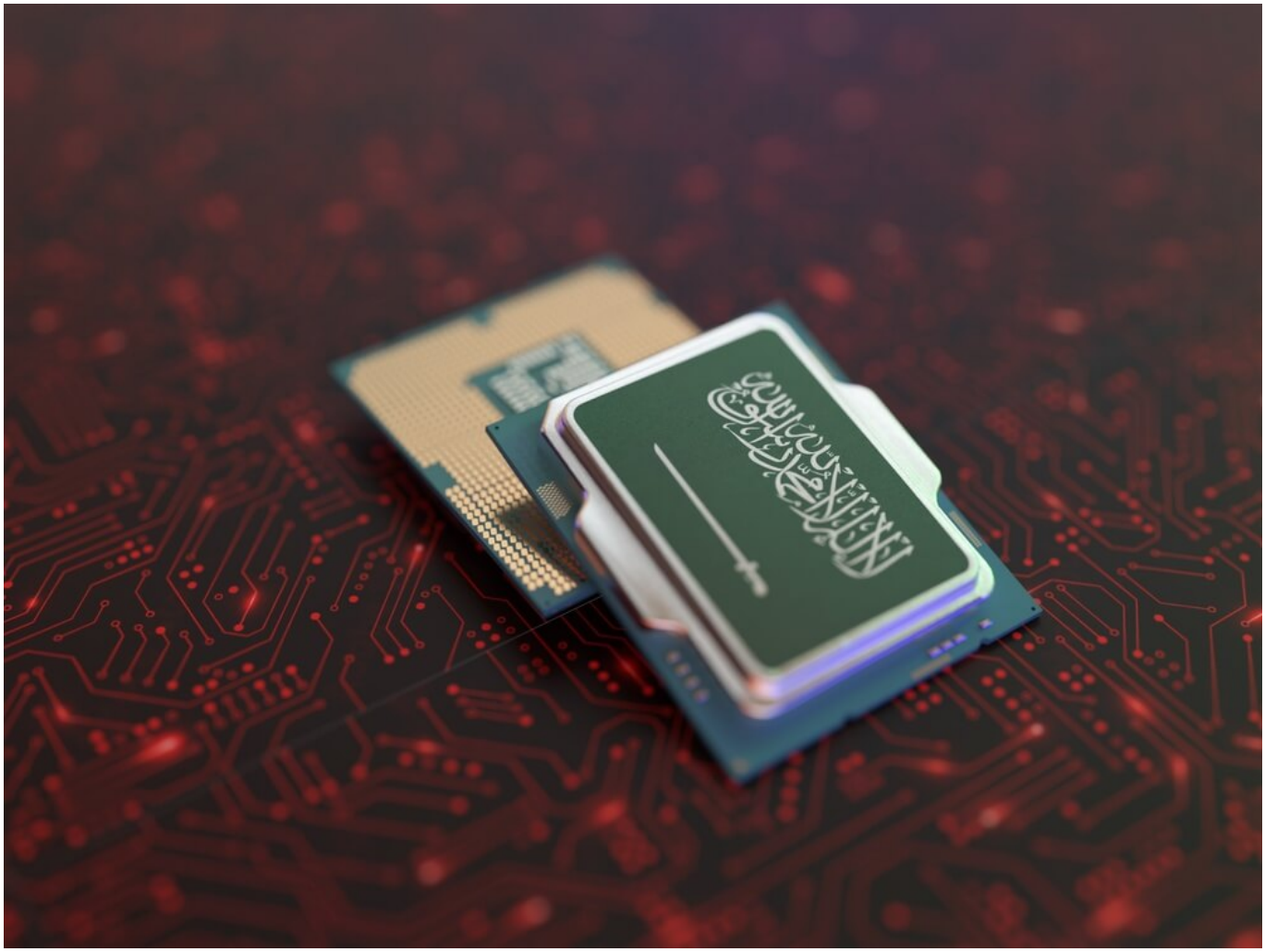
Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Elise Quevedo

The Kingdom waits for no one – competing in the global AI economy



My first experience in the Middle East was in 2012. Fourteen years later, I have watched the region move through several phases of transformation. In 2026, the ambition, capital and speed of execution are operating at a different scale.

The fifth edition of LEAP 2026 in Riyadh closed with almost $15 billion in announced investments, partnerships and agreements across artificial intelligence, data centres, cloud computing, technology manufacturing and venture capital. But where is the money going?

The Middle East is shifting from being a consumer of global technology to building technology infrastructure. And for investors, it is a highly appealing market.

The HUMAIN effect

HUMAIN was arguably the company at the centre of LEAP 2026. The PIF-backed AI company is building an increasingly broad proposition across compute, AI models, data infrastructure and applications.

Its partnerships with global technology companies are giving Saudi Arabia access to the underlying infrastructure required to develop and deploy AI at scale.

The most tangible example came from HUMAIN, AMD and Cisco. The companies announced that AMD Instinct MI355X GPU infrastructure is already live in Saudi Arabia, supported by AMD EPYC CPUs and Cisco Silicon One networking.

> The infrastructure is already operational. That changes the conversation from announcements to deployment

The systems are serving HUMAIN customers and enabling GPU-as-a-service for training and inference workloads.

The next phase is considerably larger. The companies plan to deploy up to 250MW of AI infrastructure from 2027, with the broader joint venture targeting up to 1GW by 2030.

The planned expansion will use AMD's next-generation Instinct MI400 Series, EPYC CPUs, and ROCm software alongside Cisco networking infrastructure.

The infrastructure is already operational. That changes the conversation from announcements to deployment.

AWS enters the next phase

AWS is another important piece of the puzzle. Amazon Web Services confirmed at LEAP that its first cloud infrastructure region in Saudi Arabia is on track to launch in December 2026. The company expects the project to involve more than $5.3 billion in planned investment.

AWS is also expanding its relationship with HUMAIN, with up to 50MW of capacity planned for Saudi Arabia's first AI Zone by 2028.

> Saudi Arabia wants to connect cloud infrastructure with locally developed models, applications, and data platforms

The partnership goes beyond physical infrastructure. HUMAIN's Arabic-language ALLAM model is expected to become available through Amazon Bedrock, while HUMAIN Fabric will be offered through AWS Marketplace.

Saudi Arabia wants to connect cloud infrastructure with locally developed models, applications, and data platforms. For AWS, Saudi Arabia represents a long-term cloud opportunity.

For Saudi Arabia, the arrival of global hyperscalers strengthens the foundation for a broader digital economy.

The infrastructure investment cycle

One of the strongest takeaways from LEAP 2026 was how broad the infrastructure buildout has become.

Al Moammar Information Systems announced $1.2 billion to expand its data-centre footprint to 192MW. NHC Innovation announced $800 million for Khuzam Digital Valley, with capacity expected to reach 65MW by 2033. Microsoft also confirmed that its Saudi Azure region is expected to become available in November 2026.

> The opportunity extends well beyond the companies selling AI models

HUMAIN and DataVolt are also developing an AI-ready data-centre project at Oxagon, part of NEOM. The initial phase involves approximately 100MW of capacity, within a larger planned development.

AI infrastructure creates a much wider economic chain. It needs semiconductors, networking equipment, optical connectivity, power, cooling, data centres, cloud platforms, software and specialist engineering. The opportunity therefore extends well beyond the companies selling AI models. It reaches deep into the technology supply chain.

Why the Middle East is moving so fast

Western markets tend to explain the region's technology expansion primarily through capital. Capital is certainly an advantage. But it is not the complete explanation.

The more interesting factor is the willingness to coordinate capital, infrastructure, policy, and execution around a long-term national objective.

Saudi Arabia can make decisions on energy, land, telecommunications, data centres, and technology policy within a far more integrated framework than many mature markets, and that creates speed. It also enables building ahead of demand.

> Rather than waiting for demand and then building capacity, the Kingdom is working to create the capacity that attracts demand

AI is a great example. The industry is struggling globally with constraints on power availability, data-centre capacity, and access to advanced compute.

Saudi Arabia is addressing these constraints from a position of abundant energy resources, larger pools of capital, and a willingness to invest in infrastructure before the full demand curve appears. It is a different investment model.

Rather than waiting for demand and then building capacity, the Kingdom is working to create the capacity that attracts demand.

From technology consumer to technology producer

Can Saudi Arabia turn infrastructure into intellectual property and companies? Yes, it can.

At LEAP, AMD, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, and the Digital Cooperation Organization established an open developer ecosystem that combines developer training and AI governance initiatives with access to AMD's AI platforms and ROCm software.

> HUMAIN's ALLAM model is being positioned around Arabic-language capabilities and regional requirements

The objective is clear. Compute without developers has limited economic value. Saudi Arabia still needs engineers, founders, researchers, and product teams who can use this infrastructure to build businesses. The same logic applies to Arabic AI.

HUMAIN's ALLAM model is being positioned around Arabic-language capabilities and regional requirements. Adobe is also expanding its relationship with MCIT and HUMAIN through a commitment worth more than $4 billion, including access to AI-powered creative tools for more than 27 million eligible citizens and residents.

These initiatives point to an effort to build local technological capability.

What investors should watch next

For investors, LEAP 2026 creates several areas worth monitoring.

First, execution. Large announcements are easy to measure. Operational data centres, paying customers, and recurring revenue are harder to measure. The next phase of the Saudi technology story will be judged by delivery.

Infrastructure usage comes in second. Utilisation will eventually determine the economics, but the quantity of AI compute implemented is key. Can Saudi Arabia draw in enough business, government, and foreign labour to sustain the level of investment?

> Saudi Arabia's geographic position gives it the potential to connect Europe, Asia and Africa

Third, the local technology ecosystem. HUMAIN is important because it sits between infrastructure and applications. If Saudi Arabia can develop companies around the compute being deployed, the economic multiplier becomes considerably larger.

Fourth, the supply chain. The beneficiaries will not be limited to GPU manufacturers. Networking, optical connectivity, cooling, power systems, data-centre construction, cloud platforms and semiconductor infrastructure all stand to benefit from sustained capacity expansion.

Finally, the international dimension. Saudi Arabia's geographic position gives it the potential to connect Europe, Asia and Africa through cloud, data-centre and digital infrastructure.

Fourteen years later

When I first experienced the Middle East in 2012, the region's technology ambitions were already visible. But the scale was different.

The conversation has shifted from whether Saudi Arabia can become a technology hub to how quickly it can build the infrastructure, companies, and talent required to compete in the global AI economy.

LEAP 2026 showed change and future direction.

The conversation has shifted from whether Saudi Arabia can become a technology hub to how quickly it can build the infrastructure, companies, and talent required to compete in the global AI economy

AWS is committing billions to cloud infrastructure. AMD and Cisco are putting production AI compute into operation with HUMAIN. Microsoft is expanding its cloud

footprint. Data-centre developers are building at hundreds of megawatts.

Adobe is targeting millions of users. And Saudi companies are increasingly positioned not only as customers of global technology firms, but as partners shaping how those technologies are deployed.

There will be execution risks. Not every announcement will translate into the expected commercial outcome. Large-scale infrastructure projects take time, and capital expenditure alone does not guarantee competitive technology companies.

But dismissing the opportunity because of these risks would be a mistake.

The Middle East is building with a level of ambition that deserves considerably more attention from global investors.

After fourteen years of watching the region evolve, here is one fact: the region has capital, infrastructure, and ambition. We still underestimate the power of Middle Eastern minds. The Kingdom waits for no one.