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Tarak Ben Ammar the Great Weaver of “tele-politics”

**THE PRODUCER FROM CRAXI
AND BERLUSCONI TO MEDIOBANCA**

By Giovanni Pons

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THE PERSONAGE: The story of the film producer, his friendships with Craxi and Berlusconi, advisor to Al Waleed and Murdoch. Today he is consultant for Mediobanca.

TARAK BEN AMMAR THE GREAT WEAVER OF POLITICS, MOTION PICTURES AND TV

Giovanni Pons, Milan

Biography: Tarak Ben Ammar was born in Tunis on June 12, 1949. His career as film producer and distributor begins after receiving a degree in International Economics at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. At present he lives in France, with two of these three sons, Neil and Tarak Jr., and with his daughter Sonia. Ben Ammar is one of the owners of Rome Studios, on Via Pontina near Rome, and one of the producers of the film “Black Dahlia.”

“I’ve known Tarak for 25 years and the boy has come a long way”, Fedele Confalonieri told reporters who rushed to Cannes for the press conference of the latest enterprise of Mediaset and French-Tunisian entrepreneur: Nessma TV, a television in the Arab language which looks to the Maghreb countries. Those 25 years remembered by Confalonieri take back the clock to 1983, the year of the unforgettable meeting with Silvio Berlusconi, Confalonieri and Tarak Ben Ammar. The place is one that cannot be forgotten... a beach in Tunisia. The two Italian entrepreneurs were strolling along the shore, waiting to go to dinner at Bettino Craxi’s home. They met up with Tarak, surrounded by five models who were shooting a film with Aldo Maccione. An invitation was immediately extended to the Craxi home, where Tony Renis was present also, and where Tarak brought all the women performers of the production, becoming the hero of the evening. But that is the lighter side of the story.

The young filmmaker, at the time 34, already had quite an interesting background. French mother, originally from Corse, who emigrated to Tunisia, was Catholic and then converted to Islam and married a Tunisian lawyer who later became a diplomat. An aunt, Wassila Bourguiba, wife of Habib Bourguiba, the first president of the Independent Republic of Tunisia, proclaimed in 1957. Bourguiba is the father of modern Tunisia, with his lay progressive ideas, inspired from the French universities.

During the years of his presidency he was able to promote laws that had never before been possible in Arab Moslem countries, like abolition of polygamy and prohibition of a man to give up his wife, thus making Tunisia a “pioneer” country in the world of

woman's emancipation. So Tarak grew up in a lay, peaceful and anti-integralist environment, open to other cultures. His career as a politician or diplomat was practically set out for him, but ever since his university days in Washington, he had a passion for cinema. Upon his return to Tunis, he created a new profession, that of promoting his country as the ideal location for filmmaking. In the Fifties and Sixties the choice had always been Spain or Italy. In this new role, in 1971 Tarak convinces Francesco Rosi to shoot "Caso Mattei" in his country and later convinces Rossellini to film "Messiah" in 1975.

The first steps he takes already mark him as an upcoming entrepreneur. Instead of being paid as a consultant, Tarak asks to participate in the productions with small minority quotas, thus he too, becoming a co-producer, although his debut as head of Carthago Film is not one of the best. Claude Chabrol's "Les Magiciens" turns out to be a modest work which is unsuccessful at the box office and risks suffocating Tarak's newborn adventure. Ben Ammar comments on this: "I have realized that content is more important than financing. If I had not been confronted with failure during my first film I would have become hideous. Today I try to remain authentic. The greatest regret would be that of discovering I have become arrogant."

The young, new producer, however, has an inborn inclination to public relations. His success pivots around his capacity to communicate with high level, international people who, according to the occasion, can be a passport that opens many doors. This is a lesson he learned from his Uncle Bourguiba who was unique in that he was both pro-Arab as well as pro-American.

In his famous speech in Jericho in 1965, 20 years before Sadat, Bourguiba supports normalization of relationship with Israel, by proposing to the United Nations to create a federation between Arab states of the region and the Jewish state. Such a daring speech resulted in Tunisia's expulsion from the League of Arab States for ten years until 1978 when it returned to the anti-Israeli position, criticizing the agreements of Camp David. Tunisia was again the seat of the League of Arab States, although it maintained good relationships with Americans. In fact, the US, during Carter's presidency, asked the Tunisian government in 1983 to accept Yasser Arafat's Olp Palestinians who had been chased out of Beirut after the Israeli invasion. Under the leadership of Bourguiba, Tunisia was the only country that could guarantee a minor hostility between Israelis and Palestinians. Besides, the family of Wassila Ben Ammar, wife of the Tunisian president since 1961, had always supported Olp, and even on that occasion did not back out.

The known bond between Arafat and Bettino Craxi triggered an operation which left a mark, even in Tarak's career. According to his reconstruction of the facts, Craxi asked Berlusconi for money to support the Palestine cause during those difficult years. The Canale 5 head did not want to be directly exposed since he was doing business with Americans so he asked Tarak, the friend he had met a few years earlier on a beach in Hammamet, to act as intermediary.

The producer, who already was quite at home with film rights, took upon himself the sale of a package of La Cinq library rights for a value of 200 billion Lira. Shortly before, Berlusconi had had losses and had been refused in his transalpine adventure,

and Tarak seemed like the ideal person to recuperate a little money, and at the same time answer to Craxi's call. The agreement was simple: for his intervention as intermediary, Tarak would request a percentage that was higher than normal 15% instead of 5%. The difference amounting to about 20 billion, was to be given to Arafat's Olp, passing through All Iberian, Berlusconi's offshore company Which at the beginning of the Nineties ended up on the Milan magistrates' desk, insomuch that is was the "Biscione's" foreign safe, with deposits on bank accounts that led to Craxi. In the first degree trial, which ended in July, 1998, the court condemned Craxi to 4 years and Berlusconi to 2 years and 4 months with the accusation of illicit financing certified by transfers amounting to about 10 billion from All Iberian in favor of the politician. Tarak was called in as witness but was only available in Paris in the presence of his lawyers. The deposition never took place, but the fact that the All Iberian transaction dealing with the sale of tv rights was actually addressed to Arafat never convinced investigating judges which considered Tarak's story a coverup in favor of Craxi and Berlusconi. But Tarak states that he sent to the magistrates all the papers that gave evidence of that sales operation and passing of rights, including the receipt signed by Arafat for having received about 20 billion Liras. In appeal, on October 1999, Craxi and Berlusconi were declared non punishable insomuch as the established period for a trial had expired, a sentence that was later confirmed by the Cassazione.

This side incident did not stop the rising parabola of the French-Tunisian entrepreneur who, in the meantime, became consultant of the Saudi Prince Al Waleed, and then of media tycoon Rupert Murdoch. To the Prince, he proposes an investment in Mediaset just before it went on the stock market and in Germany in the empire of Leo Kirch, and later in Murdoch's News Corp. Two out of three operations hit the bulls-eye (Kirch went bankrupt in 2000) and so credibility of the Tunisian businessman grew in time. In recent years Tarak brought Murdoch's acquisition of Telepiù from the Vivendi French and then its merge with Stream, to launch Sky Italia's pay tv. In 2004 he convinces Breton Vincent Bolloré to increase his presence in Mediobanca capital up to the ruthless battle with the Italian banks that led to the traumatic exit of Vincenzo Maranghi from the Istituto di Piazzetta Cuccia. Today Tarak is consultant of Mediobanca and played a major role in the choice of Franco Bernabé in his leading position of Telecom Italia, thanks to the transversal alliance of French investors who accepted the positions of Intesa San Paolo, headed by Giovanni Bazoli, Prodi's banker friend, hated by Berlusconi.

How much farther Tarak will continue to travel, is difficult to foresee because his role among France, Italy and Tunisia is 360 degrees, both in business as well as in politics. When the Libyans attacked Calderoli, a possible minister of the Berlusconi government, he flew to Gheddafi to find a settlement for the incident, just as in the middle of the election campaign,

Tarak sent a message to Sarkozy regarding Alitalia on behalf of Berlusconi. But the greatest challenge was the one which took place a few days ago on the Croisette: taking to Maghreb countries the culture of commercial tv, the same one launched by Berlusconi in Italy in the Eighties.