LOGIC

INSIGHTS

GOVERNING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

Edition 1

2

Moving Beyond Static Planning Through Foresight

The defining characteristic of today's global environment is not disruption itself, but the accelerating pace at which disruptions compound and spread. What was once a sequence of isolated shocks has become a state of **continuous, overlapping volatility,** cutting across economic, technological, geopolitical, and social systems. Governments designed for a world of relative predictability are now being asked to operate in one that increasingly defies it.

The result is a more demanding operating landscape, where the external environment has become an active force in national planning, capable of reshaping priorities, timelines, and institutional readiness as conditions evolve.

This changing risk environment was underscored since 2024 when the **World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report** identified the top global risks—from AI-driven misinformation and extreme weather to geoeconomic tensions and cyber insecurity—as deeply interconnected. Their defining feature is not just their severity, but their capacity to reinforce one another, creating a fundamentally different risk landscape from the one that shaped most existing planning models. By 2026, that warning reads less like a forward-looking diagnosis and more like a description of the operating environment itself. Several of these risks are already materializing more visibly in the operating environment, particularly as **geoeconomic confrontation ranked first as the risk most likely to trigger a material global crisis** in the near term, with **18%** of respondents selecting it[1], while cyber risk and environmental disruption remained prominent across the short and long-term horizon:

US$11 billion losses	in Suez Canal revenues and foreign-exchange inflows between December 2023 and July 2025 due to Red Sea shipping disruptions and reduced maritime traffic.
US$368 billion in global losses	caused by natural disasters in 2024, with weather-related events accounting for 93% of total losses[2]; losses in the first half of 2025 alone reached approximately US$131 billion.
64% of organizations	now factor geopolitically motivated cyberattacks into their risk mitigation and resilience strategies amid rising geopolitical tensions[3].

The standard architecture of public sector planning—multi-year national strategies, annual budget cycles, sector-specific KPIs, and periodic policy reviews—was built to optimize performance toward a defined, expected future. It assumes predictable direction, incremental change, and scheduled adjustment. In a volatile environment, these assumptions turn into a structural vulnerability.

What remains particularly challenging is not a lack of awareness of uncertainty, but a limited institutional ability to translate that uncertainty into actionable foresight before disruptions materialize. Planning systems are inherently designed to contain uncertainty in service of execution. In doing so, they often work against the adaptive, multi-scenario thinking that today's environment demands.

This tension is especially pronounced for governments pursuing large-scale national transformation agendas. The more ambitious the vision, the longer its execution horizon and the greater its exposure to shifts in global conditions, technological trajectories, and demand dynamics that cannot be fully anticipated at inception.

> **"Vision defines direction, but it does not ensure continuity because direction under evolving conditions requires a capability that traditional planning does not provide; a capability anchored in future foresight.**

[1] Global Risks Report 2026: Geopolitical and Economic Risks Rise in New Age of Competition – World Economic Forum
[2] Climate change is showing its claws: The world is getting hotter, resulting in severe hurricanes, thunderstorms and floods – Munich RE
[3] Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2026 – World Economic Forum

I. Vision vs. Foresight

From Defining the Future to Navigating It

Vision and foresight serve **distinct but complementary functions.** They operate on different logics and require different institutional capabilities, but their value lies in how they work together.

Vision

Vision defines a **desired future state.** It is **aspirational and directional,** setting the destination, articulating ambition, and providing the framework for national strategies, sector plans, and resource allocation. It also helps align national resources toward a shared direction by giving institutions a clearer basis for prioritization, sequencing, and coordination. Initiatives such as **Saudi Vision 2030** and **UAE Centennial 2071** reflect this role: coherent expressions of transformation across economic, social, and institutional dimensions. In practice, a clear national vision helps reduce fragmentation, align institutions around shared priorities, and give longer-term coherence to strategy and execution.

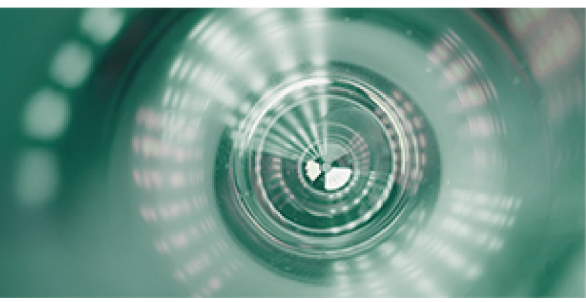
Foresight

Strategic foresight, by contrast, is the **ongoing ability to perceive, interpret, and respond to emerging futures.** Rather than defining a preferred destination, its role is to examine the uncertainty surrounding it: to challenge the assumptions underlying a vision, identify where they may break down, look beyond the parameters within which the vision was originally defined, and build the **adaptive capacity** to respond when conditions evolve. It is a way to improve present-day decision quality by making more of the future visible before it becomes irreversible.

This distinction becomes most evident in execution. A national vision translates into strategy based on a defined set of assumptions about how the world will evolve. While these assumptions are rigorously developed at the outset, they often become **less visible once embedded in plans,** treated as fixed conditions rather than variables.

This rigidity is a common driver of strategy failure when external conditions shift, **especially in large-scale national visions** that take years to develop, carry substantial political and institutional weight, and often require decades to realize. In that context, revisiting foundational assumptions underlying the vision becomes difficult and, in many cases, institutionally disincentivized. Adaptation is therefore more likely to occur within targets, timelines, or implementation mechanisms than at the level of the underlying strategic logic itself.

> **Foresight addresses this by keeping assumptions explicit and continuously tested. It does not replace strategy, but provides the early-warning infrastructure around it.**



Through horizon scanning, scenario development, and stress testing, foresight establishes **a continuous feedback mechanism** between the external environment and internal planning, allowing decision-makers to detect shifts early and adapt before they escalate into crises.

Vision		Foresight
Where do we want to go?	Primary Question	What could happen on the way?
Aspirational, directional	Nature	Analytical, adaptive
Strategy, targets, programs	Output	Scenarios, signals, stress tests
Projection from the present	Time Orientation	Exploration of uncertain futures
Direction without adaptability	Limitation	Analysis without purpose

> The relationship between vision and foresight is therefore complementary, not competitive. Countries that have integrated both—most notably Singapore, through the Centre for Strategic Futures operating within the Prime Minister's Office—demonstrate how foresight can be embedded at the center of government and linked directly to decision-making.

For governments in the Gulf, where vision-led transformation is both highly ambitious and highly exposed to external shifts, this distinction is operationally critical.

II. Strategic Foresight and National Transformations Across the Middle East

Where Vision Meets a Shifting Operating Environment

Few regions illustrate the importance of distinguishing vision and foresight as clearly as the GCC. Within it, **Saudi Arabia and the UAE** stand as defining cases. Both nations are pursuing large-scale, capital-intensive, multi-sector transformation agendas while trade routes, capital conditions, technology trajectories, and geopolitical alignments remain unusually fluid.

A. Structural Shifts Reshaping Execution

The external environment through which Gulf transformation agendas must now be executed is shifting in ways that are materially affecting the assumptions on which long-horizon strategies depend.

The **energy transition** is among the most consequential of these shifts. In 2023, **global clean energy investment reached USD 1.7 trillion,** surpassing fossil fuel investment at around **USD 1 trillion.** For economies where fiscal revenues and diversification timelines remain linked to hydrocarbon demand, this introduces a **compression risk** as the window within which hydrocarbon-generated fiscal strength can finance diversification may become narrower, more cyclical, and more exposed to changes in technology, regulation, and investor preferences than earlier planning assumptions allowed for.

Global clean energy investment reached
USD 1.7 trillion

fossil fuel investment
USD 1 trillion

22%
jobs will undergo structural transformation by 2030 [4]

170 million
new roles created

The **technological** dimension further compounds this pressure. AI is rapidly reshaping sectors central to diversification—financial services, logistics, healthcare, education, and professional services. **The Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects that 22% of jobs will undergo structural transformation by 2030[4], with 170 million new roles created and 92 million displaced.** For nations building new sectors from the ground up while also attempting to reshape labor-market capabilities and education systems, the time between investment and disruption is shortening, creating real execution risk.

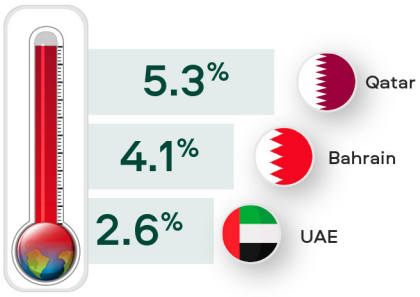
Geopolitical volatility adds another layer of complexity. The Gulf sits at the intersection of multiple pressures:

- Regional security dynamics
- US-China technological decoupling
- Shifts in global trade and supply chain structures
- Reconfiguration of energy geopolitics

The volatility created by these forces is already translating into direct regional consequences, with Red Sea and Gulf countries recording an average trade-volume decline of about **8%** relative to pre-crisis levels[5], as they directly shape **capital flows, investment confidence, partnership structures, and the operating environment for foreign direct investment.**

[4] Future of Jobs Report 2025 – World Economic Forum
[5] The Deepening Red Sea Shipping Crisis: Impacts and Outlook – World Bank

Working Hours Lost Due to Heat Stress



Another immediate disruption is extreme heat. In recent Gulf-focused analysis, **Qatar is projected to lose 5.3% of total working hours from heat stress, followed by Bahrain at 4.1%, and the UAE at 2.6% by 2030[6].** Transformation depends heavily on construction, infrastructure rollout, logistics, urban operations, and outdoor service delivery. Heat therefore does not act only as an environmental stressor; it directly affects labor productivity, project timelines and operating costs.

The tightening **global competition for skilled talent** is also becoming more strategically relevant. Estimates put the global shortfall at **85 million unfilled jobs by 2030,** equivalent to around **USD 8.5 trillion** in unrealized annual revenues. For Gulf economies simultaneously expanding into AI, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, logistics, finance, and tourism, this is an execution constraint. The pace at which new sectors mature increasingly depends on whether countries can attract, retain, and continuously reskill specialized talent faster than competitors facing the same shortages.

A further disruption is the changing **cost and complexity of insuring large-scale assets and projects.** Middle East outlooks note **premium rate adjustments for natural-catastrophe-exposed portfolios in the UAE,** even as construction, tourism, and technology expansion create new insurance demand across property and engineering lines. For transformation programs built around giga-projects, new districts, logistics corridors, industrial sites, and tourism infrastructure, the questions is not simply whether assets can be built, but under what insurance, financing, and risk-sharing conditions they remain bankable and investable over time.

What this context ultimately demands is the institutional capacity to continuously stress-test these visions, to detect early when assumptions begin to diverge from reality and to adapt with the speed and confidence required.

B. The Scale of The Transformation

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are both executing large-scale, capital-intensive, long-horizon transformations:

رؤية VISION 2030
المملكة العربية السعودية
KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Vision 2030 represents a fundamental restructuring of the national economy away from hydrocarbon dependence toward a diversified, knowledge-based, tourism-driven, and industrially productive model, delivered through **multi-billion-dollar** projects across tourism, entertainment, manufacturing, logistics, and renewable energy.

مئوية الإمارات 2071
UAE CENTENNIAL 2071
The World's Leading Nation أفضل دولة في العالم

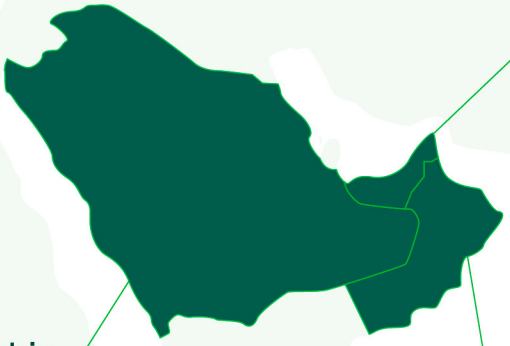
UAE Centennial 2071, similarly, anchors the UAE's ambition to position itself as a **global hub for innovation, capital,** and **talent,** supported by a broad ecosystem of sectoral strategies spanning AI, space, advanced manufacturing, and financial services.

That scale is what makes the surrounding disruptions more consequential. As a national transformation grows in scale and expands across an extended time horizon; it becomes more exposed it is to changes that lie outside the original boundaries of the plan. Transformations of this kind depend on long-duration capital deployment, sequencing across sectors, sustained investor confidence, cross-border partnerships, and institutional coordination over many years.

[6] Building A Heat Resilience Roadmap for the Gulf Region – ORF Middle East

> **When the external environment becomes more volatile, the challenge is no longer only to maintain ambition, but to preserve execution continuity while the assumptions surrounding demand, capital, technology, talent, and geopolitical stability continue to shift.**

Therefore, what requires closer examination is not the ambition of these visions, but the external environment through which they must be executed and the extent to which it is evolving beyond the assumptions embedded at the time of design.



Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia presents a different but equally relevant pattern. Its transformation model has not revolved around a branded foresight architecture in the same way as the UAE, but **Vision 2030** implementation has increasingly shown the characteristics of adaptive execution: targets have been reached early, others revised upward, and delivery has continued through recalibration rather than being stalled by changing conditions. In 2024, **93% of performance indicators** across national programs and strategies were either met, exceeded, or on track against phased targets , showing that adaptation can be built into delivery systems even as sequencing and sector conditions evolve.

Saudi Arabia is also starting to formalize anticipatory capacity in technology and innovation. **The Research, Development and Innovation Authority** has established a foresight and future-trends stream tracking emerging technologies and sectoral outlooks, which indicates movement toward a more structured link between technological change and strategic planning.

UAE

In the **UAE,** this logic has been made explicit. The **Future Foresight Strategy** is designed to embed foresight into strategic planning, reinforced through the **Dubai Future Foundation**, which has developed visible capability in horizon scanning, trend analysis, strategic foresight training, and government future-readiness programs. The value of this architecture lies in creating a repeatable way to move weak signals, shocks, and emerging shifts into planning before they become delivery problems.

That broader future-readiness posture helps explain why the UAE has continued to deepen its position in frontier sectors even as the technological environment has become more politically conditional. In 2025, it advanced new technology arrangements with the United States, moved forward with AI infrastructure projects such as **Stargate UAE,** and expanded partnerships including the **Nvidia Technology Innovation Institute lab in Abu Dhabi.** These developments suggest that governments combining long-horizon ambition with structured future-oriented capability are often better placed to keep building through disruption rather than pause in response to it.

Oman

A similar recognition is beginning to emerge in **Oman.** Its **Vision 2040** places explicit emphasis on **future-readiness, long-term planning, and institutional modernization,** positioning Oman as a regional example of efforts to align forward-looking governance more closely with national strategy.

III. Where Traditional Planning Models Fall Short

Most public sector transformation programs operate through a common governance logic:

This model reflects decades of refinement in public administration, delivering **strong execution discipline, resource efficiency,** and **institutional alignment.**

At its core, however, it is built on a fundamental premise that assumes a **sufficient degree of continuity between present conditions and future execution,** or at least that emerging disruption can be identified and managed within existing review and revision cycles:

Targets are typically set against baseline projections and medium-term planning assumptions, with governments translating strategic priorities into sector plans, fiscal envelopes, and expected delivery trajectories.

Budget systems then align resources to those expected conditions through annual budgets and, in many countries, medium-term expenditure frameworks designed to improve predictability and discipline over several years.

Performance frameworks reinforce that structure by attaching KPIs, milestones, and reporting requirements to predefined priorities, allowing governments to monitor whether implementation is progressing as intended.

This does not mean governments assume the future will unfold as an extension of the present but that planning systems still tend to rely on a level of stability, predictability, and bounded change that becomes harder to sustain as volatility increases.

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Within this structure, failure rarely stems from weak execution, but from assumptions that become progressively less valid as external conditions shift.

> **“Misinformation and disinformation have been identified among the most severe interconnected risks shaping the coming years[8], which means that the failure of one assumption can rapidly undermine several parts of a strategy at once.**

[7] Vision 2030 Annual Report 2024
[8] The Global Risks Report 2024 – World Economic Forum

In the public sector, this vulnerability is structurally embedded in how governments plan and operate, most notably through three features:

Budget Rigidity

Budgeting processes depend on **fixed estimates of future conditions,** and once established, institutional incentives discourage revisiting them. The **IMF** has consistently identified budget rigidity as one of the primary constraints on governments' ability to respond adaptively to changing conditions, noting that fiscal frameworks designed for stability actively inhibit the dynamic resource reallocation that uncertainty-rich environments demand.

Target Lock-In

National transformation programs rely on **KPI frameworks tied to predefined targets,** which can create institutional pressure to sustain delivery against established priorities even as conditions evolve. In practice, these systems do not necessarily prevent reassessment altogether, but while adaptation may occur at the level of targets, timelines, or project scope, the broader assumptions and strategic logic underpinning the transformation are less frequently revisited.

Absence of Continuous Sensing

Planning systems typically gather information **intensively at the outset and at periodic review points,** but lack a structured capability to continuously track external change. As a result, early signals often fail to translate into **timely, decision-relevant insight.** The is often described as the **impact gap:** the structural disconnect between the availability of foresight-relevant information and its actual integration into decision-making processes.

Taken together, these features produce a governance model that is inherently backward-looking, even when presented as forward-looking.
The consequences are visible in how large-scale public programs encounter difficulty.

> **“Failures rarely result from intent or resources alone, but from a growing misalignment between the conditions a program was designed for and the environment it ultimately faces during implementation.**

What is missing is not more planning, but a different kind of planning—one that operates continuously rather than periodically, keeps underlying assumptions under active scrutiny, applies structured scenario analysis to anticipate a range of possible futures, and embeds adaptive pathways into governance. In such a model, responses to change are deliberate and calibrated, rather than reactive and improvised.

From Strategic Ambition to Adaptive Governance

The challenge facing governments today is therefore not a lack of ambition, nor a failure of planning in principle. It is that planning systems designed to convert relative stability into execution are now operating in an environment where **volatility is more interconnected, more persistent, and less easily absorbed within established cycles of review and adjustment.** Under those conditions, the distance between vision and delivery is shaped not only by the quality of strategy, but by whether institutions can recognize when the assumptions underpinning that strategy are beginning to shift.

This raises a more demanding question than how to define direction alone. The deeper issue is **how to sustain strategic direction when the environment through which it must be delivered becomes harder to predict and less forgiving of rigidity.**

Seen in this light, the value of foresight becomes more visible, and it is more clearly understood as a **governance capability.** The following article moves the discussion towards that capability: how foresight strengthens resilience, where its value comes from, and what it takes to embed it into government in ways that shape decisions rather than merely sit beside them.

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