

FEATURE DOCUMENTARIES: JOEL SOLER

Tracing terror's family tree

After gaining access to Saddam Hussein's inner circle in *Uncle Saddam*, fearless film-maker Joel Soler switched his attentions to the Bin Laden clan

In spring 2001, French film-maker Joel Soler had finished his first feature documentary *Uncle Saddam*, an exonerating look at Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and decided that his next subject would be the Middle Eastern dynasty, the Bin Laden family.

"I went to the networks which had bought *Uncle Saddam* and pitched the new film and they all said 'Osama who?'" he recalls. "Nobody was really interested, but I went ahead anyway and spent the summer doing research."

The Bin Laden name, of course, surged in notoriety after September 11, but rather than making Soler's job easier, the tragedy meant that the suspicions surrounding the family rose dramatically and travel into the regions where the Bin Ladens lived grew difficult.

But Soler, who lives in the US, was not put off. For *Uncle Saddam*, he spent several months in Iraq posing as a film-maker making a documentary about Iraqi architecture and as such gained access to Saddam's inner circle as well as his palaces.

So, after 9/11, the indomitable Soler went to Yemen to the village of Osama's father and to Syria where Osama's mother was born. Travelling on a tourist visa, and often pretending to be a family friend — either financed by the family business or, in one case, the fiancée of a Bin Laden — he began an extraordinary odyssey to track the personal and financial activities of the vast Bin Laden clan, a network of some 54 brothers and sisters.

Two-and-a-half years later, after trips to Jordan, Lebanon, Russia, Azerbaijan, South Africa, France, Switzerland, the UK and various parts of the US, Soler is near to completing the film, which he has called *Bin Laden: Dynasty Of Terror*, and which he is personally representing at MIP-TV.

Key to the film's insights is the participation of Carmen Bin Laden, the ex-wife of Osama's half-brother Yeslam, who



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now lives in Geneva with her daughter from the marriage. "I spent two years trying to convince her," explains Soler (pictured with Carmen, above), "and finally she said 'yes'".

Uncle Saddam sold to TF1 in France, Channel Four in the UK and RAI in Italy, among others, and HBO in the US. Indeed, it became the third highest-rated documentary ever to screen on HBO's Cinemax service and Soler cites HBO's

documentary chief Sheila Nevins with encouraging him to make a second film. He is now mulling a third set in the Middle East, a region which holds a particular personal fascination for Soler. His grandfather was killed by partisan terrorists in Algeria in 1963.

This time his subject might be Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, a man, who, unlike the subjects of his previous films, Soler says he respects enormously. "He holds the answers to stopping this new wave of terrorism," he says.

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