



## Saudi Arabia Moves Forward on Artificial Intelligence

**OE Watch Commentary:** By royal decree, the “Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence” was established on 30 August 2019. Overseen by the prime minister’s office, the new authority will serve as the nerve center for Saudi efforts in the development and proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled technology. According to the first accompanying excerpt, a key driver behind the establishment of this new authority were “the digital threats posed by electronic warfare,” a field in which Saudi Arabia feels particularly vulnerable.

The Saudi government and population have embraced new technologies, and the rhetoric around AI is positive and confident. The author of the accompanying excerpt from *al-Arabiya*, for instance, notes how thanks to “an effective technical mobilization” over the past two years, Saudi society has quickly adapted to a new technological reality. A virtuous cycle has been created, the author believes,

as “families and schools encourage their children to pursue technical fields.” For its part the Saudi government has embarked on several large projects involving new technology, with none more ambitious than “Neom,” a futuristic city that is currently under construction on the Gulf of Aqaba coastline, in close proximity to Jordan, Israel and Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. The project’s website (<https://www.neom.com/>) describes it as “the world’s most ambitious project.”

One of the Saudi government’s most consequential uses of AI and related technologies is to manage the more than two million pilgrims who descend on Mecca annually for the Hajj pilgrimage. A major expansion of the Great Mosque in Mecca will have been completed by July 2020, when the Hajj happens next. So the government is counting on these new technologies to help accommodate the expected growth in the number of pilgrims. At this year’s Hajj, which took place in August, Saudi authorities launched several new initiatives, including the piloting of a “Smart Hajj Card” that “holds a pilgrim’s personal, medical and housing information” as well as a tracking device. The card can be used in lieu of a passport to enter Saudi Arabia during the Hajj, and is expected to become standard in the next few years. During the most recent Hajj, Saudi authorities also installed “six transmitting stations and 350 sensors” to complement an existing network of high-definition cameras, in order to “gather and analyze data about overcrowding and the movement of pilgrims.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**



The Kaaba during Hajj.

Source: Adli Wahid via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Kaaba\\_during\\_Hajj.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Kaaba_during_Hajj.jpg), CC BY-SA 4.0

*“These institutions are part of a wide-ranging effort in which the Saudi administration seeks to develop the process of electronic transformation of state institutions and public services, as well as enhancing digital security...”*

### Source:

Ziad Ahmed al-Fayfi. “Changes in Saudi Arabia Strengthen Digital Development and Encourage the Fight Against Corruption,” *Independent Arabia*, 31 August 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y69s5qcf>

تغييرات في السعودية تعزز التطور الرقمي وتشجع مكافحة الفساد

*These institutions are part of a wide-ranging effort in which the Saudi administration seeks to develop the process of electronic transformation of state institutions and public services, as well as enhancing digital security in line with the requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. “Independent Arabia” learned that the establishment of the authority was driven by the digital threats posed by electronic warfare. Saudi Arabia is considered one of the most vulnerable countries in the world according to international reports, which increased the need to deal with cybersecurity, including investment in cybersecurity and protection from drone attacks, and to get its work up and running.*

### Source:

“Why did Saudi Arabia Establish the Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence?” *al-Arabiya*, 1 September 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y6z9o9kf>

لماذا أنشأت السعودية هيئة للبيانات والذكاء الاصطناعي؟

*An effective technical mobilization has been taking place in Saudi Arabia for more than two years. Among young people, discussing artificial intelligence, deep learning, “blockchain” or the “Internet of Things” is a living and tangible reality that calls for pride and admiration.*

*Furthermore, talk of “hackathons” and of exhibits, innovation workshops, and initiatives is no longer unusual. Families and schools encourage their children to pursue technical fields. The Saudi Programming Initiative, which concluded in February, provided a glimpse of the Saudis’ passion for technical know-how given that participants exceeded one million.*

**Source:** “Ministers launch new and enhanced Hajj and Umrah services,” *Arab News*, 7 August 2019. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1536711/saudi-arabia>

*[Minister of Hajj and Umrah Dr. Mohammed Salih Bentin] highlighted the smart Hajj platform, which offers a range of advanced and enhanced services to help pilgrims, including an online electronic visa-application process that removes the need to visit an embassy. The platform also includes a “Smart Hajj” card that holds a pilgrim’s personal, medical and housing information, and can be quickly and easily read using electronic scanners. The card also uses near-field communication to provide assistance to pilgrims who are lost and control entry and exit to Hajj tents... In a first at the holy sites, Internet of Things technology has been implemented. It consists of six transmitting stations and 350 sensors places throughout Mina and at the Jamrat bridge. This network will gather and analyze data about overcrowding and the movement of pilgrims. Crowds and movement will also be monitored by a network of high-definition cameras. They data that is collected by these systems will be analyzed at a dedicated monitoring center.*