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Young Filmmaker – Badr Ben Hirsi



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Badr Ben Hirsi grew up in London, where his family went into exile during Yemen's revolution in the 1960s. He earned a master of arts degree in drama production from Goldsmiths College. In 1995 a visit to Yemen led to his making of *The English Sheikh and the Yemeni Gentleman*, which has been described as a lyrical documentary. It follows a British expatriate with years of experience living in Yemen introducing Ben Hirsi to his homeland.

After September 11, 2001, there was much demand for documentaries from Arab filmmakers. Ben Hirsi's projects included the 2003 documentary *Yemen and the War on Terror*, and the 2002 film *9/11 Through Saudi Eyes*, which featured interviews with the families and friends of the hijackers, Arab media representatives, political and military analysts, a psychologist, and others—who gave their perceptions of events and issues involving September 11. This video, the first documentary to scrutinize 9/11 from the Saudi perspective, has been included in the social studies section of the Cambridge Educational Core Curriculum Video Collection, which had described it as "a powerful learning tool for students of political science, the Middle East, and Islam."

Ben Hirsi turned to feature films. His *A New Day in Old Sana'a* won the prize for best Arab film at the 2005 Cairo International Film Festival. It was shown at the Alwan Film Festival in New York. Although Ben Hirsi had received Yemeni government approval and funding at the beginning of the project, the minister of culture would not allow the film to be shown commercially in Yemen; however, it was shown as a British entry in a Sana'a film festival.

Ben Hirsi hopes his experience making films in the Middle East will encourage other Arab filmmakers, particularly in the more conservative Gulf countries, which have little in the way of a cinema tradition. He has seen other young directors who were trained in Europe or North America returning home to make films despite the difficulties. "There's a new wave of Arab film," Ben Hirsi said in an interview on the Netribution Web site. He adds that there is "a new and very exciting style and things are changing."

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