

## **The shifting geopolitics of higher education: Inter/nationalizing elite universities in Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, and beyond**

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**Abstract.** This article examines recent higher education projects in two resource-rich, developmental states: Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia. These projects are indicative of broader trend across Asia to move beyond previous national universities, toward a state-initiated model of the globally competitive university, which is designed to become an regional hub for elite education. Drawing on a range of qualitative methods, I consider the geopolitical context in which these projects have been conditioned and materialized, with a focus on how they are legitimated by policy-makers in the two case countries. By reframing discussions about the globalization of higher education in terms of a geopolitics of higher education, I argue that the cases of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia are not exceptions set outside of the hegemonic liberal system, but that they are ‘mirrors’ of recent internationalization agendas undertaken by elite Western universities. Through considering localized discourses of promoting knowledge-based economies, I consider how elites simultaneously work with and reconfigure globally-hegemonic discourses, and specifically how these elite university projects are part of broader authoritarian political configurations in Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** higher education; nationalism; geopolitics; academic capitalism; Saudi Arabia; Kazakhstan

*The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important,  
more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.*

–Ernest Gellner (1983, 34)

### **I. Introduction**

American and European academics have been increasingly anxious about the so-called corporatization or marketization of the university (e.g. Castree and Sparke 2000; Fisher and Chan 2008; Olds and Thrift 2005; Rhoads and Torres 2006; Slaughter and Roades 2004; Waters 2006a). They identify this trend in a range of recent policy shifts, from university fee structures, to faculty review criteria, to the increasing reliance on adjunct or part-time instructors. Another dimension of this, which has received less attention, is that a growing number of Western universities are opening branch campuses and pursuing international partnerships in the non-West (acknowledging the difficulty of this binary, I use the ‘West’ only as shorthand for European and North American countries). However, these cross-border projects are increasingly coming under scrutiny, as they grow in scope and media coverage has increased (e.g. Daley 2011; Harman 2007; Langfitt 2013; Lewin 2013; Lindsay 2013).

These projects have been heralded by some, such as former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who in 2011, praised New York University (NYU) President John Sexton’s ‘vision to expand his

university internationally while maintaining its reputation for excellence and academic freedom' (quoted in Kaminer 2013). And yet, much of the media coverage on NYU's branch campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, as with other universities' projects in similarly nondemocratic contexts, has been predominantly negative. It has frequently focused on widespread concerns about the ability of U.S.-based universities to deliver on precisely this promise of maintaining excellence and academic freedom in states where democracy, freedom of speech, and civil society are actively discouraged (e.g. Krieger 2013; Page and Areddy 2013; Redden 2013; see Vora forthcoming).

Not only does this set of critiques position the Western university as a bastion of politically liberal norms and values – and importantly one that is seen as being under attack in its extension into illiberal contexts – it is simultaneously positioned as an institution that should be outside the logics of economic liberalism. That is, Western universities' international ventures are critiqued as indiscriminate schemes to earn more money for the university (or in some cases divert it abroad), while failing to reflect the standards of the home campus and/or threatening to dilute the quality of the university brand. For example, several of the Persian Gulf monarchies have provided subsidies for facilities, salaries, and tuition, as well as massive (but mostly undisclosed) donations, for the institutions that have opened branch campuses in their countries. Critics have challenged these contracts as corporatist, and potentially corrupting insofar as they are seen to be prioritized over the (non-financial) values of the home institutions (e.g. Lewin 2008, 2013; Lindsey 2013; Redden 2013).

Yet these critiques of 'academic capitalism' and Western universities' effort to expand their international presence represent only a partial perspective about shifting trends in the global landscape of higher education. Such critiques have been strategically articulated through the defense of liberal normative commitments, but they are infused with a certain anxiety about threatened hegemony within Western academia. As this article illustrates, considering these trends globally produces a more nuanced picture, and raises new questions and challenges that are glossed over in the simultaneously (politically)

liberalist and (economically) anti-liberalist critiques dominating Western narratives. In fact, these critiques – insofar as they strategically manipulate and thus (re)produce the division between ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ states and spaces – are one means by which actors in the hegemonic center articulate their dominance.

Accordingly, I treat narratives about recent transformations in the global landscape of higher education as geopolitical scripts, whereby global space is hierarchized (Agnew 2003, 21) as situated actors categorize and make sense of the world through interpretive cultural practice (Ó Tuathail 2006, 7). Rather than critique these Western narratives, I am keen to move beyond the center’s discursive dominance and, instead, consider two ostensibly peripheral cases in this article. Through a joint case study of recent higher education developments in Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan, I consider how Western universities’ internationalization agendas have coincided with extensive nationalization agendas in other parts of the world, and how we can discern a broader geopolitics to these parallel developments. This article thus advances the literature on the globalization of higher education by reframing it in terms of a geopolitics of higher education, so as to highlight these political geographies in such a way that does not merely reproduce stigmatizing liberal/illiberal binaries, and hopefully, to escape banal critiques of neoliberalism as inherently bad (Ferguson 2010).

## **II. Domesticating higher education in the non-West**

Universities in the United States, as well as in Canada and Western Europe, have long held a privileged position in higher education’s hierarchy of prestige. Overwhelmingly dominating global ranking charts (Jöns and Hoyler 2013), they attract students from around the world. Although many international students study on an individual basis (either offered university scholarships or paying their own way), many arrive on scholarships funded by their home governments. Where material resources and governmental agendas align, policy-makers in non-Western countries have developed extensive

programs to send students abroad to receive a Western education at these prestigious institutions. These include various state-sponsored scholarship programs, such as those in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, just to name a few. This is clearly a substantial financial boon to the destination universities. However, even in the cases I analyze here, Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan, two oil-rich countries with a long history of sending their students abroad to U.S. and European universities, this trend is beginning to change. These governments are now intensifying their efforts to domesticate elite higher education – that is, they are trying to bring Western education to their students rather than sending them abroad. This process, I argue, is intimately connected with ongoing Western internationalization projects.

Globally, this domestication of higher education has mainly taken three, often co-existing, forms in the non-West. The first is the explosion of private universities in a diverse range of ‘neoliberalizing’ states, like Chile, Mexico, Lebanon, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and China. In these cases, loosening state regulations, both in terms of education policies and market liberalization, has enabled the founding of new universities, in settings where higher education options were previously tightly controlled. The second form is the proliferation of branch campuses, found in clusters like Qatar’s Education City (Vora forthcoming; Kane 2012; Tetrault 2011), as well as individually in the cases of NYU-Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, Clark University in Poland, and a host of second-tier Western universities around the world (for an incomplete list, see [www.globalhighered.org/branchcampuses.php](http://www.globalhighered.org/branchcampuses.php)).

The third trend, which is the subject of my ongoing research, is the strengthening of existing, and development of new, state-sponsored universities. These are not quite the national universities of afore (e.g. Mitchell 1988, 113), but are rather framed as being globally-competitive universities, which are to serve as hubs for elite education, not just in the host country, but regionally. Examples include the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, National University of Singapore, Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, King Abdullah University of Science Technology in Saudi Arabia, and Qatar University. In all these cases,

the governments have invested significant funds to attract Western scholars to staff them – often with a stated agenda of becoming their world region’s Harvard or Oxford.

The latter two trends are of particular interest for geographers for the way they actively blur the lines between the foreign and the domestic. Though are typically legitimated domestically through the language of nationalism – and especially in response to calls to spend education dollars at home – much of the money to develop local elite universities goes to hiring Western faculty and administrators, enticed there with high salaries, free housing, and reduced workloads, etc. So extreme is this dependence on the foreign that Neha Vora (forthcoming) has aptly labeled these new universities as ‘expert/expat camps.’ This article explores just one aspect of this rhetorical and conceptual tension and considers why we have seen this recent shift in resource-rich states toward massive investment in developing globally-competitive (Western-style), but still avowedly local, institutions of higher education.

Resource-rich states are frequently characterized as being defined by a ‘ruling bargain,’ in which citizens ‘exchange all political rights for extensive welfare state goods’ (Kanna 2011, 26). In this narrative, the role of nationalism and ideology is uniformly dismissed – and undeservedly so. Through a joint case study of the King Abdullah University of Science Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia and Nazarbayev University (NU) in Kazakhstan, I illustrate how nationalism is a significant force in both Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, albeit taking different shapes. In both places, these recent higher education projects are part of broader agendas to nationalize their economies and their polities. In Kazakhstan, this has been primarily connected to the ‘Kazakhification’ of the country in the years since the end of the Soviet Union (Sarsembayev 1999). Although many ethnic Russians emigrated upon independence, Kazakhstan still has a large Russian minority, which by most accounts, has slowed the trend toward de-Russification that has characterized many other post-Soviet settings. Now over 20 years since gaining independence, Kazakhstan’s elite is increasingly dominated by ethnic Kazakhs, and there

has been an ever-expanding move toward promoting Kazakh culture and language. As I have considered at greater length elsewhere (Koch forthcoming), the realm of higher education has been one important site for this steady effort to nationalize (i.e. de-Russify) independent Kazakhstan.

Saudi Arabia, by contrast, like many of the Gulf monarchies, has a high percentage of migrant workers – at about 30% of the total population. Though lacking citizenship rights, this foreign population has been the subject of an increasingly pervasive wariness amongst Gulf citizens, ‘as if what is built in their name is somehow not fully theirs’ (Dresch 2005, 4). Some citizens articulate this through certain demographic anxieties about being outnumbered, as well as claiming that their countries’ vast resource wealth is being unduly squandered on foreigners. Thus, across the Gulf, the monarchies have undertaken nationalization agendas, i.e. the Saudization of Saudi Arabia, the Qatarization of Qatar, the Emiratization of the Emirates. Local leaders are acutely aware of their citizenries’ suspicion on this account, but nonetheless, consistently (if selectively) harness the foreign as a means to promote national futures. This is exemplified in the recent efforts to articulate a localized ‘knowledge-based economy,’ and especially through introducing various policies to simultaneously emphasize international models and presence in higher education and intensify the investment in the explicitly national sectors of higher education. Seemingly contradictory – but actually co-constituting – this promotion of a indigenized knowledge economy has quickly become a favorite means to demonstrate to the population that the government is, in fact, investing in national futures.

In this analysis, I highlight the role of geopolitical context in shaping Saudi and Kazakhstani planners’ decisions to invest so heavily in these world-class university projects. I consider how planners and other key actors narrate the seemingly-contradictory tension between the nationalist rhetoric that valorizes domesticating higher education, and the actual practices of funneling this money into foreign hands through institutional partnerships and hiring decisions. Participating in the same global economy of prestige, these new university projects can be considered as a ‘mirror’ (Foucault 1986) of the dual

trend toward corporatization and internationalization in Western universities. As mirrors, they actually give meaning to those very relations that they are understood to invert: the mirror's reflection is a 'sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent' (Foucault 1986, 24).

Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia are illiberal both in terms of their state-society and state-market relations, and are thus typically indexed as liberalism's prototypical other. Promoting some variant of state-led capitalism, ruling regimes in both countries can draw upon vast resource wealth to develop their countries economically. In true developmentalist fashion, their political economic systems are validated on the basis of promises of progress and economic opportunity. Political legitimacy thus stems largely from leaders' ability to produce growth and deliver the iconic markers of modernity. In this respect, developmentalist regimes are inherently outward-looking (Koch 2013). They are constantly drawing international comparisons, whereby they seek to demonstrate (to both foreign and domestic audiences) that their polities are 'world-class' and that they are legitimate actors in the modern, global statist system.

Yet a developmentalist regime alone does not explain Kazakhstan's and Saudi Arabia's recent move to invest heavily in developing globally-competitive, local, institutions of higher education. As this article illustrates, these projects are also intimately bound up with nation-building agendas, whereby citizens are to be made proud of their homeland, through promoting international prestige. Regardless of whether this is actually happening (the question being outside the scope of this paper), it is important to ask how planners legitimate these development agendas, and the costly educational projects in particular. This is because, as I illustrate here, the discursive practices mobilized in setting up places like Nazarbayev University and KAUST are important avenues of articulating and constructing geopolitical imaginaries – of the citizen-self, the state, and their place in the world. Indeed, as Sarah Amsler (2009, 1192) has noted, the choice of educational models are in fact 'choices about identity and geopolitical

economy as much as they are problems of pedagogy and administration. They are intellectual and emotional investments not just in a particular way of doing things, but also in whole ways of being in the world.' These investments are politically significant, not just in terms of how the state-society border is constructed and maintained, but also how authoritarian regimes more generally maintain their hold on positions of power.

Material for this article comes from qualitative research conducted in Kazakhstan (2010-2011) and the Gulf Arab states (2012-2013). The research in Kazakhstan was part of a larger dissertation project about Kazakhstan's reconfigured political geographies in the post-Soviet era, in which I employed formal and informal interviews (n≈150), focus groups (5 groups, n=36), participant observation, and textual analysis. For this case study in particular, I considered reports and promotional materials pertaining to the university projects, coming both from official university outlets, as well as governmental documents and official media coverage. In addition to extended ethnographic observations over the course of three field visits, I conducted interviews with variously ranked officials and administrators working at NU and the Centre for International Programs (CIP), which administers the country's foreign study scholarship program. While the focus groups were held in October 2010, the bulk of the interviews took place in July-August 2011. In the Gulf region, I conducted various site visits and informal interviews with faculty, administrators, and students in Qatar and the UAE in November 2012 and December 2013, and in Saudi Arabia in March 2013. Due to the exploratory nature of this ongoing work, the material for the Saudi case study focuses on elite discourses drawn from government and university reports and media reports. As in Kazakhstan, elite discourses are especially important in Saudi Arabia's highly-centralized political system. In both countries, tight restrictions on free political expression means that state-based actors maintain strict discursive dominance, meaning that they also strategically positioned to set the discursive playing field. By analyzing how planners adopt and rework global rhetorical frames in justifying their nationalization agendas, I stress how their agency must be



considered alongside broader geopolitical structures in understanding why planners have decided to invest in these elite university projects.

### **III. Education, nationalism, and the knowledge economy**

Scholars of nationalism have long highlighted the centrality of national education systems in (re)producing nationalist attachments and, thus, national selves (Bourdieu 1977; Durkheim 1956; Gellner 1983; Herb 2004; Hobsbawm 1990; Kaiser 2002; Mitchell 1988; Paasi 1996). Much of this work has been confined to state-based primary and secondary education, with significantly less attention given to nationalism in institutions of higher education. Instead, most of the interdisciplinary work on tertiary education tends to focus on its globalization. This literature has considered internationalization both in terms of institutional spatial diffusion through study abroad programs, branch campuses, and foreign partnerships and modeling (Amsler 2009; DeYoung 2010; Jöns and Hoyler 2013; Kane 2012; Mitchell 2003; Olds 2007; Reeves 2003; Rhoads and Torres 2006; Slaughter and Roades 2004; Thiem 2009; Vora 2014; Warren and Bell 2014), and in terms of student mobility and faculty composition (Brooks and Waters 2011; Findlay et al. 2012; Holloway and Jöns 2012; Holloway et al. 2012; Waters 2006a, 2006b, 2012). Falling in line with social science's fixation with neoliberalism of the past decade or more, much of this scholarship explains these transformations through the expansion of pro-market policies into the realm of academia. Meanwhile, the continued significance of nationalism and other political affinities is markedly underemphasized – and sometimes even actively negated with the dream of a deterritorialized, post-national world (e.g. Mitchell 2003).

Lisa Hoffman's (2006) analysis of 'patriotic professionalism' in China offers a notable counterpoint to this imaginary, in which public education systems are constructed as being under siege because of processes of neoliberalization, and the concomitant 'altered spatial relationship of individual states to new global economic regimes' (Mitchell 2003, 387). Hoffman illustrates how pro-market

transformations in China have actually been used to strengthen and reinforce nationalist attachments. Through a range of state-scale discourses and the more capillary mechanisms of family- and communally-based moral education, Chinese college graduates are taught 'to view employment (i.e., their labour power) as a means to develop themselves individually' (Hoffman 2006, 554), but also as a way to fulfill their patriotic duty and care for the homeland (Hoffman 2006, 563). Neoliberal and nationalist values are here powerfully fused as 'standards of respectability' (Hoffman 2006, 561), in which individuals are disciplined in a more capillary fashion than in the obviously top-down techniques of governing in the Maoist era. Of course, this sort of 'normalization' of society (Foucault 2007) is not limited to the case of China, but is a major product of modernist, state-based education systems, and the workings of hegemony more generally, in which 'every man is an educator' (Gramsci 2008, 265-266; see also Bourdieu 1977; Durkheim 1956; Gellner 1983).

Further, this conjunction of market-based rationalities with top-down statist agendas is characteristic of developmental states (Johnson 1999). In developmentalist thought, progress is constructed as the societal good that accompanies processes of modernization. As many scholars have illustrated, development discourses are frequently bound up with a fetishization of science and technology (e.g. Ferguson 1990; Hecht 2011; Jones 2010; Mitchell 2002). In such cases, technical prowess and scientific achievements are treated as markers of progress, becoming privileged sites of articulating the state's modernity. This is readily apparent in Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, where government planners have treated science and techno-development as the primary vehicle and yardstick for their modernization agendas. In developmentalist states, then, it might appear logical that decision-makers have promoted their techno-modernist visions through promoting knowledge-based economies. But with such wealth at their disposal, why should they choose to promote this over alternate development projects?

First and foremost, it is in vogue globally. The knowledge economy discourse is largely promoted by various international consultancies, which have an exceptionally strong influence over policy development in the Gulf Arab states, and increasingly so in the resource-rich Central Asian states. Of course, this does not mean that elites passively accept the rhetoric. Rather, they actively work with it to promote their own agendas. Regional leaders around the Gulf and Central Asia have deployed the idea of promoting a knowledge-based economy as a way to stave off international criticism about the dangers of being resource-dependent, and to demonstrate their willingness to diversify away from resource economies in preparation for ‘post-oil futures.’ This is not to say that they do not completely believe in this necessity; indeed policy-makers around the Gulf are acutely aware that oil supplies will not last forever. However, these longer-term prospects do not parallel the temporality of political careers in either case country, where personalistic rather than institutionalized structures of power prevail (Jones 2010; Junisbai 2010). But due to various cultural, political, and social constraints, these elites cannot freely pillage their country’s resource-wealth. The important question for now is, how do they seek to maximize profits without jeopardizing their political position?

The knowledge economy discourse turns out to be quite useful in this regard. This is seen in large part through the way that educational spending in both of the case countries is spent on stereotypically rentier-state projects: construction. Multi-billion-dollar mega developments like KAUST and Princess Noura University in Saudi Arabia, and in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University and the EXPO-2017 buildings that are set to be gifted to NU after the event, provide exceptional opportunities for distributing resource rents and shoring up patronage networks amongst elite circles. Space and lack of transparency do not permit a full discussion of these dynamics here, but suffice it to say that knowledge economy agendas are used strategically in these education projects, in part – but by no means exclusively – as a rhetorical cover for typical ‘resource-cursed’ economic practices. But even though there is a large degree of capitalist economic logic that goes into justifying and materializing these

educational reforms, an exclusively economic reading would overlook the ways that economic motives are strategically enabled by narratives of nationalism.

#### **IV. Domesticating higher education in Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev University**

In 1997, Kazakhstan's capital was relocated from the Soviet-era capital, Almaty, to Astana. Developing this run-down Soviet-era town into a grandiose new capital city rapidly became the favorite project of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has been in power since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991: 'Astana's development has become the brightest page in the annals of an independent Kazakhstan' (Nazarbayev 2010, 52). One important dimension of this project, the president notes, is the development of new scientific centers, industrial parks, and educational institutions 'with the most modern facilities and the most qualified professors' (Nazarbayev 2010, 53). As if taking seriously Le Maître's vision of an ideal capital city, which is to be 'the site of academies, since they must give birth to the sciences and truth that is to be disseminated in the rest of the country' (Foucault 2007, 14), elites in Astana have actively pursued an agenda to turn Astana into an educational hub and a 'high-tech city' (Neef 2006, 150) – with the government even developing a program to repatriate emigrant scientists to that end (RFE/RL 2010a).

The government's highest profile education project was announced in 2006 during one of President Nazarbayev's yearly speeches, in which he called for the establishment of a 'prestigious international university to create a unique academic environment' (Nazarbayev 2006). Four years later, this new university, was opened in Astana under the name of 'Nursultan Nazarbayev University' (NU), notably as a special corporate entity outside the laws of the Ministry of Education. Still very much a work in progress, NU has planned to have degree programs in engineering, natural sciences, and medicine, and is eventually supposed to accommodate 20,000 students and teachers (RFE/RL 2010b). It is also intended to become a world-class institution, and official descriptions consistently highlight its

conformity to 'international' standards (NU 2011). This effectively means the standards of elite Western universities, illustrated for example by bureaucrats' descriptions of the university's goal to become 'an Oxford or Harvard of Central Asia' (Myers 2006).<sup>1</sup>

This internationalist orientation notwithstanding, among the university's seven guiding principles identified on its website is 'Love of Country' – defined as serving 'the good of Kazakhstani society in order to build a modern prospering state' (NU 2011). The avenue to this prosperity is defined in techno-modernist terms, and the institution was initially envisioned as an explicitly technical university. Astana Master Plan director, Amanzhol Chikanayev, explains:

We need to develop scientific and technical abilities in the city. We should project to the world an image that Astana is not just nice buildings and good service, but that it is a city where new technological innovations and advances are made. Kazakhstan should not just make macaroni for internal consumption, but brand names known all over the world. The reason this has not yet happened is because it takes a lot of money and technical skills, which we still need to develop. This is why we need to prepare cadres, for example through international study and at the new Nazarbayev University. (author's interview 2011)

With specialties said to be 'determined by the priorities of the Kazakh economy,' NU's stated mission is to 'prepare the best technical and engineering specialists for the industries already developed in Kazakhstan' (NU 2011).

While NU was opened to great fanfare in 2010, Nazarbayev's government was extremely quiet about another major transformation that accompanied this opening: the complete elimination of funding for the undergraduate 'Bolashak' international scholarship program. When Bolashak started in 1994, it was to become a prestigious program to send the country's best and brightest to study at foreign universities. Seen as a way to acquire the human capital needed for the country's ambitious development plans (including the knowhow and language skills to do business internationally), students were selected in a highly competitive process, including a Kazakh language exam. After studying abroad,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a contested title: on American University's similar claim in Kyrgyzstan, see Reeves 2003.

they were all required to return to Kazakhstan to work for at least 5 years. From 1994 to 2010, about 15,000 students were sent abroad (Abazov 2011).

Although funding still remains for graduate study after the 2010 decision to cut Bolashak's undergraduate program, the bulk of the students that went abroad were studying for Bachelor's degrees. Many young Kazakhstanis and their families – especially those in the middle- to upper-class echelons of society – had come to expect the scholarship as a governmental obligation. So while Nazarbayev's administrative apparatus sought to minimize publicity about these developments, popular conversations were abuzz with speculations that the money was diverted to Nazarbayev University. Among supporters, a common rationale, used to explain this speculation, was that the government had invested a great deal of money in the NU project, and that it needed all the support it could get. Because it is still new, and lacks the prestige of foreign universities, the broad expectation was that Kazakhstan's most promising students would invariably choose to study abroad if they had a choice between Bolashak and NU. In this narrative, there is a clear (if indirect) articulation of Kazakhstan's educational system as inferior to those found abroad, and especially in the West. However, this is also narrated as something the government is positioned to remedy through the NU project, and it is often accompanied with a critique of the fact that Kazakhstan's government has paid millions of dollars to foreign institutions to educate the Bolashak students, whereas this money would be better invested at home.

Another rationalization of the program changes underscored the lack of patriotic sentiments of the Bolashak students, once they returned to the country. For example, in my 2010 focus groups with students at Kazakhstan National University (KazNu), participants consistently highlighted how ungrateful many of the Bolashak students are: they simply take the government's money and do not want to come back to Kazakhstan afterward. This storyline emphasized the idea that students going abroad lose patriotic sentiments and gratitude to the state – which they were expected to have for receiving so much at the government's expense. With a marked tone of Schadenfreude, the discussions invariably

turned to the fact that those students must come back – or else their families will lose their homes, be forced to reimburse the government for all the costs, or face other serious repercussions (enforcement is patchy, but this is not widely known or discussed by the general population). NU, by contrast, in the approving words of one focus group participant, ‘will educate (*vospityvat*)<sup>2</sup> patriots’ (FG4P9). Regardless of whether it stems from jealousy or patriotic fervor, this narrative works to valorize patriotism and articulates a norm, whereby citizens are expected to be grateful for the state’s generous giving. Importantly, university education in these geopolitical imaginaries is understood as a key site for delivering this state benevolence.

These rationalizations are striking for the manner in which they define home and the nation as opposed to an outside world of foreign study, where students lose their commitments to the homeland. The NU project simultaneously engages and acts on this imaginary, by seeking to bring together the inside and the outside. Despite all the rhetorical framing of it as a national project, Nazarbayev University clearly stretches the conceptual and material boundaries of domestic space through its deep engagement with the international. Elite education – long understood to be exclusively located elsewhere – is treated as a luxury to be domesticated in Kazakhstan through the NU project. This is not just through the idea of a prestigious university, but through Western bodies and norms (Vora 2014).

This blurring of the inside and outside is both activated and validated in the rhetoric of national development and international standards used to describe the establishment of NU. As noted above, the university has been described as striving to become ‘an Oxford or Harvard of Central Asia’ (Myers 2006). In practice, the global standards involved in such an aspiration are those of the West, and the project has been explicitly modeled on the US higher educational system (NU 2011; author’s interviews). Furthermore, it has been realized through an international partnership strategy, in which partner universities have been enlisted to assist with developing academic programs, curricula, teaching

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<sup>2</sup> This word is much more active than ‘educate’ suggests, and is more literally translated as ‘to raise.’ The implication of the statement is that the university will actively *inculcate* these students with patriotism.

materials, laboratories, as well as recruiting, selecting, and training deans, faculty, and staff (NU 2011). NU students also have the opportunity to study abroad at the partner universities – for up to two years in some programs (NU 2011). Nevertheless, the image of NU being physically located in Kazakhstan gives the impression of education being brought home. This is exemplified in the words of the focus group participant quoted above, who argued that NU will ‘educate’ patriots. Even though most observers were well aware that the faculty is almost exclusively comprised of foreign professors, this did not detract from the overall sense that it was a national project – but actually strengthened their impression of its prestige.<sup>3</sup>

Because of Kazakhstan’s less-than-free environment for political expression, critiques of the project were largely muted, but some informal interview respondents suggested that the money would be better spent reforming the existing university system. In general, though, the same people who praised the NU project and asserted its merits over the Bolashak alternative (it now appearing as the university’s counterpart in an either/or imaginary) also tended to simultaneously view it as an elitist and exclusionary project. In the focus groups, critical outlooks of the project’s largesse became evident in participants’ reactions to the annual tuition. At US\$18 thousand a year, it was seen as accessible only to the elite. In the words of one focus group participant: ‘It seems that simple people (*prostyye lyudi*) won’t study at this university, that only big-shots (*krutyye*) will study there’ (FG3P6). People in the group contested this, citing the merit-based entrance criteria. But according to a widespread rumor or fact (I personally have no data to evaluate which it is), the merit criteria only applies to those who are accepted on scholarship – and that anyone could enroll if they pay the full price tag. What an economics-centered reading of this scene would miss is the swelling of national pride in the room when pictures of the beautiful NU facilities were put on display to the focus group participants. Even with this exclusivist and privatized governing technology, ordinary citizens still found themselves feeling

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<sup>3</sup> However, since these focus groups were conducted in 2010, press coverage has increasingly carried critiques about the perceived excessive benefits accruing to foreigners from the NU project.



extremely proud of their young country and its ability to domesticate the luxury of elite education. In the next section, we see some of the very same dynamics unfolding about 5000 km away in the Gulf.

## **V. Saudi Arabia's higher education revolution**

Although they have received less attention from international commentators, the higher education developments in Saudi Arabia are also among the best funded in the Persian Gulf region. Whereas other Gulf countries have long embraced the neoliberal rhetoric of an internationally-oriented development strategy, Saudi development policies have – rhetorically, at least – been somewhat more inward-looking. However, the reformist government of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz has targeted the education sector for extensive investment and internationalization, setting in motion what might justifiably be called an education revolution since 2006. Part of this has included sending students abroad, but in recent years, there is a growing emphasis on bringing foreign education home, evidenced through such projects as the recently-opened King Abdullah University of Science Technology (KAUST) north of Jeddah. As with the Kazakhstani case, although there is a large degree of neoliberal economic logic that goes into justifying and materializing these educational reforms, an exclusively economic reading would overlook the ways that neoliberal narratives are co-constituted with the narratives of nationalism. As I illustrate in this section, heightened nationalist attachments are important motivators and outcomes of these projects.

Saudi Arabia's elites have drawn heavily from the rhetorical toolkit of developmentalism in justifying educational reforms since 2006. It is important to ask, though, what was behind planners' increased interest in instrumentalizing higher education in their efforts to modernize the country's economy and increase its global competitiveness? Observers have attributed the shift to the government's reaction to the dozens of Wahhabi militant attacks on foreigners that racked the country for several years, beginning in May 2003 (McEvers 2009). Grappling with these assaults, which injured

hundreds and left 90 civilians and 74 Saudi policemen dead, the country's leadership allegedly pinpointed the country's education system as a source of extremist, anti-foreign thinking that was in need of reform (McEvers 2009). It is difficult to know the specifics under such a closed regime, but the subsequent policies do lend a degree of credence to this account. Another reading could be the government's commitment to its nationalization agenda – or framed differently, its effort to co-opt nationalist rhetoric that is used to critique the monarchy's allocation of the country's resource wealth. In any case, the nationalist and forward-looking modernization narratives pervade the official justifications of these higher education reform efforts.

Starting in 2006, the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program provided for Saudi students to study abroad at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Like Kazakhstan's Bolashak program, funding is said to be awarded on the basis of 'the needs of government ministries, national corporations and the private sector,' with the goal of 'qualifying Saudi youth to take an active role in development in all fields in government and private sectors' (MOHE 2013). The stated vision is thus: 'To prepare distinguished generations for a knowledge society built upon a knowledge-based economy' (MOHE 2013). And the program mission is:

To prepare and qualify Saudi human resources in an effective manner so that they will be able to compete on an international level in the labor market and the different areas of scientific research, and thereby become an important source of supply of highly qualified individuals for Saudi universities as well as the government and private sectors. (MOHE 2013)

Since the program's inception, the government has invested US \$5 billion and it now funds about 90% of all Saudi students studying abroad. It is currently set to continue until 2020 (OFE 2013).

From 2006, the government also launched its Tatweer ('reform') agenda, the King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Public Education Development Project, with US \$2.4 billion allocated to redefine the country's higher education system (McEvers 2009). Similar to the NU project in Kazakhstan, the program is run as an independent corporation, and is set outside the laws of the Ministry of Education – the idea

in this case being to facilitate the development of curricula less focused on religion and capable of graduating 'savvy, job-ready Saudis' (McEvers 2009). In the subsequent years, the number of public universities in the country rose from 8 to 24, and in the most recent five-year development plan, passed in 2010, the Council of Ministers approved an additional \$200-billion to expand access to schools, universities, vocational training (Lindsey 2010). Not only do these new investments have domestic audiences in mind, they also factor strategically into King Abdullah's efforts to promote a more positive image of the country internationally:

His focus on science and technology, and his use of oil wealth to build up local expertise, which the king hopes will ultimately help the kingdom diversify its economy, establish a foundation for a future after oil, and make Saudi Arabia internationally competitive in science, are signals that these areas should figure prominently in how both Saudis and outsiders think about the kingdom. (Jones 2010, 242)

The project is apparently meeting with success, if the country's 2013 annual budget is any indication. Marking a 21% increase from the previous year, 25% (US \$54.4 billion) of total governmental spending is allocated to education and training (SUSRIS 2013).<sup>4</sup> In addition to financing school construction and refurbishment, funds are earmarked for 15 new colleges and the continued development of facilities at newly-opened universities. US \$3.6 billion is also allocated for the development of an 'electronic university,' while US \$5.76 billion is to fund students studying abroad (SUSRIS 2013). In this most recent spending breakdown, it is apparent that, although still an enormous sum, funding for the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program is now dwarfed by domestic spending on education.

With the recent explosion of new institutions of higher education within Saudi Arabia, relations with foreign institutions have not exactly been eliminated, but reworked – domesticated in a similar fashion to the case of Kazakhstan. This is evident in the way that new universities have sought out partnership and consultant relations with their counterparts abroad, with upwards of 300 such agreements having been signed by 2010 (Lindsey 2010). Though each of these partnerships is unique,

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<sup>4</sup> Compare these figures, for example, to the US Department of Education's 2013 annual budget of US \$69.8 billion.

based on my observations of two such partnerships at my own university, the Saudi partners clearly see them as a means to gain access to essential know-how and administrative support as they seek to develop their campuses and more specialized programs. Indeed, these partnerships might more accurately be described as consultancies. Similar to developments in Kazakhstan, the foreign is largely used as a way to mark these projects as world-class caliber – and more ultimately, to support domestic state- and nation-building projects.

In 2010, one of the most high-profile new university projects was opened 90 km north of Jeddah: the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). Personally donating its US \$10-billion initial endowment, King Abdullah expressed his wish that it ‘become one of the world’s great institutions of research’ (quoted in Lindsey 2010).<sup>5</sup> As part of the broader grammar of the technomodernist development, it offers degrees only in engineering, and its three-part mission is to ‘integrate research and education, leverage the interconnectedness of science and engineering, and work to catalyze the diversification of the Saudi economy through economic and technology development’ (KAUST 2013). This technical focus has been treated as a remedy for the fact that ‘too many’ Saudi students pursue degrees in the social sciences and humanities, leaving them unprepared for the ‘fields of study related to the job market’ – this according to Mohammad Al-Ohali, Deputy Minister of Educational Affairs (quoted in Lindsey 2010).

The concern with the preparedness of Saudis for the job market logically draws extensively from the stereotypically neoliberal notion of self-entrepreneurship, but it does so through the language of nationalism. This is seen not just in the developmentalist tropes about qualifying Saudi youth to ‘take an active role’ in their country’s economic progress, but also in the way that these domestic ‘needs’ stem from an increasing perception of over-reliance on foreign labor and foreign demand for oil. By developing Saudi Arabia as a knowledge-based economy, King Abdullah’s reforms have sought to get

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<sup>5</sup> Compare this to the 2012 figures for the top 5 individual university endowments in the United States: Harvard, \$30.4 billion; Yale, \$19.3 billion; Stanford, \$17 billion; Princeton, \$17 billion; MIT, \$10.2 billion.

citizens invested in the idea of a self-reliant national homeland, which has not hitherto prevailed. This idea of national sovereignty, it must be reiterated, is not just about creating the warm and fuzzy feelings of patriotic love of the homeland, but, *as everywhere in the world*, it is deeply connected to the regime's own political calculus. As Jones (2010, 242) explains: 'While the new university has figured and will figure prominently as a symbol for the new and more open Saudi nation, its basic political role fits squarely within Abdullah's push to marginalize the clergy, undermine religious extremism, and reconsolidate the authority of the ruling family.' And as elsewhere in the world, national independence and self-reliance tends to take the shape of a curiously heavy reliance on the foreign: in order to materialize the project of reshaping Saudi Arabia's international image and domestic political economic configuration around a techno-modernist, knowledge-based ideal, it has been imperative to rely on international expertise.

As a major research institution being developed in today's highly globalized environment of higher education, KAUST had to be conceptualized as internationally-oriented to be competitive, and indeed it 'was created to bring foreign scientists and experts and to support their work' (Jones 2010, 242). Even the students are mostly international, with estimates suggesting that only 8% of the first cohort of KAUST students were Saudi (Lindsey 2010). Even the most explicitly nationalist component in the university's vision statement (of three total) – the value of 'rootedness' – is international in its articulation:

KAUST supports the Kingdom's aspirations and contributes to Saudi society and economic development. At KAUST, rootedness will involve commitment of both Saudi and international talent to work together, as well as leveraging global partnerships in pursuit of excellence and in support of the aspirations of the Kingdom. (KAUST 2013)

This relationship – or rather, this boundary-drawing project – between the local and the foreign, as in many places in the world, is a point of serious contention in Saudi Arabian politics: 'how fast to move to reform the educational system, and how much to rely on foreign expertise and the private sector, are complicated questions for the kingdom's rulers' (Lindsey 2010).

Furthermore, this internationalist language is not gender-neutral. While KAUST is the first co-educational institution in Saudi Arabia, its global orientation is not paralleled in the conceptualization of the country's women-only institutions targeted to Saudi students (i.e. rather than a more international student body), such as Princess Noura University (PNU). Originally opened in 1970 as the Riyadh University for Women, PNU was relocated to a stunning, 800-ha compound near the airport in 2012 (see [pnuproject.com](http://pnuproject.com)), reflecting an extraordinary investment on the part of the government. Yet the university's full mission statement<sup>6</sup> touches only tangentially upon the knowledge economy and international competitiveness, instead stressing a more localized set of values. The first three university goals, for example, are to:

1. Promote the faith of royalty to Allah and then to the country.
2. Build a generation that has a sense of belonging to the country, sticks to the identity and national system.
3. Work on building personality of the girl fully to carry out her duty in life as a wife, mother, scientist and worker by providing her with knowledge and required skills to tackle whatever comes her way. (PNU 2012)

And the first stated mission is to 'root the role of the university in the acquisition of knowledge, its transformation, adaptation, dissemination and management in conformity with societal values and cultures' (PNU 2012). Clearly, the role articulated for this institution and the women who are to make it a reality is one that is much more inward-looking. As women have been treated in nationalist imaginaries all over the world (e.g. Mayer 2000; McDowell 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997), they are here understood to contribute to national development through their role as reproducers of the national system and societal values. They are to 'stick to the identity and national system,' rather than transgressing its boundaries through engagement with the wider global community. This is not to say that the women of PNU necessarily absorb this reasoning about themselves and, in fact, the many women I met over the course of my visit in March 2013 were quite internationally-minded and well-traveled. But the scripted role of the university indicates the rhetorical boundaries of neoliberal and

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<sup>6</sup> This is no longer available online, but is available from the author upon request.

globalizing rhetoric, as it pushes up against deeply political concerns about gendered national identity and the role of women in Saudi society. And yet, as the Saudi state planners and their counterparts around the Gulf deepen their nationalization agendas, the small population of their citizenries means that the increasing incorporation of women into the labor force is essential to the success of their effort to reduce their countries' heavy reliance of migrant labor. They have set in motion processes enabling more Gulf women, who have not traditionally attended college in large numbers, to professionalize and work outside the home. Situated at the confluence of these simultaneously nationalist and internationalist discourses, these new university projects promise to be at the center of highly political discussions about the place of women in Gulf societies and rapidly changing gender norms.<sup>7</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion**

By reframing discussions about the globalization of higher education in terms of a geopolitics of higher education, I have sought to move beyond simplistic assumptions about the rise of a post-national global politics. The cases of NU and KAUST are illuminating for the very fact that, as nationalist projects, they seemingly run counter to hegemonic trends toward the neoliberalization of the university. Although I have argued that we might see the cases in Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabian not as representative of the so-called corporatization of the university today, they can productively be seen as mirrors of these changes. So even though governmental legitimacy in both countries is staked in neither democratic norms nor free-market capitalism, elites are nonetheless competing in a world in which these political economic systems are globally-hegemonic. This means that they must legitimate their policies and practices in a geopolitical context in which they are considered deviant – but which they have no interest in changing. Even as decision-makers rework many dimensions of the contemporary push to corporatize and internationalize the university, they are necessarily competing within the

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<sup>7</sup> The nuances of these discussions are outside the scope of this paper, but a subject of my ongoing research in the GCC.

globalized system of higher education. But they are not simply reacting to this system: they are also drawing on the agencies of entrepreneurial subjects from abroad and at home, and in turn, consolidating and reconstituting their own authoritarian hold on power. It is for this reason that I have argued that the prevailing political economic systems in illiberal states such as Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan are not exceptions set outside of the hegemonic liberal system, but that they are intimately bound up with it.

From Central Asia to the Gulf, rulers and ordinary citizens alike have picked up the knowledge-based economy rhetoric and worked it into their own statist and nationalist political projects, thereby producing a unique set of geopolitical affinities and subjectivities – and this has largely taken the shape of fusing it with the conceptual and rhetorical frames of statist nationalism. While the idea of a technical national university is in no way new or unique (they are found the world over), what makes the projects I have considered here exceptional is how they are articulated together with a uniquely outward-looking understanding of domestic space. But one of the most fascinating dimensions of these projects is that, while elites seem to see the university as a mechanism of control – i.e. as a way to inculcate the youth in nationalist values – what they do not seem to realize is that by domesticating elite education, the projects have just as much potential to bolster, as to overflow the political arrangements they are intended to materialize. Following these developments in the future will provide exceptional insights into how citizens opportunistically work with statist projects and how, in doing so, they subjectivize and govern themselves in unique and contextual ways (Olds and Thrift 2005). These developments also have the power to illustrate how ostensibly global ideas are differently incorporated into broader regimes of government. And here, there is great opportunity for further comparative work beyond these case studies with East Asia, where similar developments have been underway at, for example, the National University of Singapore for much longer.



So even though elite planners are certainly focused on the immediate benefits from developing these elite higher education projects, they will have substantive and long-lasting effects on local political economies, rationalities of the self, as well as nationalist and geopolitical imaginaries. Although the issue of what is actually being taught (and learned) in these new institutions is also highly relevant to understanding the geopolitics of these institutions, it falls outside the scope of this short article, but points to an important line of inquiry for geographers and other social scientists. Further research about these inter/nationalizing university projects across Asia would benefit immensely from a close analysis of the subjectivizing practices and geopolitical imaginaries that are arising through the new opportunities (intellectual, financial, political, etc.) they have opened up – not just on the part of students and domestic observers, but also on the part of the foreign faculty and partnering administrators abroad, who participate in bringing them to fruition.

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