

ARAB NEWS

Rewriting the script: Saudi Arabia's role in cinema

As the 81st Venice Film Festival unfolds in full splendor after last year's Hollywood strikes, Saudi Arabia continues to strengthen its presence on the global film stage. This year's lineup includes four films supported by the Red Sea Film Festival, furthering the Kingdom's growing influence in international cinema. This momentum, coming on the heels of the groundbreaking achievement of "Norah," the first Saudi film selected for Cannes' Un Certain Regard category, signals the beginning of a shift in how the Kingdom is shaping and being represented in global cinema.

In a world where media shapes our understanding, films do more than entertain. They challenge perceptions, spark conversations, and foster a deeper understanding of diverse cultures and experiences. While traditional Western portrayals too often reduce Saudi culture and society to stereotypes, a new wave of filmmakers is offering a fresh perspective, giving depth to the realities behind the headlines and illuminating the Kingdom's rich diversity.

Since the Kingdom reopened its cinemas in 2018, it has become the largest cinema market in MENA — and its film industry has become one of the region's most dynamic. Substantial investment as part of a broader social and cultural transformation under Saudi Vision 2030 has led to the establishment of a vibrant film ecosystem that supports the emergence of talented writers, directors and producers, and expands both the quality and range of films produced. This support extends beyond the Kingdom's borders, positioning Saudi Arabia as a key player in global cinema.

The film "Norah," directed by Tawfik Al-Zaidi, is a prime example of this support, with its screenplay winning a fund award from the Saudi Film Commission's Daw Film Competition and receiving a post-production grant from the Red Sea Film Foundation. The Red Sea Foundation has also supported more than 250 projects from development to distribution, and this year is set to provide \$14 million in grants via the Red Sea Fund. Among the films backed by

the Red Sea Film Foundation this year at Venice are “Seeking Haven For Mr. Rambo” by Khaled Mansour and “Aicha” by Mehdi Barsaoui. While these are not Saudi films, their inclusion in the Biennale highlights Saudi Arabia’s growing role in reshaping global cinema.

Expanding Saudi influence beyond borders

Indeed, the region’s film festivals have become critical platforms for expanding the reach of Saudi films beyond the region. Films shown at the Red Sea Festival attract attention from critics, audiences and major festivals such as Cannes, Toronto and Venice. Screenings or accolades on the international awards circuit are crucial for securing distribution in international markets.

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The dark comedy “Mandoob” (Night Courier) — another recipient of support from the Red Sea Foundation — is a notable example. The film was one of the first to sell out at the Toronto Film Festival, has since been picked up by Metis Films and MPM Premium for distribution in European markets, and continues to gain international traction, now showing in cinemas across the UK and Ireland.

Whether produced within the Kingdom or supported abroad, Saudi-backed productions are reshaping perceptions by reflecting the complex social and cultural dynamics of their society. “Mandoob,” Ali Al-Kalthami’s first feature-length film, is both a comedy and a social commentary. Its exploration of the lesser-seen urban aspects of Riyadh challenges preconceptions of Saudi society and provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of life in the Kingdom.

Outlook

Gaining widespread distribution, especially in Europe and North America, remains a challenge for Saudi films. However, as more films generate international recognition, this could change. The increasing interest from international film financiers, distributors and producers in films from the region, as seen at the Red Sea International Film Festival, demonstrates the potential for growth. The festival has become a hub for those seeking new talents and stories from the Middle East. This growing interest is driven by the unique perspectives offered rather than mere efforts to attract Hollywood talent or PR buzz.

The continued commitment to both growing the film industry and nurturing local talent is a key factor in the success of, and demand for, films made in the region. Similarly, reduced spending by major international studios and streaming platforms is driving industry leaders to seek out MENA-made films. Streaming giants like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ have the reach to promote and distribute these films to millions worldwide — and are increasingly looking for MENA content.

Production spending in the Middle East has surged by 46.3 percent, driven by local platforms like Shahid VIP, which has committed an additional \$100 million per year to original content. This growth highlights the burgeoning potential of the MENA film industry. Netflix, for example, has significantly expanded its Arabic content catalog, making these films available in more than 190 countries. In 2023, Netflix generated \$33.7 billion in revenue, with 44 percent coming from the US and Canada, underscoring the importance of its international markets. “Perfect Strangers,” the first Arabic Netflix original film, quickly became one of the most-watched non-English films on the platform, viewed by millions within weeks of its release.

These trends are clear signs of growing momentum and influence. Through the lens of film, viewers across the globe can access, appreciate, and understand the diverse cultural landscapes and social dynamics of the region. More viewers worldwide can experience the region’s rich narratives than ever before. As filmmakers continue to create works that challenge stereotypes and provoke reflection, the question arises: How can we, as a global audience and cultural advocates, better support Saudi filmmakers in bringing their authentic stories to the world stage?

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