

Posted: Fri., Feb. 8, 2008, 7:30pm PT

Ammar moves between film, finance

Financier has become major European player

By [ALI JAAFAR](#)



ROMAN DEAL: From left, producer-financier Tarak Ben Ammar poses alongside Martha and Dino De Laurentiis, actor Gaspard Ulliel and helmer Peter Webber last year in Rome to promote the release of 'Hannibal Rising.'

Borders mean nothing to Tarak Ben Ammar. The financier and producer has moved between the worlds of film and finance with the same ease as he has traveled from his native Tunisia to his adopted France, in the process becoming a major Euro film player.

Buoyed by profits of x237 million (\$350.2 million) from his Italian DTT channels Sport Italia and Sport News, he's been on a spending spree in recent months, gaining 100% control of France's post-production labs, buying a 2% stake in Italian animation company Rainbow and acquiring Italian distrib Eagle Pictures.

As topper of Paris-based Quinta Communications as well as board member of the Weinstein Co. and leading Italian merchant bank Mediobanca, Ben Ammar is building on his reputation as adviser and dealmaker to some of the media world's most powerful men.

He engineered Saudi Prince Al Waleed bin Talal's investment in News Corp.; brokered Rupert Murdoch's purchase of Telepiu from Vivendi Universal, which paved the way for the creation of Sky Italia; and has a business relationship with Silvio Berlusconi that stretches back to the 1980s. "For a long time, I've been seen more as a financier than a film guy," Ben Ammar says. "I learned that financing is really the center. You get people together and instead of doing a movie you do deals. I became an adviser, an investment banker, and I learned financing. At that point, I said if I can do this for others, why not start building my own little media empire?"

Ben Ammar's domain also includes Empire Film Studios in Tunisia, a pact with Luc Besson that allows Ben Ammar's Quinta to share facilities at Besson's planned Cinema City studio complex outside Paris, and his highly profitable Italian DTT channels.

Born in Tunis in 1949, Ben Ammar is the son of a Tunisian ambassador to Italy. His uncle Habib Bourguiba was Tunisia's founding president following the country's independence from French colonial rule in 1956. Ben Ammar began his career attracting productions such as "Star Wars" to Tunisia. It wasn't long before he set his sights on the biggest arena. "I knew from day one coming from Tunisia, a small country with no money, that my playground had to be the world," he explains. "... Today my business is worth a billion euros."

Not that he's forgotten where he came from. Ben Ammar has reproduced his French post-production facilities in Tunisia, enabling local and North African helmers to access the same technology on offer to their more privileged European counterparts.

"I'm a guy from the south, a former colony, who came to the north and helped save the French film industry without taking away any of their jobs while also reproducing those facilities for Third World directors who don't have the means or money of Hollywood. It's never been done before," Ben Ammar says. "All those post-production facilities in France were losing money despite all the subsidies and the French film industry making 200 films. I did my homework, which came from being a banker, and realized that all they needed was to be a little more sophisticated in their financing. All you need to do is run the show a bit better, get people to pay their bills and inject some money."

Having been entrusted by Goldman Sachs to be the investment bank's strategic European investor -- a relationship forged when Ben Ammar worked with the bank to raise coin for the Weinstein Co. -- he has now set his sights on building a pan-European distribution network. Goldman Sachs is in the final stages of acquiring a stake in Canada's Alliance Atlantis, which owns U.K. distrib Momentum and Spain's Aurum.

With a deal for Scandinavian distrib Scanbox also in the pipelines and Ben Ammar bringing Quinta (France) and Eagle (Italy) into the mix, the future looks exciting for the maven. "I have an entire chain," Ben Ammar says. "I can make movies, post-produce them and develop them in my lab. I have studios in France and Tunisia. I have film channels I can put them on. I have media deals with Sky and RAI. Why don't I think of a European network? Because I don't want to play in only one territory."