

## Kuwaiti producer and Egyptian film director cooperate on documentary film set in the Sinai

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Scene from the documentary film *Beit Sha'ar* by Iman Kamel. The Arabic-language title for the film may be translated as 'house of hair' and refers to the traditional home of the nomads that is made of goat wool. [Image: Ute Freund]

When Kuwaiti filmmaker Talal Al-Muhanna was invited to participate in an exclusive workshop for Arab film producers at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2008, he did not expect that this networking event would eventually lead to him being invited to produce a new project: in this case by the Egyptian film artist Iman Kamel – a graduate of the previous year's workshop. At the time of their initial meeting in Dubai, Al-Muhanna was busy promoting a script for German-Iranian director Teymour Tehrani - a story about a young Iranian immigrant living in the U.K. entitled *The Bridegroom*. In it, the young man's father tries to persuade his son to return to Iran to get married but the young man falters since he has grown accustomed to life in England and prefers to marry an English girl instead. Says Al-Muhanna:

"I liked the story because the issue of arranged marriage was turned by the writers to focus on the dilemma of the groom-to-be rather than the bride." "Similarly, in many Arab societies", Al-Muhanna suggests, "the pressure for people to conform to certain lifestyles, to meet their family's expectations and to follow society's traditions is equally strong. So anyone seeking a measure of independence or freedom frequently has to struggle with having to make decisions about how he wishes to live his life versus what his family would like him to do and what society dictates."

So perhaps it is no surprise that the debut feature film by writer-director Iman Kamel – for which Al-Muhanna acts as a producer - has some similar themes: “Beit Sha’ar is a documentary film about a Bedouin woman named Selema Gabali from the Al-Gabalia tribe in Egypt’s Sinai. It is a remarkable story because she was the first woman of her tribe to go to school, to get a job, to marry outside of her tribe and to create employment opportunities for other women in her district as well.” Since Gabali accomplished these acts against the wishes of almost her entire family and, especially, the men of her tribe, she is something of a pioneer for women’s rights in the region.

Filmmaker Kamel became acquainted with weaver and social entrepreneur Gabali during her repeated visits to the Sinai over the course of several years. Kamel points out: “Though Bedouin society is very welcoming and protective to those in its circle, it does not easily assimilate strangers into its midst.” When asked why this is, Kamel responds by saying that the Bedouins have endured a long history of harassment by the Egyptian government and that the Egyptian people are also generally prejudiced against them. “So, Bedouins naturally mistrust the Egyptian authorities and people - especially those from the cities, like me.”

In Kamel’s case, however, the Bedouin were very welcoming with her: “When I first met with the Bedouin as an Egyptian woman I was enchanted by how much they welcomed me, allowing me to take an active part in their lives.” In the film, we watch as filmmaker Kamel interacts with the Bedouin girls, teaching them English and learning about their lives. We also see how the protagonist Selema Gabali has organised the women of her tribe to produce handicrafts which can then be sold to tourists. “This income is very important for them,” Kamel insists, adding, “Initially, the men of the tribe were against the women working but slowly, slowly some of them came to realise that this was a positive contribution to their society as a whole.”

Indeed, life is difficult in this corner of the Sinai where tensions due to regional conflicts and fears of terrorism disrupt the local people’s way of life. Military checkpoints are common and travel restrictions on the Bedouin act to prevent them from developing their livelihoods fully. Around the town of St. Catherine where the Al-Gabalia live, infrastructure is poor: ramshackle buildings have been built without structural plans or licenses, the local hospital has no doctors and the sole schoolteacher is unqualified. “Fortunately,” says Kamel, “the European Union has recognised that the area represents a unique nature reserve and supports tourism there so that the indigenous people can have a better life.”

In addition to Al-Muhanna, another producer, Hala Galal in Cairo, is also assisting Ms. Kamel in the final stages of the film’s production. “This is especially valuable,” says the Kuwait-based producer, “since Galal’s organisation Semat Cairo is known for its promotion and distribution of Egyptian independent films.”

The two producers will now join forces to promote Kamel's film at upcoming regional film festivals in Abu Dhabi, Doha and Dubai.

Reflecting on the outcome of her filming experiences amongst the Al-Gabalia in the Sinai, writer-director Kamel says: "What I came to realise during the making of this film is how two women with totally different backgrounds – me coming from Cairo and living an urban existence and Selema coming from the desert and living a rural existence - can sometimes have so many things in common." In a broader sense, Kamel's visits to the Sinai connect cultures that would appear to be alien to one another. And her project has accomplished this on a very personal level - directly between the filmmaker herself and the weaver Gabali: "It's the idea of positively bridging this cultural divide within Egypt which I think is worth sharing in these troubled times," emphasizes Kamel.

Currently, *Beit Sha'ar* is being edited in Berlin by long-time Kamel collaborator Klaudia Begic in preparation for an exclusive preview screening in late September at the San Sebastian Film Festival in Spain. One of only three projects selected for the festival's annual *Cinema-in-Motion* preview screenings, the festival will introduce the work-in-progress film to sales agents and distributors and also make the film eligible to receive prizes for its completion.

"The fact that the film has been invited to San Sebastian is a good sign," says Al-Muhanna, who has been advising director Iman Kamel on how to develop the project further. "It means that representatives from the international film industry recognise the quality of the project and appreciate the human interest element of the story." If the presentation in Spain goes well, the project will improve its chances to receive the final amount of financing required for it to be completed.

On the subject of financing, Kamel says: "Producing an independent film in the Middle East is a difficult and time-consuming process as there is often little financial support available to filmmakers to work on their projects and ideas." What this translates to in reality is that production teams are often donating their time and services for free in order that films get completed. Al-Muhanna agrees: "Film financing is complex and a challenging issue for 'indie' Arab filmmakers like Iman." However, hope is on the horizon for independent film artists in the region since new initiatives – particularly in Abu Dhabi and Dubai – are creating the infrastructure required for the GCC to have a localized functioning film industry.

One of these initiatives is the Dubai Film Connection, a regional film co-production market that aims to stimulate the growth of film production in the Arab world. The DFC does this by bringing international and Arab film professionals together to collaborate on the realisation of around 15 ongoing projects each year. Since *Beit Sha'ar* has been submitted for the 2009 line-up, the team hope their project will be accepted for consideration this year: "With sufficient funding, we could complete this film by the end of 2010," says Al-Muhanna, adding wryly, "another global financial melt-down notwithstanding of course..."