

MENA Hollywood

The Greater Middle East: Hollywood's Next Big Paycheck

Usually the Middle East region is grouped with North Africa under the MENA moniker. The problem is that there is confusion about the number of countries to include under MENA, since it has no standardized definition. There is also some confusion between "MENA" and "Arab countries."

For example, U.K. research company Informa, which has just published a report on the area (cost U.S.\$1,566), lists 25 countries, including Turkey and Cyprus, but not Iran and Iraq. As per a program producer in Qatar, there are 22 Arab countries, but not all are located in MENA, while Iran is in the MENA region, even though it is not an Arab country.

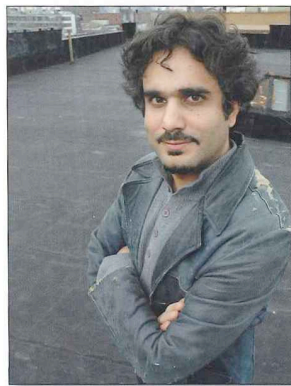
According to Patrick Jucaud, who organizes several TV markets in Africa for his Basic Lead, there are five North-African countries: Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. In addition, commented Jucaud, Israel should be included in the "Greater Middle East region," while the "Broader Middle East" includes Turkey and Afghanistan.

So, for the purpose of this new account, in addition to the aforementioned North-African countries in the MENA region, the following countries are included: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE and Yemen. It remains to be seen where the Palestinian territories should be located, since Palestine not yet a country.

Informa estimated that there are 78 million TVHH in the MENA (Greater Middle East) region, representing 95 percent of households, with satellite reaching 62 percent of TV families. Pay-TV households are said to number 2.4 million, excluding Israel, which Basic Lead estimated at 1.7 million subscribers.

Key satellite operators in the broader region are: Digiturk (two million subscribers); ART (1.087 million subs); E-Vision (340,000, including cable and IPTV); OSN, which is the result of a merger between Orbit and Showtime (603,000 subs), and HOT (in Israel with 908,000 subs via cable and MMDS). In addition, Canal Plus now reaches North Africa, but it is not a major player in MENA. Because 75 percent of the population of this region is under the age of 35, online TV services are gathering momentum.

In terms of content, sports (especially



Mahyad Tousi

football), news, movies and drama series are the region's popular fare. Most watched shows come from the U.S. studios. There is also a good number of programs originating and exchanged within MENA areas. However, very little production from the region is seen outside MENA, with the exception of ethnic channels scattered throughout the worldwide Arab communities.

If the region lacks exportable content, it certainly makes up for it in resources, especially financial resources and viewership. And these resources are the leverage of two young entrepreneurs who have taken on the challenge of marrying Hollywood with MENA.

BoomGen Studios (BGS) is a New York and Los Angeles-based cross platform media and entertainment company founded in 2007 by Mahyad Tousi and Reza Aslan that is trying to change the perception of the Middle East by helping to create high profile film and TV shows from or about the region. BGS is designed to provide creative input, publicity and marketing to Hollywood's production community. Even though it was founded three years ago, the company is still in a start-up phase and what it might lack in financial resources is made up in enthusiasm, film expertise and knowledge of the Middle East.

VideoAge asked the two partners to illustrate their strategy and business model.

VideoAge International: Why is the Greater Middle East region interested in financing films produced in Hollywood?

BoomGen Studios: With much of the liquidity out there in the Middle East, the regional players now enjoy greater leverage than they ever did. This, coupled with the failure of studios and independent producers to make the hedge fund/slate model work, makes for much more interesting deals for anyone who holds the purse strings, and gives them unprecedented access to Hollywood, the greatest storytelling factory around.

VAI: From a financial standpoint, enlighten us regarding your selection and go-forward process?

BGS: We focus on creating and championing commercial entertainment projects that also have the ability to reframe perceptions of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East, North Africa and Central/South Asia — a region with a rich history of storytelling. These could be smaller character-driven dramas, slapstick comedies, or epics rooted in the rich mythology of this vast region. The important factor is that the project fits our financing model. For instance, we are very much interested in projects that have strong "Transmedia" potential. Right now our portfolio consists of two comedies, comic book properties, and an international political thriller.

VAI: It is clear in financial terms, but in cultural terms, what unique advantages regarding film development/production does this region possess?

BGS: With regards to infrastructure, this region still has a long way to go, though there are major efforts in play to develop expertise and build-out production infrastructure. Some 75 percent of the population of this region is under the age of 35, making it one of the youngest groups in the world. According to the World Economic Forum, this region also boasts the world's fastest growing consumer market. This, without a doubt, is the region's greatest advantage and asset, and the reason why there is so much interest from the majors in being part of the solution.

VAI: Despite the soft economy, why do you believe the current time is appropriate for your venture?

BGS: The amount of liquidity in the region, and the value of this emerging market, ensures there will be increasing interest from the studios and international players in creating content in our niche. We feel we are uniquely



Reza Aslan

positioned to work with the best of these projects and, from time-to-time, put our own horses into the mix.

VAI: Briefly, please explain the BoomGen Studios model and how it differs from what might be considered the traditional indie film model?

BGS: BoomGen Studios is a boutique company with a narrow focus and diverse set of skills. We differentiate ourselves by having a first person understanding of content, as well as the in-house strategies and expertise to produce and market projects specific to our niche.

Providing high-end creative, public relations and marketing solutions to major studios and independents allows us to continuously hone the strategies we apply to our own branded projects.

VAI: Will BoomGen be actively involved on the festival/trade show circuit?

BGS: We commenced our second phase of operations this year and have multiple projects in various stages of development. We will be participating at many of the major festivals and co-production markets, as well as at the bigger festivals in the Middle East, with the intention of closing some deals and looking for new partnerships. We plan to go into production on our first feature film by next summer. ●

Portland, Oregon-born **Mahyad Tousi**, 37, is co-founder, CEO and producer. He oversees business and creative strategy for the company while serving as the lead producer for all its projects. Tousi's production experience includes *We Are New York*, a 10-part series for NY Public TV station and *Looking for Palladin*, starring Ben Gazzara and Talia Shire. Tousi's cinematography credits include *Blindsight*, directed by Lucy Walker, which was a winner at the Berlin Film Festival.

Iranian-born **Reza Aslan**, 38, co-founder and CCO, teaches creative writing at the University of California, Riverside. Aslan holds degrees in religion from Santa Clara University and Harvard; a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. His first book, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*, has been translated into 13 languages. He is also the author of *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization and the End of the War on Terror*, as well as editor of an anthology of modern literature from the Middle East. Aslan has worked as a consultant on feature films including *Prince of Persia*, *Rendition* and *Body of Lies*.