

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

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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.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, New cities, Economic diversification, Post-oil economy, Urban imaginaries, Authoritarian spatialities

Location of KAEC and NEOM



Source: Ginkgomaps & researcher's analysis