

A LINE in the Sand

Urban livability, some argue, is in jeopardy. Responding to the environmental crisis inciting this problem, the NEOM Company has broken ground on a new project in the desert of the Red Sea coast. But this won't be just any residential development. In 2022, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and NEOM Board Chairman Mohammed bin Salman introduced the world to THE LINE, "the city of the future."¹

The community will run entirely on renewable energy: no roads, cars, or emissions. Most notably, this development will not be organized by any definition of "traditional." Instead, embodying its name, THE LINE is projected to be just over 200 yards wide, about 105 miles long, and sits about a third of a mile above sea level. It will quite literally resemble a line—and an invisible one at that: its outside walls will be paneled with mirrored glass, allowing the city to seamlessly blend into the surrounding desert. Accommodating 9 million people within 21 square miles featuring year-round climate control, the city will foster a greatly reduced carbon footprint while ensuring residents enjoy the surrounding "natural" features. All facilities will be accessible within a five-minute walk, and a high-speed rail can take visitors end-to-end within twenty minutes.

To some, bin Salman's proposal sounds like a utopia. By gathering "a team of the brightest minds in architecture, engineering, and construction" and establishing an alternative way to live, there is no denying that THE LINE redefines the idea of urban living, providing the rest of the world a blueprint for hypothetical civilizations of the future. Its residents' wellbeing will be prioritized alongside infrastructure and transportation: NEOM advertises a lack of pollution and traffic accidents, as well as "world-class preventative healthcare."

However, for others, the ability to live, learn, and work in a walkable, carbon negative community seems to be an out-of-character offer from an oil-rich country like Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom possesses roughly 17% of the entire world's known petroleum reserves, exporting 6,227,000 barrels of crude oil each day.² Other critics point out that NEOM's efforts could be interpreted as a move to divert attention away from Saudi Arabia's dark track record of human rights abuses. In November 2013 alone, more than 370,000 foreign migrant workers were deported, with 18,000 still detained in March of 2019.³ Human rights organizations are banned, and protests are often criminalized or even provoke death sentences. Many activists have been detained without trial for over two years, and human rights advocates Mikhlif bin Daham al-Shamarri and Omar al-Sa'id endured respective two and three hundred lashes at the hand of the Saudi Arabian justice system. With the track record of the Saudi government in mind, is the prospect of THE LINE too good to be true, or too groundbreaking to ignore?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the moral trade-offs between building a brand new city and investing in existing communities which are already struggling?
2. To what extent can THE LINE be a "green" development project given its connections to the oil industry?
3. What, if any, are the ethical concerns with a single private company providing basic needs for the residents of an entire city?

¹ <https://www.neom.com/en-us/newsroom/hrh-announces-theline-designs>

² https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm

³ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/saudi-arabia-human-rights-raif-badawi-king-salman>

