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Stand-Up Diplomacy

By James Poniewozik

Air travel is technology's greatest gift to the comedian. Those little bags of peanuts they give you--what's the deal with them? Hey, just last week I took a trip to L.A.--and my luggage took a trip to Hong Kong! Ba-boom-boom!

Oh, and how about when security pulls you for special screening because of your olive skin and your last name? Don't you hate when that happens?

It's fitting that each segment of Comedy Central's *The Axis of Evil Comedy Special* (March 10), the first TV stand-up show with all Middle Eastern--American comics, begins with each comedian walking onstage through a metal detector. The 9/11 attacks changed the airport from a place of comical annoyance to a place of suspicion and dread. "Whenever I get on a plane, I always know who the air marshal is," says Axis' Ahmed Ahmed. "He's the guy holding the PEOPLE magazine upside down, staring right at me."

It may be stretching it to say there was a silver lining in 9/11 for Middle Eastern Americans. But it did get them America's attention, and not just on cross-country flights. Save for the occasional terrorist or sheik stereotype, the pop-culture profile of this growing group had been almost nil. You might know that F. Murray Abraham or Danny Thomas had Middle Eastern ancestry, but it was trivia, like knowing that Dan Aykroyd was Canadian. There was no figure whose ethnicity deeply informed his or her work--no Arab-American Dick Gregory or Iranian-American Lenny Bruce.

Now that moment might finally be coming. Comedy, because it relies on creating and breaking tension, has been one of the main means for minorities to confront America and get away with it. And after 9/11, comedians like the guys in *Axis of Evil* were politically relevant--whether they liked it or not. For months after the attacks, comedian Dean Obeidallah performed in clubs in New York City as Dean Joseph, using his middle name at the suggestion of a friend and club manager.

After several months, he says, he realized that his audience--mostly non-Arab--wanted to hear jokes about what

they were hearing in the news. He founded the New York Arab American Comedy Festival and, partnering with a group of Los Angeles comics, did the Axis tour and special, along with The Watch List, an online Comedy Central sketch series the group hopes to develop for TV.

It's not just that 9/11 made Americans notice Middle Easterners; in a sense, Obeidallah said, it made Middle Easterners notice themselves. "Before 9/11," he says, "I was white." In his stage act, he makes fun of a pundit's line that "Arabs are the new blacks." ("Oh, my God. We're cool!" he jokes, imagining white suburban kids wearing headdresses and saying "What up, Mustafa?") But there's something to the theory--just look at Barack Obama. His biggest problems with bigotry--besides being called "not black enough"--have been insinuations about his Muslim father, rumors that he attended a madrasah, jokes about his middle name (Hussein) and the Freudian confusion of his surname with "Osama" on CNN and in the New York Post.

And just as slavery effaced regional differences among Africans, 9/11 lumped together widely disparate people: many Arab Americans are not Muslim, and many Muslim Americans (Iranian, South Asian, black) are not Arab. Pop culture, to put it mildly, has paid less attention to these nuances. Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-American Axis comic and actor, says he's often cast as "Unspecified Foreign Guy" and plays an Indian cabdriver on *The Knights of Prosperity*.

There are flashes of Middle Eastern awareness emerging: the midseason sitcom *Andy Barker, P.I.* features an Afghan kebab-house owner who defensively festoons his shop with patriotic kitsch. Still, in *Axis* Aron Kader complains that even today he meets people who can't pronounce Palestine. "Come on! We're responsible for half the terrorism in the last 50 years!" he rants. "How many rocks do we have to throw?"

It's an edgy line, but it shows how suited comedy is to introducing a group that mass culture has stereotyped, literally, as walking time bombs. Stand-up is warfare by humorous means. Just look at the violent lingo: comedians slay a crowd, or they die. Four years into Iraq, the U.S. may finally be ready to meet a group of incisive Middle Eastern Americans who do anything but bomb. In fact, they kill.

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