions will ultimately be subordinate to King Salman and his son MBS. Critics of this liberal enclave point out that the Saudi government must resist interfering in NEOM's regulatory framework if it wants the development to succeed commercially (Mogielnicki, 2022).

How these fantastical dreams will manifest in NEOM's physical development is yet to be determined. So far, the vision for NEOM is ambitious and wildly untested. Its advocates, however, insist it will be a "civilizational revolution." Without proof, they have claimed the Line will provide "more time with loved ones" and "unparalleled access to nature" (NEOM

website). These guarantees of an urban utopia make the more realistic plans and organized events, like Trojena's bid to host the 2029 Winter Asian Games, seem questionable ("Saudi Arabia to host the 2029 Asian Winter Games", 2022). For NEOM to avoid the same pitfalls as KAEC, it must stop announcing new initiatives for media fodder and begin developing its existing plan.

#### **5.4. Changing geopolitical realities: Analyzing KAEC and NEOM**

The NEOM endeavour demonstrates that Saudi leadership believes they have learned from the mistakes made at KAEC. Both cities have emerged from the Al-Saud family's top-down structure to diversify the oil-dependent economy. But their marked differences illustrate each leader's unique city-building rationales and ambitions. Comparing the two places provides insight into Saudi Arabia's domestic political geography and how it has evolved since the early 2000s.

##### ***5.4.1 City-centric similarities***

Both KAEC and NEOM share similar city-centric assumptions about national economic development. KAEC emerged from King Abdullah's '10x10' program to develop the kingdom's economy beyond the oil industry. Similarly, NEOM and other infrastructure projects are considered the 'crown jewel' of MBS' Vision 2030 initiative, which too aims to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil. For both leaders, planned urban projects are the primary modality to 'leapfrog' the Saudi economy toward tertiary sectors. They believe urban infrastructure will attract foreign investment in Saudi Arabia, providing jobs to the kingdom's rapidly growing, youthful population.

This city-centric approach is mainly due to the increasing connections and interdependence between the world's cities. In the era of globalization, cross-border trade in goods and services can create thriving economic nodes in all regions of the world. Often, cities or special economic zones (SEZs) are the portals for international economic participation. King Abdullah and MBS have tried to join these global networks through massive new urban spectacles that demonstrate their commitment to the hegemonic values of the international community. They have both dreamt of urban developments at an unprecedented scale to launch Saudi Arabia into the global markets that glittering metropolis' represent.

KAEC and NEOM have similar economic drivers that reflect the desire of Saudi leadership to diversify its economy away from oil. Manufacturing and logistics, shipping, tourism, and real estate are all desired sectors for each city. Saudi leaders are especially hopeful that developing ports will cement the kingdom as a trade and logistics gateway, forming the foundations of its future economy.

Location is an important consideration for both cities as they seek to develop midstream logistics activities. KAEC and NEOM are both located on the western coast of the country. This orientation reflects Saudi leadership's desire to shift the country's centre of economic power away from the oil-rich Persian Gulf in the East to the Red Sea in the West (Bsheer, 2020: 221). KAEC can leverage its proximity to the new Haramain high-speed rail line, the King Abdulaziz International Airport, and the nearby King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). Meanwhile, NEOM benefits from its closeness to the Suez Canal and short flight path to Europe. Both regimes have recognized how Saudi Arabia must shift its economic priorities for longevity and have used urban development in critical nodes to create these new geopolitical realities.

#### ***5.4.2 NEOM's traits: Correcting KAEC's mistakes***

However similar their globalized city-centric approach may be, the two cities are disparate in their ethos. KAEC has pursued a more measured approach to new city-building. Traditional formulas for organic city growth have largely inspired its creators, whereas NEOM's planners have pursued instantaneous success. KAEC has laid the foundations for a port city, hoping the industrial town will eventually evolve into a white-collar business hub. Meanwhile, NEOM is designed to be an international hub from the outset. Its slogan: 'made to change,' adopts an 'any means necessary' attitude for city building. Indeed, the plans for the city subvert all historical models of how prosperous towns have traditionally grown. This aggressive plan demonstrates Saudi leadership's frustration with the slow pace of KAEC's development. MBS seeks to rewrite King Abdullah's formula for new city growth by envisioning a city that is too big to fail.

MBS believes the unprecedented scale of NEOM will differentiate it from KAEC. KAEC pails in comparison to NEOM in every way possible. NEOM's planned area will be 150 times bigger than that of KAEC, with more regions spanning its territory and a much larger population. It will also serve more sectors, hosting a diversity of economic drivers beyond logistical



activities. Of course, this is reflected in its price: NEOM is expected to cost the kingdom five times more than KAEC has thus far. MBS is sparing no expense when it comes to his own version of a Saudi new city project.

The different ideologies between the two cities are represented by their urban imaginary. KAEC's name explicitly states whom it was built by and what it was built for. Its promotional materials are mainly directed toward Saudi nationals, showing the city as a lovely retreat for families (KAEC Website; Radwan, 2021). The Saudi culture of the city is also reflected in the names of neighbourhoods and streets marked by Arabic toponyms. On the other hand, NEOM's regions are ambiguously named in ways that do not reflect Saudi culture. It is envisioned as a destination for unparalleled global tourism with promotional materials illustrating a cosmopolitan hub. This is reflected in its name: a portmanteau of the Greek word for new (neo) combined with the letter 'm' to represent an abbreviation of the Arabic word for future (mostaqbal) and the initial of the Crown Prince's first name. NEOM demonstrates MBS' vision for the kingdom's 'new future' as it opens to the world.

#### ***5.4.3 Cutting through bureaucracy***

Another significant difference between the two city visions is their approach to urban governance. While KAEC's team never successfully established a legal framework that would provide the clarity and predictability necessary to attract citizens, businesses, and international governments to invest in and re-locate to their development, NEOM's leadership will. The city's website states that "NEOM will provide a regulatory framework that is conducive to investors' participation through their inclusion in the drafting of regulation and legislation" and that NEOM will be "supported by a progressive law compatible with international norms and conducive to economic growth" (NEOM website). The legal system will likely cater to an international audience by legalizing the sale of alcohol (Michaelson, 2020) and other Western norms. This 'founding law' will establish NEOM as an efficient and streamlined 'free zone' with different laws than the rest of Saudi Arabia that will take time to reform (Carey, G. et al., 2023; Nereim & Gamal El-Din, 2021).

The drafting of NEOM's progressive law is taking place against a backdrop of judicial reform across the kingdom. Previously, the kingdom had no codified legal system (Turak, 2021). But as of 2021, MBS has been introducing various legal reforms to increase the reliability of

court rulings and procedures in an effort to make Saudi Arabia a more attractive place for international business (Turak, 2021). These dramatic reforms demonstrate MBS' frustration with the faltering of Saudi economic plans of the past and his commitment to his Vision 2030 agenda. As a microcosm of these goals, NEOM stands to be a liberal enclave that pitches itself as a destination for international business in more effective ways than KAEC ever did.

#### ***5.4.4 Money no object***

Beyond the legal overhaul MBS is conducting to see NEOM succeed, he is also making a substantial financial commitment to the project. While KAEC's development primarily relied on a complex financing structure, NEOM is government funded. This means that MBS is not pursuing the same public-private scheme as King Abdullah but rather committing all the cash needed for the project to succeed from the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund. Government funding allows NEOM's leadership to be far more ambitious in its planning and promises. The guarantee of financial backing contributes to a healthy project cash flow that gives plenty of room for contingencies, experimentation, and failure. Moreover, it highlights MBS' commitment and confidence in NEOM's eventual success.

#### ***5.4.5 Possible challenges moving forward***

The differences in conceptualizations between KAEC and NEOM reflect the problems with new city-building in authoritarian contexts. KAEC's namesake is no longer King; therefore, the city is no longer at the center of Saudi national development projects. The time, energy, and financing that once surrounded KAEC have shifted to MBS' NEOM. MBS is naturally inclined to dedicate himself to the project that will one day shape his legacy, and that is where the money goes. In this way, the self-aggrandizing nature of these spectacular urban projects contradicts the Kingdom's national development goals as it antagonizes the two cities.

Without a coherent plan for how KAEC and NEOM will work together, the two cities will constantly compete (Debusmann Jr, 2019a). KAEC's position as a publicly-listed company leaves it especially vulnerable, and it is less attractive to investors now that its namesake is dead. Investors will likely invest in NEOM, which receives the prince's energy and attention. This competition will only worsen when NEOM eventually goes public, as both cities will be subject to market forces. Since their development depends on continuous economic support through

government spending and private investment, they will have to compete to attract the type of jobs, migration, and financing that will raise their stock price. This may lead to an uneven level of development that will make it more difficult to achieve the Kingdom's overall goal of diversifying the Saudi Arabian economy.

### **5.5. Chapter conclusions: City rivalries and remaining competitive**

The two projects are remarkably ambitious, with a high level of funding and a demonstrable desire to alter the Saudi economy's principal economic drivers. But just like the Saudi leaders they are connected to, they vary remarkably. KAEC is a measured approach to new city building that attracts investment by attempting to create a modern built environment for wealthy Saudi nationals and regional tourists. Meanwhile, NEOM is an aggressive pitch for a city of the future that will attract a global community of innovators. This shift in urban imaginaries reflects how Saudi leadership's priorities have changed since the early 2000s as they have grown more impatient with the urban development model.

These changing political geographies also raise questions about how KAEC and NEOM will fit into Saudi Arabia's national development agenda. It is difficult to see how the two cities will complement each other when NEOM aims to provide all the same services as KAEC and more. This incoherent national strategy reflects the competitive nature of the House of Saud in which each royal member is determined to maintain power and establish their legacy.

## **Chapter 6. Cities to Save a Kingdom: Re-Branding Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is using new cities to reinvent itself on a national and international level. While the spatial manifestations of this have been discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter explores the latent political benefits Saudi leadership seeks. Analyzing both projects in the context of new city literature and Saudi political policy reveals how urban imaginaries, as meaningfully constructed representations (Lindner & Meissner, 2018; McCann, 2011), are a powerful mechanism to maneuver Saudi Arabia in political directions that favour the monarchy. Their place-branding mechanisms create a new narrative for Saudi Arabian society.

### **6.1. Urban networking for soft power**

While the kingdom's interest in diversification remains a driving factor for its agenda, aligning international interests through city-building initiatives also strengthens its soft power (Alhussein, 2022). Elsheshtawy argues that cities in West Asia and beyond are increasingly used to symbolize a thriving sovereign state culture (2004). They are viewed as global centres of interaction from which a country can communicate its "wealth, power and modernity" for increased influence in world affairs (Moser et al., 2015: 71). Indeed, Saudi leadership uses discursive and material city-branding activities to imbue the kingdom's urban imaginary with global significance, putting it on par with other world centres like Dubai and Singapore (Ong, 2011). Insertion into these international urban networks allows the Saudi state to bolster its national and international influence, further fostering its soft power potential.

Participation in the "new-city realm" (Moser, 2019: 213), where urban policies, norms, and aesthetics circulate, allows Saudi leadership to play a prominent role in the urban development industry (Cook & Ward, 2012; McCann, 2011). Saudi Arabia has hosted multiple urban policy and innovation conferences to show the world its new city-building expertise. From 2013-2015, the country hosted the annual Cityquest KAEC Forum, a new-cities-themed meeting for political leaders, new city developers, and corporate players from across the globe to network and share insights on master-planned urbanization (Moser, 2019). Similarly, a showcase of NEOM was held over four days at the 2023 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, to show the vision of NEOM to world leaders in politics, business, and the media (Laughlin, 2023). In each case, these conferences constitute "mobility events" (Clarke, 2012: 27), where urban policies are mobilized and embedded in ways that contribute to the authority of new city

narratives (Cook and Ward, 2012: 139). National governments and business elites present these resource-intensive and high-risk planning interventions to an exclusive list of visitors as necessary investments for Saudi Arabia's post-oil future (Moser, 2019). By projecting a sense of urgency for master-planned projects to address challenges related to urbanization, they reinforce the idea that new cities are a necessary development model, thereby validating the often-self-important grandeur of their designs and the leaders who aspire to create them.

These urbanistic initiatives have created numerous opportunities for building strategic ties with international state partners. Saudi Arabia emphasizes that NEOM's neoliberal ideology makes it an appropriate locale for cooperation and investment between Saudi Arabia and leading economic nations (Dogan, 2021). Indeed, during the G20 summit in 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that he would have liked to visit the "exciting new city of NEOM" at the showcase planned for visiting politicians. ("PM Boris Johnson on G20—Saudi Arabia's NEOM represents a greener future for all", 2020). Russia has also expressed interest in the new city. During MBS' visit to the country in 2017, the Russian Investment Fund declared it would like to co-invest with other international funds in the megaproject ("Russia's sovereign investment fund to participate in Saudi NEOM project", 2017). These are all examples of how the NEOM project serves as a showcase to woo diplomatic partners (Dogan, 2021).

In this way, new city-building goes beyond infrastructure development's social and economic benefits. For Saudi Arabia, the new-city cultural apparatus is an opportunity to project the nation's expertise onto a new field beyond oil. Exhibitions of urban policy innovation have allowed Saudis to "take on the mantle" of experts on building new cities (Moser, 2019: 224). This newfound importance has helped expand Saudi Arabia's diplomatic opportunities, strengthening its foreign policy and improving its global public image.

## **6.2. Urban development as a distraction**

Beneath the carefully constructed narratives of these massive urban spectacles lies an undercurrent of repression that contradicts their progressive visions. It is important to note that KAEC and NEOM emerged from mounting criticism of the regime's human rights record. King Abdullah and MBS turned to urban development to foment pride in the population while projecting a modern image to the rest of the world that helps maintain the Saud family's

influence in the region and globally. This politically astute strategy distracts the media from criticizing the regime and helps to create more neutral and, at times, favourable public opinion.

King Abdullah is remembered for his paradoxical reign. Widely seen as a reformist, the King was lauded by domestic and foreign leaders for his modernization of Saudi Arabia's state apparatus. He also promoted Saudi women in politics, allowed for more debate in the media, and supported higher education opportunities for Saudis to study abroad ("King Abdullah: A Look Back At His 10-Year Rule", 2015; Coogle, 2015). But these prospects for advancement were cut short after the 2011 Arab Spring. Threatened by the pro-democracy protests, he abruptly changed course to stifle domestic criticism (Coogle, 2015). His crackdown on political and human rights advocates and a lack of consistency in women's rights policy revealed his regime's paradoxical nature. As a result, many began to question his commitment to reforming Saudi Arabia.

KAEC is a manifestation of King Abdullah's contradictory politics. When the project was announced, it was touted as a socially liberal gated city that reflected King Abdullah's efforts to rejuvenate the ultraconservative Islamic theocracy. The city's master plan and promotional materials excited a global audience because they showed a different vision of Saudi Arabia that was progressive, business-friendly, and cosmopolitan (Ouroussoff, 2010). It demonstrated a marked attempt by the Saudi leadership to create tangible change in the country. However, like many of King Abdullah's other reforms, the city remains a smokescreen. The unwillingness of King Abdullah to relinquish power in any meaningful way is reflected in the city's failure during its repeated rethinks to develop a two-system legal policy that would have allowed for the type of international business growth it sought.

MBS' rule has taken Saudi leadership's contradictions to new heights. The kingdom's young, de facto leader is vying for a new era of economic and social reforms. He has invested in domestic industry, modernized judicial structures, and begun to liberalize cultural and entertainment programs (Ignatius, 2017). But this seemingly genuine commitment to reform is shrouded by violence and intolerance for dissent. Since MBS became crown prince, there have been waves of mass arrests of women's rights activists and political rivals as well as a steep increase in the number of executions in the kingdom ("Mohammed bin Salman: The dark side of Saudi Arabia's crown prince", 2020). The gruesome murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi officials in 2018 exemplifies how intolerant the royal establishment remains towards

outspoken critics of their modernization efforts (“Mohammed bin Salman: The dark side of Saudi Arabia’s crown prince”, 2020).

With this in mind, it is hard to see MBS’ reforms as anything more than a “slick PR exercise,” with NEOM as its frontrunner (“Mohammed bin Salman: The dark side of Saudi Arabia’s crown prince”, 2020). The spectacular city distracts from the atrocious record of human rights violations he continues to build. This endeavour has been successful in many ways: global dialogue remains optimistic that the city, with its claims of progress and futurism, will bring progressive change to Saudi Arabia. More importantly, investors consider the money in Saudi Arabia to be “too big to ignore” (Guyer, 2022). The increasing number of sporting events hosted under NEOM’s name and the contracts signed with world-renowned brands like McLaren Racing demonstrates how global discourse has shifted in MBS’ favour. NEOM continues to attract worldwide attention and rehabilitate MBS’ name while he centralizes his economic and political power by silencing dissent.

KAEC and NEOM exemplify Koch’s observation of the “stark contrast[s]” that emerge between urban imaginaries and their surrounding contexts when governments engage in statist spectacles (2018: 2). Under the guise of state-led reform, the spectacular cities of KAEC and NEOM have projected symbols of modernity and progress to the world by appropriating globally circulating urban imaginaries. These flashy facades obscure the reality of what is happening within Saudi Arabia and have helped deflect criticism from King Abdullah and MBS’ human rights abuses. In this way, the national narratives expressed in these urban imaginaries are intimately linked to legitimacy projects for authoritarian leadership (Koch, 2014b; Koch, 2022). New city discourse is a red herring for an increasingly oppressive regime.

### **6.3. New city building towards a secular future**

As the country’s governing structures are centralized, new city projects are helping the House of Sa’ud rewrite the kingdom’s history. A vital aspect of this has been marginalizing the religious establishment from politics, law, and history to further link the stability of the state to Al-Saud leadership (Alhussein, 2022). For example, a royal decree issued in 2022 declared February 22nd as the kingdom’s “Founding Day” (Yaakoubi, 2022). The anniversary is 18 years before what historians consider the beginning of the Saudi state: when Ibn Saud allied with Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab whose purist doctrine is often called Wahhabi Islam. This new national holiday

uproots Wahhabi influence from Saudi state formation by shifting focus to the Al Saud family. It is a marked attempt, among others, to tie the state's identity to the royal family in a new type of Saudi nationalism.

The developments of KAEC and NEOM demonstrate how the new history of Saudi Arabia is being territorialized. New cities alter the material culture of Saudi Arabia's archive by imagining and creating spaces whose planning and architecture silence past Saudi narratives (Bsheer, 2020; Trouillot & Carby, 2015). For example, the architectural design of KAEC to date has been generically global with little connection to Saudi religion and culture (see Fig. 6.1.) (Moser et al., 2015). NEOM will likely share a similarly dubious aesthetic as its futuristic megacity renderings put it on a similar trajectory towards impersonal design. Like many other top-down national identity projects (See Vale, 2008), the regime has employed this urban development strategy to re-orient the kingdom away from Arabia's historical formations to serve political ends. These real and imagined spatial configurations erode other historical forces essential to Saudi state formation and enshrine the supremacy of Al-Saud leadership in the kingdom's past, present, and future.



Figure 6.1. Generic 'western' architectural design in KAEC.  
Source: KAEC Website.

Markedly, new cities play a large part in bulldozing the Saudi state's religious origins. As experiments in religious tolerance, KAEC and NEOM break with the ultraconservative religious past that accompanied the development of state institutions. The cities are advertised as



pluralistic and socially liberal spaces. These seductive discourses downplay the pivotal role of religion in the state's founding and foreground the importance of its secular dynastic history.

New cities have become a part of the historical archive as urban space is increasingly seen as a mechanism to deconstruct and reconstruct Saudi Arabian identity (Bsheer, 2020). Saudi leadership uses these spaces to rewrite the kingdom's narrative in which the royal family's role in state formation is central, and its ties to Wahhabism are forgotten. The lavish urban spectacles of KAEC and NEOM reflect this as they attempt to project state superiority above all else – including religious splendour.

#### **6.4. Chapter conclusions: New cities for a new national identity**

This chapter has demonstrated that new cities are informed by, and are used to serve, the Al Saud political apparatus. The international networks that encourage urban imaginaries empower leaders like King Abdullah and MBS to communicate their modernity to national and global audiences through extravagant urban spectacles that often contradict on-the-ground political realities (Bagaeen, 2007; Lindner & Meissner, 2018; McCann, 2011; Ong, 2011). Their increased participation in these global urban policy networks provides them diplomatic opportunities to distract from their grave human rights record. This urban policy has also served to consolidate the Al Saud regime. Indeed, KAEC and NEOM city brands have been instrumental in publicizing a new Saudi Arabian identity based more on its royal institution than its religious one. They promote a version of Saudi statehood that celebrates the Al Saud, placing the family at the centre of Saudi Arabian life.

By connecting with relevant urban studies literature about urban policy mobility, urban imaginaries, and authoritarian spatialities, I have highlighted how globally circulating rationales for city-building projects are embedded in the Saudi context to legitimize the Al Saud regime and their construction of a new national identity through urban initiatives. This has the effect of re-writing Saudi Arabian history to favour the government, consolidating its political power domestically, and bolstering its soft power capabilities internationally.

## Chapter 7. Discussion and Conclusion

The central focus of this thesis has been examining how top-down development imaginaries drive Saudi Arabian new city projects. Through analyzing the development of KAEC and NEOM, I have investigated the rationales, imaginaries, and politics that underpin Saudi Arabia's new-city building activities. My analysis demonstrates how Al Saud legitimization politics propel new city projects. By perpetuating city-centric assumptions about national development, King Abdullah and MBS constructed urban imaginaries to express their regime's promise. This authoritarian self-promotion shines through in KAEC and NEOM's masterplans and the discursive politics surrounding their development. The two cities are differentiated expressions of Saudi Arabia's path to a post-oil future, with NEOM illustrating MBS' intense ambition to create a new Saudi Arabia open to the world and under his control.

This final chapter summarizes this study's key arguments, conceptual contributions, and empirical findings. First, I outline the primary results of each chapter in this thesis and how it addresses the research questions. Second, I summarize the key conceptual ideas explored in this study. Third, I offer several directions for future research outside of the limitations of this research.

### 7.1. Chapter summaries

In chapter 1 of this thesis, *Introduction*, I broadly outlined the context of my research and provided general background on Saudi Arabia's national city-building strategy for economic development. Chapter 2, *Literature Review*, reviewed the main strands of scholarship that I utilized and contributed to in this thesis, which I categorized as 1) Contemporary new city building, 2) Globally circulating urban imaginaries for national development, and 3) Authoritarian spatialities. Then in Chapter 3, *Methodology*, I discussed and explained the qualitative methods I used as part of this research: historical analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis. Accordingly, Chapter 4, *Historical Context*, analyzes Saudi Arabian history as told by the line of succession to situate KAEC and NEOM within contemporary Saudi authoritarian politics. Chapter 5, *Comparing KAEC and NEOM*, contributes a comprehensive overview of city-building activities in Saudi Arabia by critically investigating the main rationales for new city-building in the kingdom and how they inform urban imaginaries. These drivers are explored further in Chapter 6, *Cities to Save a Kingdom: Re-branding Saudi Arabia*, which

highlights how the kingdom's participation in global urban policy networks has provided the regime with national and international political opportunities.

## **7.2. Contributions and significance of findings**

Overall, this thesis helps advance understanding of how globally circulating new city ideas are mobilized in Saudi Arabia's unique political context. Through my research objectives, this thesis simultaneously outlines commonalities between the Saudi city-building context and global city-building trends while underscoring some distinctive characteristics and particularities of new city-building in Saudi Arabia. Although the media coverage of Saudi Arabia's ambitious new city-building activities has been immense, the phenomenon has received little scholarly attention. With some of the world's most expensive new city projects underway, Saudi Arabia is a leading city-building country in the Gulf region and represents a particularly relevant example to expand our understanding of some of the political underpinnings of the new city-building phenomenon. Through a case study of the political dimensions behind two of Saudi Arabia's most significant projects to date, this thesis offers one of the first analyses of the complex dynamism reinforcing new city-building efforts in the Kingdom.

This research has situated KAEC and NEOM within the historical currents of the House of Saud's quest for power. As strategies for confronting the country's diminishing oil reserves and changing demographics, the two projects represent a city-centric approach to development that will quell domestic unrest and preclude international criticism. In some ways, these reactive policies to maintain power are congruous with the Al-Saud political ethos of the past. At the same time, however, MBS's bullish approach to building NEOM differentiates the project from King Abdullah's more measured KAEC. As a marked attempt to outdo KAEC, NEOM's spectacular urban imaginary highlights how the authoritarian politics within the House of Saud's legitimacy campaigns manifest in new city projects.

Thus, my research has contributed to several strands of urban studies scholarship. By helping answer questions about the main rationales and actors involved in new city-building in Saudi Arabia, I have contributed to the theorization and characterization required for scholars to better understand the global new city-building trend. Exploring how these rationales and the policies they inform manifest in urban imaginaries has also allowed me to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms involved in creating urban visions. Lastly, by contextualizing

Saudi Arabia's new city-building activities within the Kingdom's political context, I have shed light on space's central ideological role in authoritarian politics and the kingdom's unique engagement with the global city-building trend.

### **7.3. Directions for future research**

Through the process of writing this thesis, several avenues for future research emerged that were informed by what I encountered in my analysis and the broader themes that I could not pursue due to the limitations of this study. First, while I focused my analysis on the two major Saudi new-city projects to be announced in recent decades, various master-planned projects have been introduced as part of Vision 2030. A comparative study of NEOM, Qiddiya, King Salman Energy Park, AIUIa, and other PIF-backed urban initiatives would be valuable to examine how the national approach to new city-building varies across space and social contexts (Vision 2030 Website). Second, although my research touched on how new cities are informed by global networks of entrepreneurialism, it would be interesting to conduct a focused study on these cities as extreme cases of entrepreneurial urbanism and explore how their plans are connected to global capital investment flows in real estate. Finally, future research would benefit from on-the-ground fieldwork in Saudi Arabia and interviews with planners, developers, investors, and residents to evaluate how these projects come to be and how Saudi citizens of all backgrounds use and adapt to the cities. This would provide insight into how global new-city plans impact the livelihood practices of local people and urban migrants. Thus, as the subfield of research on contemporary new cities is rapidly growing, these research areas, and many more, constitute fruitful avenues to expand scholarship.

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