



Credits: Saudi Research & Marketing Group and The Independent

Long satisfied to attempt to dominate pan-Arab media and battle it out with Qatar's state-owned Al Jazeera television network, Saudi Arabia has now set its hegemonic sights on influencing the media landscape of the non-Arabic speaking greater Middle East.

In the wake of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's concentration last year of control of Saudi-owned pan-Arab media in an anti-corruption power and asset grab, [Saudi Research and Marketing Group \(SRMG\) this week announced a tie-up with Britain's Independent news website](#) to launch services in Urdu, Turkish, Farsi and Arabic.

The announcement provided no details of the business model or whether and, if so, how the SRMG-owned, independent-branded websites would become commercially viable. That may not be an issue from the Independent's perspective, given that the deal amounts to the British publication licensing its brand and content to a Saudi partner.

The bulk of the content of the new websites is slated to be produced by SRMG journalists in London, Islamabad, Istanbul and New York, with the Independent contributing only translated articles from its English-language website.

The sites, operated out of Riyadh and Dubai, would produce "highest-quality, free-thinking, independent news, insight and analysis on global affairs and local events," the Independent said.

SRMG publishes the English-language Arab News and Arabic-language Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, newspapers operating within the constraints of tight Saudi censorship that do not challenge Saudi policies.

SRMG was chaired until he recently was appointed a minister of culture by Prince Bader bin Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Farhan Al Saud. An unknown member of the Saudi ruling family, Prince Bader made headlines last year when he paid a record \$450m for a Leonardo da Vinci painting of Jesus Christ, [allegedly as a proxy bidder for Prince Mohammed](#).

Sultan Muhammad Abuljadayel, a Saudi banker with no track record in media acquisitions,

last year [bought a 30 percent stake in the Independent](#). An executive of NCB Capital, a subsidiary of government-controlled National Commercial Bank, Mr Abuljadayel said at the time he was investing on his personal account.



British Prime Minister Theresa May with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia/ Al Jazeera

[A cache of Saudi diplomatic cables](#) leaked in 2015 documented a pattern of Saudi chequebook diplomacy that aimed to [buy positive coverage of the kingdom by European, Middle Eastern and African media](#) who were encouraged to put “learned” Saudi guests on talk shows and counter “media hostile to the kingdom.”

Cables by the late Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al Faisal, suggested that Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat, and another Saudi-owned pan-Arab daily, Al Hayat, refrain from criticizing Lebanon and Russia.

Saudi funding ranged from [the bailout of financially troubled media to donations, the purchase of thousands of subscriptions, and all-expenses-paid trips to the kingdom](#). It was often driven by Saudi Arabia’s covert public diplomacy war with Iran.

Saudi Arabia’s near monopoly on staid pan-Arabic media was broken in 1996 with the launch of Al Jazeera and its free-wheeling, hard-hitting reporting and talk shows. Al Jazeera’s disruption of conservative, Arab state broadcasting prompted Waleed bin Ibrahim Al Ibrahim, a brother in law of the late King Fahd, to launch Al Arabiya as an antidote.

The rise of Al Jazeera cemented a realization in the kingdom that it needed to expand from print media into broadcasting. The need for broadcasting was initially driven home six years earlier when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Saudi authorities banned Saudi media from reporting the invasion only to discover on the third day that Saudis were getting their news from foreign media outlets, among which CNN.

The Saudi-Qatari [battle for control of the airwaves escalated in the run-up to this year’s World Cup](#) in Russia. With Al Jazeera and beIN, the network’s sports franchise, blocked in the kingdom as part of the 13-month-old Saudi-UAE-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar, Saudi Arabia initially turning a blind eye to beOutQ, a bootlegging operation operating out of the kingdom that used a satellite that is co-owned by the Saudi

government.

[Threatened by FIFA with punitive action](#), Saudi Arabia began cracking down on beOutQ and said it [welcomed legal action in the kingdom](#) being initiated by the world soccer body. At the same time, Saudi Arabia explored ways to challenge beIN's broadcasting rights.

The choice of languages for the Independent websites suggests that SRMG sees the deal as strengthening its brand while supporting the kingdom in its battles with Qatar and Iran and quest for regional hegemony.

The launch of a Farsi website targets the kingdom's arch-rival Iran. Leaving politics aside, Iranians, confronted with an economic crisis that is being exasperated by harsh US sanctions, are unlikely to subscribe or advertise on the website. The same is true for Saudi businesses in the absence of diplomatic relations and given Saudi backing for the sanctions.

The Independent's Turkish website will have to compete in a heavily populated media landscape that has largely been muzzled by President Recep Tayeb Erdogan. The website's significance lies in the fact that Turkey supports Qatar in the spat that pits the Gulf state against Saudi Arabia and its allies, maintains close ties to Iran, and challenges Saudi regional ambitions in Palestine as well as the Horn of Africa.

In many ways, Urdu-speaking Pakistan, one of the world's most populous Muslim nations that borders on Iran, has long supported the kingdom militarily, and is home to the world's largest Shia Muslim majority, could prove to be the most lucrative element of SRMG's tie-up with the Independent.

In contrast to Turkey, Saudi Arabia enjoys empathy in major segments of Pakistan's population, hosts a sizeable Pakistani community, has strong support among the country's religious scholars as well as ties to influential militants whom the military is seeking to ease into mainstream politics, and funds religious media outlets.

At the bottom line, the SRMG-Independent tie-up may be for the kingdom less about business and more about soft power.

"A channel is a very economical way to influence people. Bang for your buck, it's much cheaper than guns. [It is about controlling the discourse, and for Saudis about being in charge](#)," said Hugh Miles, author of *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. Mr Miles' analysis applies as much to broadcasting as it does to online media.

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