

## Case Study: *Son of Babylon* Assembling the Babylonian Puzzle

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Photos: Lars Borges



Photo (left to right): **Mohamed Al-Daradji** (director), **Amra Bakšić Čamo** (moderator), **Isabelle Stead** (producer, Human Film, UK), **Raphaël Berdugo** (sales agent, Roissy Films, France)

From idea through to final delivery, from Leeds to Baghdad the producers fought four years to bring *Son of Babylon* (Berlinale *Panorama* 2010) to life. The team talked about their successfully completed odyssey. And how, after many rejections and drawbacks from funds and potential financiers, eventually one supporter after the other (Iraq, UK, France, the Netherlands, Palestine, UAE, Egypt, USA/Jordan) came on board and how even the smallest financial help made a difference.

**Amra Bakšić Čamo - moderator:** *Son of Babylon* has been a very difficult co-production. When I heard it's a co-production between so many countries, I first thought that what they mainly did for five years, was signing contracts - as I thought they did it as a standard European or international co-production. But they found their own way. Actually they signed most of the contracts at the very end. They will explain to us how they did it. I would love Isabelle to start, because Mohamed of course, as a director, will talk a lot, but I would love you to tell us how you came across Mohamed as a director and then about the project.



**Isabelle Stead - producer Human Film:** I guess you could compare Mohamed to the Iraqi Rossellini. He does things very off the cuff. He likes to work with non-professional actors. And I met him whilst I was doing my master's at Leeds Metropolitan Film School. We were working there and we both came from the film industry. I came from Hollywood, Mohamed from the Dutch film industry.

We were both a little bit jaded about the stories and projects that we'd been working on. Mohamed had just finished making *Ahlaam*. We both had a collective vision of the type of stories that we wanted to tell. Obviously Mohamed is from Iraq and he is very passionate about telling stories from Iraq and from the Iraqi perspective, as opposed to the American perspective. That was something that really interested me.

*Ahlaam* was his first film and as we started working on a documentary called *War, Love, God and Madness*, I started to see a change in Mohamed's filmmaking. That was something really exciting. With some directors you don't always see that growth and there was such a dramatic growth in his work that when he came with the idea of *Son of Babylon*, which was originally entitled *Um Hussein*, I was gripped by the story. It was a mother searching for her son and this could be any mother in any country from around the world, making it universal. So, although the idea was a small concept, it had a high-concept value for me as a producer. Maybe Mohamed can talk about where the story came from.

**Mohamed Al Daradji - director:** It is amazing to be in Berlin, because when I started with this project five years ago, I never thought I would sit here and talk about my co-production. When I started my first film, nobody wanted to work with me, they thought I was crazy to make a film in Iraq, inside Iraq during the war.

When I succeeded with my first film I thought my second film would be easy to make, I worked between Europe and Iraq, and so it should have been easier for me. I came up with the idea in 2003, after the invasion. I had finished my master's degree in the UK and was making films. I went to Iraq to do my first film called *Ahlaam*. I was walking in the street and at the café, on the street, I heard through the radio the news coming from Babylon: a mass grave was discovered around Babylon. I thought about my aunt. My aunt lost her son - his name is Ali - during the Iraq-Iran war, and she never found him. I remembered her, when she was crying when we had birthdays, or weddings, or happiness, she always remembered and cried about Ali. As a child, I was always asking why she was crying, what was behind her crying, because I had no idea at the time.

I came with the idea of a mother with her grandson looking for her son who has been missing during the war. Then I decided to develop it, and it became not about an Arabic mother, from where I come from, Arabic Iraq, from Baghdad, but a Kurdish mother that made it a lot more exciting, more vivid.

**Amra:** Isabelle, can you start from the beginning, from the first year?

**Isabelle:** In the development phase, as Mohamed said... we thought: "Ok, we have this great idea! It's going to be super easy." So we intended naively to go in production the following year. And Mohamed thought: "Yeah I'll do what I did with *Ahlaam*, I'll write the script and we'll go into production!"

We both knew there was a different expectation this time, that he wasn't making the first Iraqi film. This was going to be his second film and he wouldn't be judged on making a film from Iraq, he would be judged on making *a* film regardless from where it came from. So we knew we had to come to it with something else.



When we started in development, we went to our local screen agency and I asked for some development funding. They asked: "How is this a Yorkshire film?" So I racked my brains and thought: "I'll get back to you on that." So we decided to develop it a little bit more.

Although this is a backward way of how we came to the funding, Mohamed was selected for the Sundance lab that takes place in Jordan - it's a lab in the desert with the Bedouin people where Arabic film makers get to go back to basics with the story idea.

As soon as he came back from that, he received an invitation to go to Sundance in Utah where he would meet with the top Hollywood script advisors who would take a look at the script. As soon as we got Sundance on board - the project was under Sundance's umbrella - everybody suddenly started going: "Ok, what's this film about?"

We went back to our local screen agency. By this point we had attached Antonia Bird as our executive producer, who is a well renowned British director. She said: "You're not a known producer in the UK, so let me walk you through the door and they will know that this project has value".

We went into Screen Yorkshire. They then said this time: "Ok, we can find a way to make this work. We will give you some development money. You have to submit your financial plan, your budget, the first draft of the script and we will give you some notes."

As this started to happen we then found a way into the UK Film Council. By this point we'd already been applying for over eighteen months to the UK Film Council who still had no

recollection of our application. Then, Emma Clarke at the New Cinema Fund took a look. As soon as she read it, she called me up and said: “Ok you guys, you definitely have something here, we just need to figure out how we can make it work. Come down to London and we’ll start having meetings on the script development”. Again, the development of the script was a big part of us getting the funding because suddenly our little Iraqi film started to take on an international meaning. It started getting a universal appeal. The western influence definitely had an effect on that.

We were able to go through the process with the development fund. It wasn’t easy. As many of you know, England is renowned for being bureaucratic and we had to submit a lot of paper work. The development fund came into place. At the same point we’d started working with Rashid Masharawi, whom Mohamed had met on a trip whilst promoting his other film *Ahlaam*. Rashid created a network for us. He worked with a producer in France called Dimitri de Clercq. Although we wanted to work directly with Rashid, because by this point we knew him quite well, he wasn’t able to access the funding directly from France, because, although he’s based there, he wasn’t known for being a producer there. So he was the one that pitched the project to the CNC. They said: “We really like the project. We’ve got a lot of applications this time, so we don’t know if you’ll get selected but we really do like it.” So we waited and waited and...

**Mohamed (laughing):** Basically they rejected us.

**Isabelle:** They rejected us. They asked me to submit all this paper work and we tried and made the project look so strong. But maybe they look at it and they go: “Maybe they don’t need the money as much as another production.” So that’s always the balance - between seeming strong enough to be able to deliver the project but also showing that we need the money. We were always out of synch with that.

We went to the Dubai film connection in 2007 - it was their second year of doing the Dubai connection. Everybody said: “If you want money for your production go to Dubai”. We thought: “We’ll get some Sheikh, it’ll be done and we’ll be able to start shooting.” It didn’t happen. It was all the people we had met in Cannes. But nobody really had any money, it just didn’t work.

Also we met ARTE and they rejected the story. They thought we were a bit crazy. We didn’t come back from Dubai with any money as we’d hoped. Then we met with Roissy films through Dimitri De Clercq and... I think Raphaël instantly took a liking to the project.

**Amra:** Raphaël, can you tell us how you came on board, as, until you came, mostly, they had had rejections?

**Raphaël Berdugo - sales agent, Roissy Films:** I didn’t know about this entire story by the way.

**Mohamed:** We don’t tell about rejections.

**Raphaël:** If I had known I would have rejected it of course!

I met with Mohamed and Isabelle thanks to this French co-producer. In fact my idea of international sales is special. I don’t think everyone knows that the market is tough at the moment. If you are willing to sell arthouse movies, which is what we do at Roissy Films, either you have access to major names - or you don’t have access to major names, which is our case. My experience of international sales is that films which I sold the best were

always films where the auteur was unknown, the actors were unknown. It came from nowhere in fact.



Of course we had the support of a major festival but what I was looking for every time was stories, strong stories with a very important emotional aspect in the story. To give you an example, we sold *Caramel* a few years ago, or *Respiro*, this kind of movies.

So when I met with Isabelle, I wanted to know Mohamed. He was a very nice guy and very sympathetic but I watched what he did before. What I saw was a documentary, *War, Love, God and Madness*, which is a documentary where you conclude that it is totally crazy to make a film in Iraq: the guy was kidnapped, almost killed when he was making his previous film and he is telling this story in the documentary. So you realise how chaotic the situation was when he was making his first movie. I showed the documentary to Costa Gavras, for example, and he was totally amazed how you could envisage making a film there.

But he was willing to make a film there and the story of course was very strong. So I told him if you do the film there, with this story of course, it will be a very special event - this year is an important year for Iraq as you all know. So for me it was about telling the story without depicting the war of Iraq - we have had many films on the Iraq war. We are not here in the context of the war but of the story of Iraq. I also liked the integration of the long history of Iraq thanks to the name Babylon. Babylon is a name that resonates in everybody's mind.

So we followed this production step by step. They were nice to us, enough to be confident with us and show us all the steps of the production - we were involved in the editing stage at a very early stage.

**Mohamed:** We had a meeting with Raphaël in France. It was an important meeting because through it we came up with the title of the film. I had a working title. And then we talked about *Son of Babylon*, Babylon, we were talking, talking, talking. He threw three titles at us and then we said: "Ok, it's *Son of Babylon*". The work together, the work with a sales company, has brought a lot of experience to me, and putting an MG into the film was important for us, to me and for Isabelle.

**Isabelle:** And Raphaël, you gave us a lot of feedback on the script as well. And that was really important - we didn't even realise that's something a sales agent would do. You knew the market. You've seen the film. It has quite a dark ending. It could have been much darker, couldn't it? Well, you helped us clear a lot through that, helped us to be able to still tell the story that we wanted to tell but to leave the audience not earth-shattered by the end of that.

**Mohamed:** We also had some disagreements, of course...

**Isabelle:** We were originally going to work with another sales company in the UK, a British one. But at this moment in time, in the UK, especially for arthouse films, foreign language films, it's very difficult for them to be able to provide MG for the type of films that we

want. Continental Europe is where we found most of the funding, that was more accessible for this type of film.

**Mohamed:** I'm going to be honest - Isabelle is not going to like it. Before I headed to the production in September/October 2008 in Iraq, we didn't have a lot of money. We expected UK Film Council to put money into the film. But because we decided and thought that Raphaël, Roissy Films is good as a sales company we had a talk with the UK sales company, and we ended up not having the UK Film Council money: "You have a sales company from France, it's not right for us to give you the money right now." So I'm heading to Iraq, and Isabelle calls me and tells me: "The UK will not put money into the film". And that was for me a very big disaster to go to the production without UK Film Council money. But that was a challenge that we tackled later on through production and post-production.



**Isabelle:** I think, as well, that it was a blessing in disguise because if the UK Film Council had been involved during the physical production, we would have been under so many extra rules and regulations. When you're filming in Iraq there are no rules. You can't stick to a clean financial plan, on paper you can do it, and you know when the money is going to hit, but the money never hits. You're relying on founders and twenty different signatures. When you go into production you have to go in no matter what and you can't be restricted by a fund saying: "Well unless that... if..." Thankfully, the UK money then came in for the post-production.

**Amra:** Can you explain how much money you had at the beginning of the production - when you were about to enrol into the production of a feature film in Iraq...

**Isabelle:** 50.000 Euros! We had to buy film stock. We would buy it on a weekly basis. And that doesn't work with Kodak. We had to buy it from the Iranian distributor who didn't speak Arabic so he couldn't communicate with Atea, my producer in Iraq. And it was more difficult getting in touch with Iran than getting in touch with Atea in Iraq. So to get the film stock it was taking three weeks turnaround time so sometimes we were shooting to the last foot...

**Mohamed:** Before we get to this part, I think it was important what you were asking for. We planned that we needed to invest in Iraq for the production to shoot in three months, forty eight days. We had a very nice schedule very nicely planned. I went to Iraq with 50.000 Euros, that's what I had in my pocket. I needed to make a shooting in more than eight cities and I invoked more than 10.000 supporting artists that I need to pay daily and a crew of about forty-five. I had a French crew, a UK crew came with me to the North of Iraq. We put them in a nice hotel because they could not stay with the rest of the Iraqi crew in a normal accommodation and I needed to do all of that. Atea and me we needed to cash-flow the film.

**Amra:** Can you explain the involvement or non-involvement of the Iraqi government and ministry?

**Mohamed:** My producer in Iraq and I we had been working with the Iraqi government to hope to get support from them. In Iraq today there's no film industry, no infrastructure. There's no organisation to fund in the right way as we have it here in Europe. So I went to the theatre and film organisations and asked them for funds.

They rejected us: “We don’t have the money”. So I went to the ministry of culture in Iraq, and said: “Listen: my first film went to more than a 100 festivals. This film, this subject is important”. They said: “We don’t have the money. We don’t have money for film and cinema”.

Then, I went to the head, to the prime minister’s office of Iraq. It took two months with all the network and contacts to get to the prime minister’s office. We had been working with the prime minister advisor, the media advisor, and he was happy with the story. We prepared a contract - they didn’t know what kind of contract was needed. So we made a specific contract. The day we are about to sign, I sit with him in his office and he says face to face: “We are going to give you 250.000 \$. But on one condition: you need to change your main character from a Kurdish mother to an Arabic character. I said: “Wow? You want me to change the main character on which all the film is built...?”

He says: “We have problems with the region government about the oil percentage, they want 20% and we want 50% and they are giving us headaches and I don’t want this film to be about a Kurdish mother, I want it to be about an Arabic mother”. I said to him: “Thank you”.



I went to the region government, the Kurdish government. They looked at the script. The minister of culture loved the script. He gave it to its advisors. They looked at the script and said: “This is a propaganda film for the Arabic region government in Baghdad and we cannot give you the 200.000 \$”.

I said: “Someone of your own people wants to make a film about you. My main character and the characters come from the North and I’m shooting in the North.” He said: “You need to change the characters and the story”.

Then I took my case to the president of Iraq, who is Kurdish: “Maybe we can give you 100.000 \$ but let me talk with the prime minister’s advisor because we don’t want to have problems”. It was Ramadan. They had to fasten and they met every day. In the end he told me: “I could not convince him, he didn’t want to support you”. “Thank you very much”, I said. We ended without a penny from Iraq.

Finally, we had to cash-flow ourselves individually. I brought a lot of money from Dutch banks like Rabobank, privately. I had two organisations that supported me: Hivos in Holland and Doen. I worked with them on the previous film. I worked with them to train young Iraqi filmmakers on different occasions.

So they said we would like to help you. What I try to do in my films is to bring in young Iraqi who have nothing to do with film to train them. I bring in the UK and French professionals to teach them and do workshops. They said: “Ok if you train them we can invest in your project”. The money came later on in the production and they put 40.000 Euro, which is a lot of money. So I had 90.000 Euro, which was great for us.

**Isabelle:** Because of the training we do, while we do the filmmaking we were able to get the Mawred fund from Egypt. They were able to help us. The UK Trade & Investment, although it’s an odd way of getting investment, because they saw it as promoting the co-production they found a way to fund the workshop as well. It’s only little bits of money but it helped.



**Mohamed:** There were a lot of delays a lot of schedule changes. I had to wait one week without shooting in Southern Iraq because there was no film stock. There was no money to cash-flow the dailies. And the camera broke. We had really difficult times. I was supposed to shoot 45 days over two and half months. I ended making it in five months, shooting 65 days.

Things changed after I sent footage to Isabelle who looked at the footage and then she sent it to the organisations. We never forgot Sundance. Sundance helped me in developing the script, were checking how the production went, then Isabelle sent them some of the footage from the North. Then one day they call Isabelle - we had very difficult times. When I say very difficult times: I had a scene one day involving 500 women, and it’s not easy to have women working on films in Iraq. I always insisted that I needed women. I gave men 20 \$ per day. To the women I gave 28 \$ because I would like to encourage that kind of work for women. We had 400 women for four days who didn’t get their daily salaries. My producer left me in the middle of the desert and disappeared for two days. And I had this woman coming to me who asked: “What happened? Where is our money? What are you going to do?” What I did is - I have my main character who is a fantastic woman, very good

at speeches and with organisation - what I did is I put her there and let her speak with the women, let them explain what the situation is, to convince them about it. Then Isabelle received a call from Sundance.

**Isabelle:** We had no money. I was in England at the time. If you pay yourself a little amount of money the government is kind enough to give you tax credit, which is about fifty extra pounds a week. So I was living off these 50 £ a week. And then Sundance called, said: "We've seen the footage..." - by the way, Mohamed forgot to tell you: he wouldn't allow me to show the footage until he had a complete and edited film. But there was no way I was getting any money if I couldn't show anyone the footage. So I sneaked some footage to Sundance. And they sent us an email, cc'ing Mohamed, where they said: "The footage looks great etc" and I was like: "Oh god, Mohamed is going to shout at me!!!"

Sundance said: "Ok, tell us what you need, write me a letter telling me what you need". I sent them a complaint letter about things that had happened to us in the production. They felt very sorry for us: "We're going to be able to give you 15.000 \$". This was on a day where there was minus 10.000 \$ in the bank account if not more and minus 50.000 \$ on his bank account.

I was on a conference call in a big board room in LA and they put me on speaker phone and I burst into tears - and I never do that - so I burst into tears that they'd given us this money. I then called Mohamed and he told me: "What are you crying about? It's only 15.000 \$". And then he realised that in fact it was worth like 2 million to him, as he could pay these women and he then burst into tears.

**Mohamed:** It's nice to see the contrast between how difficult it was in production and how beautiful it was in post-production.

It was beautiful. The money was coming from North, from South, from East, from West. I'm sitting in the editing room and I'm like "Egypt, Arte, Sunnyland ART, our distributor" - Sunnyland ART were in talks with us during the production to sign a contract for the Arab distribution. We signed the contract late in the production but the money came in post-production.

Everybody was coming in: the UK Film Council, Raphaël's MG, the Netherlands Film Fund, the Rotterdam Media Fund. First the Netherlands fund rejected us. They said: "You need to shoot in Holland and you need to have a Dutch producer attached." I said: "I am also Dutch and proud to be Dutch." But they said: "We cannot recognise you yet as a Dutch producer. You need to first make a Dutch film". I said: "I have a company in Holland. I had Dutch funding for my first film". They said: "No it's difficult". But when they saw the footage and they saw the people involved they put money in. It was fantastic.

**Isabelle:** We also received funding from MEIFF which is the Middle East International Film Festival. They set up a fund, right at the same time when we needed post-production funding. So that's the festivals coming in to help during post-production, especially from the middle east which was the first.

**Amra:** Can you tell us a bit more about the production stage? You had an international crew coming with you. But the film didn't finish with it. Can you tell us about that experience?

**Mohamed:** It was my first experience with an international crew in Iraq. We needed a crew from France so we could cover the Fonds Sud and the CNC. This is part of the regulation. So we had some contacts with French crew. I had a sound recorder, a DOP, a

photographer, from France, a makeup artist, production designer, co-producer from the UK, Danny Evans, and an art designer from Iraq who was based in the UK. So I had seven with me.

We started in the North, where we thought it was safer. We started the workshop because we needed to train Iraqi, we needed to break down the script and schedule with the Iraqi crew. I had the feeling that maybe they couldn't continue with us. The communication wasn't easy. Some Iraqi didn't speak English and the French didn't always speak English.



On October 10, 2008 I started shooting but I was shaking. I was so stressed. We were in this mountain desert in Northern Iraq. We did the first shots and it was sort of a relief, because I needed to push to start doing something.

Ten days later we did the first ten minutes of the film - I work with non-professional actors so I have to do it scene by scene, following the script. When we were about to go to Baghdad and then from Baghdad to the South of Iraq, the UK crew said they wanted to go back to the UK. I said: "It's ok I understand that". The UK team left.

Then I had the French crew. I needed the French experience to help me.

We went to Baghdad. I took them from the airport to the hotel. We had full protection from the Iraqi interior ministers and we had about ten police cars. The French crew wondered: "What's happening here, what's going on here?" I said: "You want full protection I give you full protection". But it was a show. The entire road had been blocked anyway, just for the convoy to go.

The next day I took them to the French embassy. The embassy didn't know anything about the film, it seemed that our French co-producer hadn't been communicating properly with the French foreign ministry of France and with the French embassy. The ambassador arrived and he says: "What are you doing here?" We said to him: "We are making a film. We got the funds from Fonds Sud. Fonds Sud is an organisation part of the state department". They told us: "No, you are not going to make a film in Iraq, you need to leave, you are not staying in Iraq, it's very dangerous here, a car bomb just happened a mile from here. You would like to make a film but I cannot protect you, I cannot do anything for you."

So I had a three hour talk with the embassy and we went to the hotel, heavy headache, for two days. One of the team, Dan, came down and said: "I don't care, I'm staying". The other two: "Well the French embassy really doesn't want to have any problems." After six days I stopped production, they left.

I tried to force the Iraqi, whatever experience or equipment they had, I forced the Iraqi to give everything - like the sound recording guys and the camera team. Thank God I'm also a cinematographer so I started shooting the film and then they left.

It was for me a very sad moment, because I felt I was left alone as a filmmaker. I needed help and people to support me artistically. I needed feedback to carry on. We carried on. The Iraqi training workshop worked very well and the Iraqi team was fantastic.

The sound recorder was fantastic. We had a shot in the car and a coach and the car driving. On that scene, the French sound recorder built a lot of mics around the car. So I have this next scene later on in Baghdad. I looked at the Iraqi and he's young, 21 years old. I saw him do the same with the mics and I asked him: "Ahmed are you ok?" "It's ok" he said "I worked with François, it's ok" and he delivered fantastic sound.



**Raphaël:** What convinced me to come on the film was the personality of Mohamed. Of course the documentary was very impressive because you saw the talent of the guy. But he was really inhabited by this passion. Everyone impeded him to go back to Iraq when you saw the conditions of his previous film. He said it himself, he was crazy. This is the only word you could say at that time. Fortunately the situation is less dangerous in Iraq today than two or three years ago. Three years ago we could not have done this kind of film. The personality of this guy and the willingness to make his film whatever the conditions or the money were impressive. And I even think he had too much money. He could have made the film like *Paranoid Park* for 15.000 Euros, because he was so willing to make the film, and this is the thing to remember about him: whatever the conditions of the film - he would have made the film anyway.

**Amra:** Isabelle, tell us what was your original budget, your initial financing plan and what was your final budget?

**Isabelle:** Initially we thought we could make the film for 600.000 Euros. Given that we'd spread over seven cities, our final financial plan was over 1 million. During the production we didn't have time to figure out how it was going till we got to the end. A lot of the spending went into the post-production. We had the best sound design, the best lab work.

During production we found out that our lab deal had fallen through in Morocco. It didn't work with the way we were shooting. We were shooting in 3-perf. So we had to put our post-production deals together. Our co-producer in the UK, who is also our post-production supervisor, Danny Evans worked rigorously with Technicolor to put a deal together. So they said: "Ok we'll wait till you guys have the money so you can do the post-production that you want". That's how we were able to do it.

The budget then went to 1.1 million. We are still waiting for the rest of the bits of money that they pay you on final delivery. But we met our expectation eventually, but it's just a shame that all that money didn't come in production where it would have made a massive difference.

**Mohamed:** But it didn't pay our salaries yet... I made a film not for the sake of just making a film but for me it's very important to make a film, cinema and art, for myself and my family. I don't really care about Iraq, it's a piece of land. For me Iraq is my mother, my father, my children, my niece and nephew that's why it was important for me to make a film. That's why I was willing to give anything. My producer ended up selling his car and pieces of land to cover his cash flow. Since then he hasn't bought a new car or anything like that. We ended up spending 500.000\$ in Iraq to cash-flow the production. Borrowing money, getting money late, receiving the money late, because it was for something we believed in.

And the way Isabelle cleverly structured the financial side of things... When I read the contracts in English I didn't understand a thing. And Isabelle did her best to reduce the amount of bureaucracy.

**Isabelle:** We had contracts in five languages, so Google translator was our best friend...

**Mohamed:** I'm happy, but if you ask me to co-produce with 7 countries with a budget of 1 million or with one country with a budget of 600.000, I certainly prefer one country and I would reduce my shots...