

# documentaries as an emerging vehicle for storytelling in the Arab world

## introduction

Until recently, documentaries were often regarded as inferior to their big-budget, mainstream, fictional counterparts. They were often thought to be relegated to wildlife films of little interest to broad based audiences. This perception has changed globally, with more audiences giving credence to the non-fiction genre and an increasing number of film festivals providing a platform for documentary screenings.

Documentary films typically emphasise an issue that is regarded as a “special interest” – for example environmental or political, or they focus on issues impacting societies in different countries. The filming style tends to be less “polished” than that of mainstream productions, although this is not always the case. The genre is often used to highlight issues that might otherwise not have received in-depth coverage in mainstream media. It serves to provide more than a passing glimpse into an issue, trend or topic of some importance.

## documentary genre gaining traction in the Middle East

Globally, the documentary genre has enjoyed increased attention with watershed films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The March of the Empire Penguins* attracting large viewership. The Middle East has followed suit with an increased offering of non-fiction films in the region with titles such as *Being Osama*; *Winter of Injustice*, *The Arab Awakening* and others. Greater exposure to the genre in the Middle East has led to the release of more documentaries made in the region, about topics that impact its inhabitants.

Film festival organisers in the Middle East seem to have recognised this trend with many having a section dedicated solely towards the documentary genre. The Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Gulf and Doha film festivals are just a few examples of the regional industry taking this direction. Film festivals offer documentary makers the benefits of a screening platform; effective marketing, distribution as well as financial incentives (either prize money or production assistance).

The Gulf Film festival (along with other regional festivals) is very focused on encouraging films that depict issues of relevance to the regional community and documentaries in this festival tend to have a strong Gulf-based focus. While documentary subjects vary considerably, some common themes include life in war-torn urban environments, the emerging Arab youth identity and striving towards gender equality, amongst others. The quality of film-making is constantly improving and a few Arab documentary makers have enjoyed international acclaim such as Mahmoud Kaboor's offering “*Grandma, a Thousand Times*” which earned awards in Doha, Canada and other international markets. Successes such as this will continue to raise the international profile of documentaries made in the Arab region.

Documentary makers such as Kaboor represent a newly emerging trend that sees film makers focused solely upon the documentary genre. There is a handful of production companies formed by documentary makers (producers and directors) that are passionate about the proliferation of this genre. Some of these include Veritas Pictures, Egypt Productions, Birthmark Films and others.

## training as a means of developing the documentary genre in the Arab region

There are increased instances of specialised training opportunities for Arab documentary makers. One example of this is the launch of a three part course called the Arab Documentary Film Program (ADFP). It is aimed at Arab documentary makers in the Levant and North Africa regions where participants are educated on the elements of development, budgeting, packaging and finance. The course also facilitates a meeting with content acquirers such as broadcasters, film festivals and other stakeholders that might be interested. The course is co-funded by Lebanon-based the Arab Funds for Art & Culture and culturally focused organisations within the European Union. This serves as an indication of the international recognition of the importance of the documentary genre.

International Media Support is another organisation that aims to build dialogue and exchange between various cultures. One such activity is focused on the documentary genre and sees cooperation between Iranian, Arab and Danish filmmakers in efforts to promote the development of the documentary genre in each of these regions. There is emphasis upon the ability of a documentary to offer in-depth insight into the daily lives of the general public.

Another regionally focused programme is The Greenhouse Project launched specifically for MENA documentary filmmakers and aims to train current and potential film makers in processes that are specific to the genre. It is an on-going program funded by the European Union and other donors. The course required producers and directors to apply as a team and they were able to do so at any stage of the project. This feature meant that the course concentrated on the collaborative effort required to make documentaries and honed skills specific to each position, participants were able to develop along the lines of an apprenticeship.

The manner in which documentaries have been profiled in these courses shows how the genre can be used as a new storytelling mechanism. The genre has been embraced by film makers in the region with many using equipment they have at hand (such as phones and simple video cameras) to make their productions. The ability to add some professional-quality editorial touches – thanks to the advanced features on readily available software – means that quality levels are often far better than one might think. The value of proper education for aspiring documentary makers is therefore great and something to be encouraged.

## **challenges to the continued development of documentaries in the Middle East**

Film makers from the MENA region are eager to promote their work and are for the most part optimistic about the future of the documentary genre in the region, but there are some challenges that could slow its development. These revolve around the issue of funding, talent, distribution and acquiring audiences.

Funding is considered a universal issue with documentary makers in all regions struggling to source the necessary financial report. In other markets however, such as North America, Europe and Australasia, there are initiatives aimed at supporting documentary makers, mainly from government and education sources. The Middle East is starting to follow this trend with film festivals and film commissions being the key source of funding for these productions. The introduction of production rebates such as that of the Abu Dhabi Film Commission is another manner of addressing this challenge.

A lack of experienced production talent is a challenge that many documentary makers face in the MENA region. This is either due to a shortage of talent or the fact that existing talent is priced above the limited budgets generally available to documentary makers in comparison to mainstream productions. Networking and information sharing initiatives are on the increase in an effort to address this challenge. The UAE has become an inadvertent beneficiary of the volatility in Syria and Egypt, with the country now being a new base for many experienced professionals.

The distribution of documentaries in the MENA region is challenging, given the relatively under-developed distribution network. The market is very small with only a few cinema chains and broadcasters willing to consider acquiring documentary content. Content buyers are typically conservative and eschew the documentary genre in favour of mainstream productions, particularly those that are able to demonstrate return on investment (ROI). Documentaries struggle to demonstrate ROI in many instances and are therefore less likely to be purchased by regional broadcasters or cinema chains.

Film audiences in the MENA region have enjoyed a great tradition of Arabic cinema, with Egypt historically dominating this medium. Comedy, action and drama genres have tended to be the most popular. While film festival audiences are increasingly interested in documentaries, the average movie-watching audience tends to stick to what they know. This means that documentaries are typically left out in the cold.

## the future of the documentary genre in the Arab region

Although there are definitely challenges facing documentary makers in the region, the future for the genre looks bright. This is not least part due to the increased instance of film festivals and funding dedicated towards documentary. Even more encouraging is the launch of documentary-focused channels such as that of Al-Jazeera. The proliferation of online platforms focused on the distribution of documentaries – such as dedicated YouTube channels and sites like [topdocumentary.com](http://topdocumentary.com) - is another key factor in favour of the genre. Given that the Middle East is home to some of the world's highest consumers of online content – (Saudi Arabia), this could prove to be a valuable platform for documentaries.

It is expected that it will fall to documentary makers, film festival organisers, film commissions and government entities to drive the growth of the genre in the Middle East. The documentary genre makes it possible for the rest of the world to gain unique insight into the MENA region from the perspective of its inhabitants, which is often quite different to that of mainstream media. Some might argue that this opportunity has never been as significant as it is now with the region experiencing volatility and uncertainty in many places. Hopefully the MENA region's documentary genre will continue to go from strength to strength and will allow a broader audience to gain valuable insight into the dynamic region that is the Middle East.



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