



Is Laughter the Middle East's 'Best Medicine'?

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A motley crew of diverse Arab, Persian and American comedians is making audiences laugh and unravelling stereotypes at the same time. With their own comedy brand, sold-out worldwide tours, documentaries and frequent appearances as commentators on major news outlets, Aron Kader, Maz Jobrani, Mayssoon Zayid and Dean Obeidallah have built transnational bridges through humour.

Before 9/11, the comedians struggled in a cutthroat environment where club owners, agents and promoters didn't see the potential of this new-fangled Middle Eastern comedy. But when the media spotlight turned to their countries of origins after 9/11, their work began to generate tremendous interest. The exponential growth of their comedic output and audience— from the United States to the UAE— led to their global success, culminating in the formation of the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, a satirical title alluding to the term former president George W. Bush used to describe the countries he believed supported terrorism.

Their material is based equally on the cultural whimsies and political dilemmas of the Middle East. In a Los Angeles interview I asked if their subject matter was a creative choice or if they felt obligated to be ambassadors of their heritage. Tehran-born, California-raised Maz Jobrani explained that they did not deliberately set out to deconstruct stereotypes about Arabs and Persians. "That's not why I became a comedian. The moment you do material based on what's expected, you give up your artistic voice."

The comedians soon discovered that in difficult times, comedy is a persuasive tool for peace. Jobrani cited a specific example of a man who had a revelation after laughing at the Axis of Evil performances. "He emailed me to say he had hated Middle Easterners after September 11th and that he started to [change his] mind as time went by. He said that seeing the TV special helped in that process."

During the peak of the Iraq war, however, there were times that Jobrani was heckled by audience members for criticising the Bush administration. "I took that in stride, as I believed in what I was saying." In his routine, he emphasises the realities of everyday life in Iran. "On TV they show us angry— burning flags. Just once I wish they would show us baking cookies, because

in Iran we do have cookies.”

ABOUT Obeidallah, co-star of Comedy Central's *The Axis of Evil* television special, is a Palestinian

Italian from New Jersey who is currently producing a documentary about Arab American

comedians, *The Muslims are Coming*. For him, comedy raises socio-political issues in an impactful

and entertaining way. He has worked with the Middle East Peace Initiative and American comedians

Richard Pryor and Chris Rock, he hopes his comedy dispels some misconceptions Americans

have about Arabs and Muslims. Write for him. We're looking for your feedback. If you have questions,

comments, suggestions or want to start contributing do not hesitate to

collaborate with us. He is also the co-founder of the *Stand up for Peace Tour* with Scott

Blakeman, who says his Jewish faith compels him to speak out against stereotyping. At the same

time, Obeidallah's *Arab Comedy Festival* co-founder, Maysoon Zayid, is building a platform for

women about the "oppressed Muslim woman, the blood-thirsty Palestinian, and the poor pathetic

comedian." Palestinian American comedian, she is also an activist for cerebral palsy—a condition

she lives and laughs with.

Building bridges is a two-way street. While these comedians are challenging the status quo of

Middle Eastern misconceptions in America, they are also winning hearts and minds in the

Middle East, where they have performed in front of thousands, delivered workshops, mentored

talent and, as Obeidallah added, been witness to "the rise of stand-up [comedy] in the

Arab world, performing in English and Arabic". Kader reflected that "in America I feel obligated

to inform an audience about the Middle East and there I am an American with an obligation to

describe what Americans are feeling."

Sarah Palin, Muammar Gaddafi, Iran's Twitter revolt, Egypt's uprising, racism, country music

and cerebral palsy: no topic is taboo for these comedians as they easily straddle multiple cultures

in their comedy routines. "Make it funny, give it levity, use humility so it's easier to digest and

discuss divisive political issues", said Kader attesting to the ways Middle Eastern American

comedians are debunking myths and transcending politics with humour.

This multicultural comedy is nascent but necessary in a world that is rapidly evolving in the way

it communicates, entertains and informs.

Sadia Ashraf is a public relations, media, communications and fundraising specialist based in

Los Angeles who writes about building bridges and philanthropy.

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As an initiative of the international conflict transformation organization Search for Common Ground, CGNews welcomes all stakeholders to share their perspectives on key issues affecting Muslim-Western relations.

CGNews articles present constructive ideas, provide solutions, humanize the other, offer hope and/or shed light on a variety of issues, including but not limited to: Muslims in the West, The Arab-Israeli conflict, Social and political events in Muslim-majority countries, Interfaith dialogue, Civil society activism, especially women's activism.

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



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