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Place Branding as a Political Act: Approaching Saudi Arabia's NEOM beyond its Shiny Façade

1 Introduction

NEOM is a Saudi mega-project. It extends over an area of 26,500 km² beside the Red Sea, adjacent to the Egyptian and the Jordanian border. NEOM is short for “new future”: *neo* is Latin for new and *m* is the first letter of *mustaqbal*, Arabic for future. The mega-city was first announced in 2017 by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). This chapter shows that NEOM, as the Crown Prince's brainchild, cannot be understood in isolation from his aspirations and argues that NEOM's place branding is utilised by MBS as a spatial realisation of self-branding and power reaffirmation. Hence, the chapter foregrounds place branding as a political act composed of processes, actors, and narratives and triggered by its creator's aspirations and local and international dynamics and implies political and socioeconomic consequences. The chapter asserts the importance of broadly approaching place branding as a political act by systematically viewing NEOM's branding through this lens.

NEOM is one of the national Vision 2030's most prominent projects and is envisioned to grow and diversify the economy.¹ While the project has slowed due to reputational reverses connected to the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and economic challenges, in early 2021, MBS announced “The Line” as NEOM's first city to be constructed. The city of one million inhabitants is envisioned to be “a revolution in urban living,” free of cars, streets, and carbon emissions. It is defined as “an economic engine for the Kingdom, it will drive diversification and aims to contribute 380,000 jobs of the future and 180 billion SAR (48 bn USD) to domestic GDP by 2030.”²

Notably, NEOM is not the Kingdom's first new city. It was preceded by four economic cities, including the King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC).³ Their main aims

¹ For more information, see the official website of Vision 2030, 2021.

² MBS' announcement of The Line on NEOM, 2021b.

³ KAEC is considered one of the success stories, despite falling far short of the two million targeted population; in 2018, its official statistics showed that the population slightly exceeds 5,000. See King Abdullah Economic City, 2018.

are diversifying and boosting the Saudi economy and enhancing Saudi cities' competitiveness. It is seen as imperative that the Kingdom acquire a competitive advantage in a world of booming new urban areas and a region where Dubai long ago succeeded in diversifying its economy away from oil, has qualified as a global city, and became a model replicated around the world.⁴ For that reason, the Kingdom became the most active member of CityQuest, an annual international "elite, nonacademic new-cities-themed meeting,"⁵ launched in 2013 and hosted since then by the Kingdom in KAEC. CityQuest provides the Kingdom with an opportunity to claim a leading role in the world of new cities. According to Moser, CityQuest establishes a "hierarchy of new cities" among emerging economies in which the Kingdom plays the role of a mentor.⁶

This chapter analyses NEOM's branding documents and platforms, including the launch event, official website neom.com, NEOM YouTube channel, and statements by the involved actors. It first engages with academic debates on branding the city in a neoliberal context. It then explores NEOM's branding processes, the actors involved, and the main branding narratives as constituent pillars of the political act of place branding. The last section gives two solid examples of how NEOM's branding narratives reflect the Crown Prince's power aspirations and spatially realise his self-branding.

2 Branding the City in a Competitive Context

Various shifts in cities' roles and forms of governance accompanied the rise of neoliberalism. As early as the 1980s, Harvey initiated a debate on the shift of city governance from managerialism towards entrepreneurialism.⁷ Fostering economic growth and capital accumulation became the most prominent functions of the city as an economic engine. This shift went hand in hand with the rise of competition among places, creating a hierarchy of cities, or as Sassen refers to it, "new geographies of centrality,"⁸ in which some cities are located in the core and others in the periphery. Cities' connectivity within the network of cities and their location within its spatial hierarchy are defined by various factors, including their shares of global circuits, transactions, workflows, businesses, and professionals. Cities that score high are identified as "global" or "world cities"; various indices have

⁴ Cf. Moser, 2018; Elsheshtawy, 2009.

⁵ Moser, 2019: 413.

⁶ Moser, 2019: 429.

⁷ See Harvey, 1989.

⁸ Sassen, 2002:13.

emerged to rank them, including the Global City Index, the Global Power City Index, and datasets compiled by the Globalisation and World Cities Research Network (GaWC). The world and global city concepts have attracted the attention of a huge number of scholars.⁹ While cities at the global periphery were left out, the “worlding city” concept emerged to address their aspirations to move closer to the core.¹⁰

Such competitive worlding aspirations are echoed in new cities’ branding. According to Moser and Côté-Roy, at least 150 new cities were announced over the past two decades, mostly in emerging economies.¹¹ Remarkably, a huge number of these new cities have not yet made progress out of branding documents and urban plans towards construction on the ground. Branding documents, unlike construction, make it possible to elaborate fantasies and utopias – earning these cities the deserved title “PowerPoint cities.” Fostering economic growth is a main motive for founding new cities. Accordingly, in their branding, they focus on having an enabling business environment, and many are announced as Special Economic Zones. Moser and Côté-Roy argue that, unlike the previous waves of state-driven new cities that emerged in the post-Second World War and post-colonial eras, new cities of the past two decades have been notably characterised by an urban entrepreneurial rationale in which the national and international private sector plays a major role. Datta also tackled the shifting role of the state in mega-urban development, which she has called the “entrepreneurial state” and that provides new cities with the necessary legitimacy by adapting laws and regulations and plays a major role in new cities’ promotion.¹²

New cities promise utopias that realise a new future and offer universal solutions to all urban challenges. Academic literature has explored the utopian claims of new cities, analysing discourses of sustainability and economic growth by “building big and fast” in the Global South,¹³ the rhetoric of the smart city and the eco-city and promises of modernisation in sub-Saharan Africa,¹⁴ and claims of prosperity in the post-oil economy in the Gulf.¹⁵ Importantly, new cities are considered developmental necessities and prerequisites for economic growth for developing economies. This drive and this speed in establishing new cities are reflected in academic writings, most notably in Cugurullo’s “Speed Kills” and Côté-Roy

9 Cf., most prominently, Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 2005; Taylor, 2010.

10 Cf. Roy and Ong, 2011.

11 Cf. Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021.

12 Cf. Datta, 2017.

13 Cf. Datta and Shaban, 2017.

14 Cf. Watson, 2014.

15 Cf. Molotch and Ponzini, 2019.

and Moser's "Does Africa not deserve shiny new cities?", which quotes African leaders and elite.¹⁶

Global cities, worlding cities, and PowerPoint cities continuously work on enhancing their competitiveness to adjust, maintain, or acquire a position in the geography of centrality. In such a competitive framework, city branding became one of the most necessary tools to improve city attractiveness. Cities, like corporations, started to have their own logos, slogans, visions, missions, branding strategies, etc. Corporate branding constitutes the main way to produce a place brand. This is expressed in various consultations and academic works, such as Govers' academic productions as an editor of the *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* journal and consultancies through different platforms including the *International Place Branding Association* and *Apolitical*, as well as Florida's academic writings on the creative class and his role in advising businesses and local governments through his consultancy firm, Creative Class Group.

Adopting a corporate branding approach, Govers defines place branding as a strategy to constitute positive image "associations" with and a "distinctive identity" of places.¹⁷ Dinnie, a business scholar, argues that place competition establishes a strong relation between a city's image and reputation and its attractiveness. He affirms that branding strategies are necessary to connect cities to their "customers."¹⁸ This approach packages place branding as a purely technical, apolitical process. For instance, Govers and Go use project management fundamentals in place branding and break the process down into five steps, starting from setting goals and arriving at implementing and monitoring the brand.¹⁹ Importantly, variations of this package have been successfully recycled and sold by consultancies and experts as a one-size-fits-all product.

In contrast, Vanolo defines place branding as a political act triggered by power relations, rather than a mere technical tool. He writes, "The construction and manipulation of urban images trigger a complex politics of representation, modifying the visibility and invisibility of spaces, subjects, problems and discourses."²⁰ He notes that since branding defines what is visible (e.g., diversity and inclusion in public space) and what should remain invisible (e.g., homelessness), analysing the "invisible and the untold" is as important as studying what the brand makes visible. He also argues that the replicability of place branding makes it a tool for the "subjectification of cities," as it defines and globally reproduces specific vis-

¹⁶ Cf. Cugurullo, 2017; Côté-Roy and Moser, 2019.

¹⁷ Cf. Govers, 2011.

¹⁸ Cf. Dinnie, 2011.

¹⁹ Cf. Govers and Go, 2009.

²⁰ Vanolo, 2017: i.

ual elements, vocabularies, adjectives, and aesthetics that any attractive city should possess. So, aspects of modernity, skyscrapers, waterfronts, diverse people enjoying public spaces, and adjectives such as vibrant and global become default image-ries and rhetoric for brands of cities around the world, regardless of the local context. He also asks who has the right to the brand and to what degree does it connect with local aspirations and self-representation. Moreover, the production of place branding through top-down processes and the domination of consultancy firms simply commodifies the city and inhibits any sort of collective agency and ownership of the city brand.²¹

3 Branding NEOM: Scratching Beyond the Surface

This section provides a practical application of approaching place branding as a political act composed of processes, actors, and narratives. It first explores the main features shaping the branding process and maps the involved actors and then dives deep into the rhetoric and imageries of NEOM's main branding narratives: the future, the environment, and people. This is done by analysing both positive image associations that the brand makes visible, such as inclusion and diversity, as well as untold and invisible aspects, including forced evictions. It argues that the choice of what is told and what is untold is purely political in nature. The section provides a contextualised analysis of NEOM by locating it within academic debates, international trends, local dynamics, and power relations.

3.1 Processes and Actors

Although the private sector plays a major role in NEOM, it is still clearly a state-led project. The Saudi state, represented here by the Crown Prince, indeed fulfils the functions of the entrepreneurial state, as defined in the previous section, which facilitates the project by allowing NEOM to function outside of Saudi jurisdictions and enthusiastically promotes NEOM. However, the role of MBS expands beyond the typical function of the entrepreneurial state. He is the Chairman of the NEOM Company Board of Directors, and the project is considered his personal legacy. It is also partially financed by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), which

²¹ Cf. Vanolo, 2017: 92–98, 109–110.

he has headed since 2015.²² The complex roles and relations between the actors involved in the project are reflected in managing the brand. Unfortunately, it is not possible to fully grasp the nature of the interactions, the actors involved, and their exact roles, because of the project's top-down, secretive approach to producing the brand. NEOM and more recently The Line were publicly announced only at the moment of their launch, and no public debates preceded this moment. However, this chapter draws on the available data to develop a better understanding of who contributes to the brand and how it is being developed.

So far, the process of constructing the brand has not involved public consultations. It relies mainly on the political leadership, represented by the Crown Prince, business figures, consultancy firms, and experts. The branding process has witnessed various shifts since its launch in 2017. During the period between the launch event and Khashoggi's murder in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018, international stars of the business world were in the forefront of the brand.²³ This changed quickly by the end of 2018, as various public figures have pulled out of the project due to the killing.²⁴ The brand shifted to be more connected to the faces of experts in NEOM's fields, such as water, energy, and health. The website lists their names and quotes some of them, while the YouTube channel contains a list of short videos of the experts sharing their experience of working and living in NEOM and a series of short expert interviews under the title *Discuss the Future*.

A broad range of international consultancies are also involved in the project, including the Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey & Company, and Oliver Wyman. Their participation in the project has never been publicly announced, and it is not entirely clear what their roles and costs are. However, their engagement became evident after the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published a report in 2019 based on leaked confidential documents encompassing 2,300 pages by the three consultancies planning NEOM. Other consultancies were contracted by NEOM and announced by media outlets and the US-Saudi Business Council.

Although public knowledge about the brand-making process is limited, what has been made public triggers three important observations. First, the actors involved in the project, regardless of their roles, be it constructing the city or the

²² PIF is a sovereign wealth fund. MBS reformed it in 2015.

²³ The main launch event included a selection of the brightest names in business and technology as panellists, alongside the Crown Prince: Klaus Kleinfeld, the former CEO of NEOM and former CEO of Siemens; Masayoshi Son, CEO of Softbank Vision Fund and the richest person in Japan at that time; Stephen Schwarzman, ranked among the richest 400 people in the US and the cofounder of Blackstone; and Marc Raibert, the CEO of Boston Dynamics, a leading company in the robot industry in the US.

²⁴ Cf. Perper, 2018; Block, 2018.

brand, became themselves part of the brand, as discussed in further detail below. Second, the top-down approach that the branding process relies on completely excludes any kind of public engagement and eliminates data accessibility. Third, branding relies predominantly on experts and excludes any sort of public input. This technical, apolitical approach is noticeably taken in a huge number of urban mega-developments around the world, and, according to various studies, this approach aims to depoliticise urban development and presents it as a purely technical issue that needs technical expertise rather than a political decision that requires public engagement.²⁵

3.2 Branding Narratives

NEOM's branding materials present it as an "economic engine" that fosters economic growth and diversifies the Saudi economy. This is to be accomplished by leading the future of 14 economic sectors, including energy, water, mobility, media, design, and construction. It seeks to attract creative people, businesses, and investments through "unmatched liveability," a "profitable economy," and "progressive laws conducive to economic growth." Moreover, already by its name, NEOM promises the future. Its constant invocation is reflected in its branding material under such slogans as "building the future," "a roadmap for the future of civilisation," "a new future on earth like nothing on earth," and the "most future-oriented place."²⁶

Promising the future, economic growth, and profit represents a motive to reaffirm NEOM's novelty and uniqueness on every possible occasion. For instance, during NEOM's launch event, MBS compared a smartphone to an old cell phone, saying that "the difference between the two devices is exactly what NEOM will achieve."²⁷ Furthermore, the website presents The Line as a "never-before-seen approach to urbanisation."²⁸ The website pushes the novelty rhetoric further by adopting a fictional story to explain how "astounding" NEOM is, stating, "Nikola Tesla, Jules Verne, Thomas Edison and Gustave Eiffel shared a vision – to create a place on earth where nothing would be impossible. If they saw our plans for

²⁵ Cf. Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez, 2002; Aly, 2020.

²⁶ All quotes on the future in this paragraph are taken from NEOM's official website NEOM, 2021a and its subpages.

²⁷ NEOM, 2017.

²⁸ NEOM, 2021b.

NEOM today, they'd be astounded."²⁹ This urge to astound drives NEOM's creators to sell unrealistic visions to their customers, meanwhile buying absurd imaginaries from international consultancies. NEOM's consultancies leaked documents that, according to the WSJ, were adopted by NEOM's Board; they mention plans to have flying cars, robot dinosaurs, and a giant artificial moon.³⁰ Later, in early 2021, MBS announced The Line, which offers a more realistic vision, but there is still much doubt whether it can be funded and implemented.

Tech-utopias are not uncommon among new cities. According to its official website, NEOM promises an "acceleration to human progress." The website also states: "We are building the world's first cognitive cities. Through the use of real-time data and intelligence, NEOM will fundamentally change the way people interact and work."³¹ Furthermore, during the launch event, it was announced that NEOM will have more robots than human residents. The latest technology was promised in 14 fields, including "real-time assessments and 'digital twins' for each resident" in the field of health and well-being. Technology is represented as a solution to global problems and a way to create a more sustainable and liveable future. Aside from these buzzwords, no information is available about the cost of such technologies, technological limitations, and, most importantly, privacy. In its report, the WSJ has quoted MBS, based on the leaked documents, explaining "this should be an automated city where we can watch everything (...) where a computer can notify [sic!] crimes without having to report them or where all citizens can be tracked."³² Although this vision has never been publicly announced, it is within the scope of the current branding narrative on technology. NEOM's branding is very explicit about the major and desirable change technology will bring to people's interactions, relations, life, and work. Importantly, NEOM offers technology as a solution to all the problems existing cities are encountering, ignoring the socioeconomic and political root causes of urban issues and reducing them to technical matters. Academic literature has explored and titled this phenomenon "tech-driven urbanism."³³

NEOM's branding views it as a no man's land that provides a unique opportunity for experimenting. The website reaffirms this narrative by calling NEOM "a

²⁹ Ironically, this vision shared by Tesla, Verne, Edison, and Eiffel as referenced in NEOM marketing never existed in reality, but it is part of the back-story of Disney's *Tomorrowland* film. The story was presented in NEOM, 2018.

³⁰ Cf. Scheck, Jones, and Said, 2019.

³¹ For more on the future of technology and digital technology in NEOM, see NEOM, 2021d.

³² Scheck, Jones, and Said, 2019.

³³ Cf. for example Cugurullo, 2013; Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021.

living laboratory.”³⁴ To a great extent, this discourse, based on a broader narrative that NEOM is “a virgin area”³⁵ and will be built “from scratch,”³⁶ is frequently repeated by the professionals involved in the project and featured by the YouTube channel. The promotional video *Pioneers* confirms this rhetoric and pushes it further by featuring one of NEOM’s pioneers stating: “we were the first ones to come here in the middle of nowhere,”³⁷ while another video is titled *The Settlers*.³⁸ This rhetoric was supported by the image of settlers walking through the desert, passing a plane wreck and swimming beside an abandoned sunken ship – evoking the imagery of the periphery of civilisation from movies like *Indiana Jones* and series like *Lost*. Importantly, not far from where these videos were filmed, forced evictions took place to pave the way for the new “giga”-development. Viewing NEOM as a no man’s land of opportunities and presenting the new residents as settlers who bring civilisation to the empty desert is a poor replication of colonial discourses. It also exemplifies an utter dichotomy between reality and the narratives of the newcomers, which is also a feature of colonial discourse.

Initially, NEOM’s branding paid minimal attention to the environment. The early branding material, such as a NEOM brochure of 2018, did not mention any related keywords even a single time, while the NEOM press release limited the issue to “net-zero carbon houses,” “walking and cycling,” and “renewable energy.”³⁹ However, 2021 witnessed a huge shift as the updated NEOM brochure mentioned environmental issues in two of the five newly formulated principles, namely sustainability and nature.⁴⁰ The environment also became a defining element of The Line, which is presented as “a blueprint for how people and planet can co-exist in harmony.”⁴¹ In The Line launch video, MBS defines it as “a city of a million residents with a length of 170 km that preserves 95% of nature within NEOM, with zero cars, zero streets, and zero carbon emissions.” In the meantime, Saudi Arabia, the largest oil exporter in the world, announced it was increasing its oil production.⁴² This paradox between NEOM’s branding discourse and practices connected

³⁴ NEOM, 2021b.

³⁵ NEOM, 2019b and 2020a.

³⁶ This expression appeared in various videos on the NEOM YouTube channel, for example NEOM, 2019c, 2020a, and 2020b.

³⁷ NEOM, 2019b.

³⁸ NEOM, 2020a.

³⁹ NEOM, 2017 and 2018.

⁴⁰ NEOM, 2021c.

⁴¹ This quote and the following one are parts of MBS’ announcement of The Line on NEOM, 2021b.

⁴² Cf. Faucon and Said, 2021.

to the oil industry and the Saudi share in carbon emissions can be understood at best as economic diversification, rather than transformation towards a post-carbon future. Notably, this leads to charges of greenwashing.⁴³

“People” is one of the most frequently recurring words in branding NEOM. A set of other terms have been used to refer to the “Neomians,” as well, including settlers, global pioneers, dreamers, thinkers, doers, world’s greatest minds, and best talents. Although these labels do not imply diversity and inclusion, branding material still stresses both as defining characteristics of its community and mentions, “NEOM is for everybody.” What NEOM actually offers is an exclusive inclusivity to those who qualify to be Neomians. MBS stressed this point during the launch event, saying: “This place is not the place for conventional people or conventional companies, this is a place for dreamers that want to create something new in the world.”⁴⁴ NEOM’s strategy of defining and attracting the dreamers resembles Florida’s conception of the creative class and the irresistible 3Ts, talent, technology, and tolerance.⁴⁵ This rationale assumes a strong correlation between attracting the creatives and fostering the economy. Although this assumption has never been proven and remains debated in academia⁴⁶ even two decades after its introduction, political leadership still buys into it.

As I briefly mentioned before, the people who are involved in constructing NEOM as a city or as a brand became themselves part of the brand. In particular, since 2019, the YouTube channel has produced a huge number of promotional videos, including but not limited to two series. The first is presented under the hashtag *Discuss the Future* and is dedicated to interviews with professionals/dreamers who have been recruited by NEOM. The interviews present NEOM as a breakthrough in each and every area of expertise of the affiliated professionals. The second hashtag is *Discover NEOM*. It features the professionals’ unique living and work experience in NEOM. The selection of the featured professionals can be described as gender-balanced and diverse in terms of age, nationality, profession, and cultural background. The two videos display a “real life” already taking place in NEOM, where the settlers are enjoying quality time with their families, engaging in sports, arriving at the airport, and working hard. The brand creates the imaginary of a fully functioning city out of what is primarily a construction site.

⁴³ Boykoff and Mascarenhas, 2016: 2 define greenwashing as “the duplicitous practice of voicing concern for the environment and claiming credit for providing solutions while doing the bare minimum, if anything at all.”

⁴⁴ For more information, watch the launch event on Al Arabiya, 2017.

⁴⁵ Cf. Florida, 2003. The parallels between NEOM’s dreamers and Florida’s creative class are discussed in detail in Aly, 2019.

⁴⁶ Cf. Peck, 2005.

The generous production of imageries and rhetoric around Neomians contributes to creating a corporate identity, which directs consumers' imaginations towards positive associations with the brand. In other words, once a consumer hears the word NEOM, visuals of creative people enjoying their lives should immediately appear. However, scratching beyond the surface shows that other groups actually exist and are intentionally kept invisible. The only difference is that, unlike the "dreamers," they are not "Welcome to NEOM."⁴⁷ Two groups can be identified. The first is the working and service classes. It was announced during the launch event that robots will outnumber human residents and will provide all kinds of services, including care. Regardless of how realistic this idea is, it contradicts the existing reality of NEOM, as human workers are involved in the construction and vastly outnumber the settlers in NEOM. Their exclusion in the brand does not change the fact that they exist in NEOM and will continue to do so.

The second group is the tribes that were already living in the area for a long time before the idea of NEOM was even proposed. NEOM is very specific about whom it will accommodate, and the existing tribes clearly did not fit the criteria. In 2020, the Saudi authorities forcibly evicted the al-Huwaitat tribe from areas it has occupied for hundreds of years. During the evictions, an outspoken opponent and a member of the tribe, Abd al-Rahman al-Huwaiti, was killed.⁴⁸ While this killing case was well documented and covered by the international media, no further news about forced evictions connected to NEOM have been reported since then. Despite the documented evictions and killing, branding has persisted in claiming the virginity of the land. Ironically, this is an indication that branding imaginaries, even if based on deceptions, matter more than realities, as long as they are neatly and widely presented to the right audience.

4 Spatial Realisation of Self-Branding

Branding material has repeatedly and consistently presented NEOM as the legacy of MBS. Hence, it cannot be fully understood in isolation from his power aspirations and self-branding. Moser and Côté-Roy define new cities by "the aspirations of their builders."⁴⁹ The case of NEOM is an ideal fulfilment of this statement. This section builds on the previous section by contextualising NEOM's branding narratives and connecting them with the aspirations of its creator. Essentially, the chap-

⁴⁷ NEOM, 2019a.

⁴⁸ Cf. Daragahi and Trew, 2020.

⁴⁹ Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021: 2.

ter analyses place branding as a political act, which implies a specific choice by ruling institutions and the political elite – in the case of NEOM, the Crown Prince. It further unpacks the chapter's argument that NEOM is a spatial realisation of the Crown Prince's self-branding and power reaffirmation.

In 2017, King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, who had acceded to the throne two years earlier, decided to replace the former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, his nephew, with his son MBS. In the same year, 200 princes and prominent business figures were arrested in a bloodless palace coup.⁵⁰ The power of MBS has increased tremendously since then, and he is strongly perceived as the “power behind the throne.”⁵¹ He carried out transformations in a number of fields that were previously considered taboo, including religious and social reforms. MBS presents himself as the champion of transforming the Saudi economy away from oil towards knowledge. He ambitiously announced in 2016, “[W]e can live without oil by 2020.”⁵² Remarkably, his progressive stance is strongly based on authoritarian rule and repression.

NEOM was launched in the same year as MBS was proclaimed the Crown Prince. All state capacities were harnessed to make NEOM possible. It is the Crown Prince's physical and spatial realisation of his self-brand and power reaffirmation internally and internationally. As a city built from scratch, NEOM is viewed as a unique opportunity to materialise his “progressive” ideas, which are close to impossible to implement in existing cities. Internally, NEOM has been introduced to the society as an economic engine of the post-oil transition that will bring prosperity to the Saudis and will maintain their quality of life. NEOM is also represented as a factor of national pride, arguing that the Kingdom deserves to have an advanced city that leads the future. NEOM also exemplifies MBS' social reforms. This is demonstrated on a wide scale by the branding material. *The Settlers'* promotional video stars Fayza al-Shaalan, a London-educated architect, who belongs to Saudi Arabia's growing class of young, well-educated professionals, to whom relaxing the control of the religious apparatus is an important promise. In the video, al-Shaalan is featured as a modern woman on a professional adventure, driving her car by the sea beside the mountains. Al-Shaalan not only drives herself to NEOM, which would not have been possible a couple of years ago, but also symbolically takes off her veil when she arrives in NEOM and steps out of her car. The transition from Saudi Arabia to NEOM, the new future, serves as an allegory of MBS succeed-

⁵⁰ Cf. Gardner, 2019.

⁵¹ BBC, 2020.

⁵² Quoted by BBC, 2016.

ing Abdullah to become King. Importantly, NEOM spatially reflects not only a post-oil economic transition, but also an evolution of the social contract.

Internationally, NEOM has been used as a medium to formulate foreign policies that strategically strengthen relations to superpowers such as the United States. Saudi attention to environmental and climate issues increased abruptly, coinciding with US President Biden's inauguration in early 2021, as The Line's branding material shows. After his inauguration, Biden initiated a Leader Summit on Climate, and King Salman was among the 40 invited leaders. Coincidentally, one day after the invitation, the Crown Prince publicly announced the "Saudi Arabia Green Initiative" and the "Middle East Green Initiative."⁵³ Notably, NEOM is employed to help Saudi Arabia build an international image that blocks out the paradox of being the biggest petrol exporter while simultaneously claiming to be a leading international actor in climate-protecting measures. Personalising the green initiatives, NEOM, and The Line as the brainchildren of the Crown Prince is one of the ways to re-establish positive international associations with him, after his image suffered in the aftermath of the killing of Khashoggi and the Yemen War. This personalisation affirms his power as a world-class leader. Importantly, contextualising NEOM's environmental branding also raises questions about the path MBS is following: is he taking solid steps towards green urbanism and low emissions, or rather merely greenwashing? Globally, such state-led greenwashing raises concerns about current efforts and future climate-protecting measures, as it could aggravate the effects of climate change and hinder, rather than boost, mitigation and prevention efforts.

5 Conclusion

NEOM provides this chapter with a very fertile soil to unpack a variety of issues and pose both analytical and conceptual questions. The chapter approaches branding as a political act that implies a political choice and is shaped by power dynamics. The stakes of the political leadership and other actors, including consultancies, the construction sector, and tech companies, shape NEOM as a city and a brand and decide which narratives are to be told and which ones are to stay untold. In other words, branding is not just images and slogans. Like any other political act, it has consequences that do not affect everybody in the same way: while some are included, other are left out; while certain groups are advantaged, others are disadvantaged.

⁵³ Cf. Naar, 2021.

The chapter has shown that NEOM is not just a bright image of the future, but also a reflection of present realities. In more general terms, it asserts that studying the place branding of new cities is essential for comprehending their complexities, conflicting interests, and power relations. Bringing NEOM's branding narratives and MBS' power aspirations close together under one analytical framework exemplifies how place branding can be used to strengthen MBS' power ambitions, both nationally and internationally. NEOM's branding narratives systematically reflect MBS' views of how the future should be, who should be allowed to contribute to the making of the future, and who is invited to it. This chapter thus argues that NEOM is a spatial realisation of present Saudi political dynamics orchestrated by MBS and his future power ambitions.

Essentially, the chapter argues that future studies of branding should approach it as a political act. Depoliticising urban development in general and place branding specifically contributes to further excluding large parts of the population from city politics, fosters the dominance of experts and technocrats at the expense of citizens, and normalises the absence of accountability. Hence, the questions how and who creates the brand are very important. The role that international consultancies play in widely replicating and selling brands around the world is definitely worth our attention. The first reason is so that we can understand their stake in building the new urban imaginary. The second reason is so that we can recognise the extent to which, by overemphasising fantasies and fiction as the prototype for the future, they hinder the emergence of any possible collective alternative imaginaries. The last reason is so that we can realise how such consultancies serve the political ambitions of an authoritarian ruler, while impeding any sort of democratic practices in the city.

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