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The Gulf and the smart city movement in the Middle East
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Introduction

The growth of planned high tech cities is a global phenomenon. According to Global Data, there were 6,645 projects of this fashion planned or under construction as of 2018. These developments are usually conceived as [smart cities](#), a term that refers to urban areas in which many of the city services rely on information technologies, with a modern, digital infrastructure prepared for data collection and delivery. The [smart city approach](#) promises improvements in sectors such as mobility, healthcare, security, energy, water, waste, housing, or community engagement, thanks to its enhanced management of data. Yet, smart cities have also raised some criticism, which argues that data collection and [surveillance](#) can lead to a tighter control of the urban population.

The role of the Gulf has been key in the development and expansion of smart cities in their own countries, in the wider Middle East, and through investments, in other parts of the world as well. This is an indicator not only of the extended influence of the Gulf in the Middle East, but it also shows the new financial networks and corporate interests that have been emerging over the past two decades.

The influence of the Gulf in urban developments in the Middle East

Smart cities are a business opportunity for many interested

partners –local and national governments, capital investors, or industries ranging from telecommunications to real estate or material producers. The increased weight that the [sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf countries](#) have been acquiring in their respective economies in the past decade reinforces this perspective. Other private companies from the Gulf have also widely participated in these investments.

A notable case is the industry of telecommunications. Their role as the backbone of the smart city infrastructure makes the expansion of telecom companies a particularly fruitful opportunity. Companies like Etisalat, Ooredoo, or Du dominate the market in the Gulf and in the Middle East and control the main operators of 18 countries in South Asia and Africa, which include Indonesia, Afghanistan, Nigeria or Sudan, for instance. Telecom services provide many of the services of data collection and management that smart cities require.

Other examples of the participation of Gulf conglomerates in urban ventures in the Middle East include the real estate, construction, and infrastructure sectors. Companies like Saudi Bin Laden, Arabtec Construction (UAE), or the Al Kharafi Construction Company, to name a few, are involved in construction projects in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, or Jordan. A specific subgenre of this construction business is reconstruction, in cases such as Syria,

Yemen, Iraq, or Libya, where many Gulf companies are in charge of projects for areas that were destroyed during the different conflicts that have affected these countries.

Suburban responses to overpopulation

Some of the reasons behind the boom of planned smart cities are the congestion, pollution, and overpopulation of megalopolis like Cairo, with over 20 million inhabitants and a traffic problem whose economic cost to the city has been estimated by the World Bank to be up to 4 percent of Egypt's GDP. One of Egypt's flagship projects is [New Cairo City](#), a new capital to substitute the overburdened Cairo. Sometimes mockingly referred to as New Dubai, its design owes a lot to the [mall-centered urbanism of Dubai](#), while also hosting government offices and a presidential palace.

Yet, the history of suburban planned projects in Egypt is much older than New Cairo. In the 1970s, one of Anwar Sadat's landmark projects was the 10th Ramadan city, a residential area aimed at blue collar workers and close to Cairo that enjoyed only relative success. More recent developments, nevertheless, have taken a design closer to that of gated communities, such as Sheikh Zayed City, inaugurated in 1995 and named after Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nayan of Abu Dhabi.

There are a number of similar projects that venture into the desert to alleviate the problems of Cairo, something that was called the [conquest of the desert](#) during the years of Mubarak. Today, there are 22 of these suburban cities built or in construction,

with 7 million residents, with plans for more.

Smart cities as empowerment

Rawabi, in the occupied West Bank, is a smart city funded by the Palestinian Bashar Masri and Qatar Diar. Its first residents moved in 2014, and it expects to become a [tech hub in the West Bank](#), benefitting from the importance of the Israeli tech sector while aiming at helping develop a stronger Palestinian middle class. The city includes a mall in the city center, green spaces, a residential area, and state of the art technology, which includes optical fiber and solar energy panels. The core of its economic life is its startup incubator mostly focused on the ICT sector. In addition, most of the retail companies that operate in Rawabi are franchises owned by Khaleeji conglomerates.

The case of Rawabi provides a different approach to the mostly residential, suburban cities of Egypt, and raises the question of economic development in the Palestinian Territories, something that has not been exempt of criticism by many sides inside and outside Palestine. It is, in any case, another example of the growing influence of Khaleeji capital and Gulf urbanism in the wider Middle East.

An opportunity for economic diversification

The cases of the smart cities of Neom in Saudi Arabia or Masdar City in Abu Dhabi have the fundamental goal of helping diversifying the oil-dependent economies of their countries with

developments in green energy technologies, tourism, or in the entertainment sector. [Neom](#), with an initial \$500 billion investment by the Saudi Public Investment Authority, will be entirely powered by renewable energies and is expected to become a touristic destination. Its area lies mostly in the northern Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia, but also incorporates some territory of Jordan and Egypt.

The green component is even more present in the case of [Masdar City](#) in Abu Dhabi, designed by Foster and Partners, which has also partnered with Siemens and hosts the headquarters of the International Renewable Energy Agency. The city also incorporates different systems of data collection that inform the networks of transportation and other services.

The cases of Neom and Masdar City show how smart cities are not only an investment opportunity or a way to spread networks of influence, but also a way to promote internal and alternative development. In this sense, the [Saudi Vision 2030](#) plan, which has influenced the economic plans of most of the GCC countries, can be understood as the umbrella under which developments like Neom or Masdar City are being built.

Conclusion

The Gulf countries have been one of the foremost promoters of the idea of smart cities, thanks to their public and privately owned companies' interest in investing in industries such as telecom, real estate, or infrastructure. In doing so, their financial presence and overall influence in

countries like Egypt or Jordan has only increased, in parallel to their political weight in the region. Cases like the suburban developments around Cairo show how the overburdened infrastructure and overpopulation of certain megalopolis requires urban solutions to accommodate its residents, while Rawabi, in the West Bank, shows how smart cities can be an opportunity for local economic empowerment. Flagship projects like Neom in Saudi Arabia or Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, on the other hand, portray a futuristic urban future while trying to diversify the economies of the oil-rich countries where they have been built.

About the author

Javier Guirado Alonso is a PhD student at Georgia State University and a guest researcher at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo. He also holds an MA in Contemporary Arab and Islamic Studies from the Autonomous University of Madrid. His research focuses on the historically changing relation between society, urban space, and narratives of modernity in the Gulf.

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