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Israeli-Palestinian conflict a joking matter at comedy night

BY RYAN TOROK

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"Have you heard the one about the Jewish- and Palestinian-American comedians?" is the slogan of Jewish comedian Scott Blakeman's act "Stand-Up for Peace," which he performed with Palestinian comedian Aron Kader at UCLA last month during the university's second annual Middle Eastern Comedy Festival.

Approximately 70 students of a variety of Middle Eastern backgrounds — Iranian, Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli — attended the show on May 18.

"Thanks for sending Palestinian weapons," Kader said to the Iranian students in the audience, one of many jokes that earned laughs.

UCLA sophomore Brianna Fischer organized the event to build bridges between Jewish and Muslim students. She initially set out to start dialogue groups between students but was met with reluctance.

However, Fischer, a student of Middle Eastern studies with a "strong Jewish background," soon received an e-mail from an adviser at UCLA Hillel about Stand-Up for Peace. This gave her the idea to host a comedy show, so she went on to book a room, get advertising, secure the comedians and procure funding from student government organizations to host the event.

Kader, a founding member of the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour — a group of Middle Eastern comedians whose name mocks a phrase used by President George W. Bush to refer to Iraq, Iran and North Korea— substituted for Palestinian comedian Dean Obeidallah, who normally appears alongside Blakeman.

While Blakeman and Kader's humor focused on the conflict, much of Kader's also looked at everyday life for Arab Americans, including bits about family, food, the subtleties of their behavior — "If you're not yelling, you're not talking," Kader joked.

Fischer became interested in holding events like these after going to Israel in 2006, during the country's war with Lebanon.

"I formed a really strong friendship with [Palestinians], and we both had relatives fighting in the war against each other," Fischer said, "and that kind of just impacted me, and when I came back to the United States, I wanted to do something with that."

Can comedy, in and of itself, bring peace to the Middle East? Neither Kader nor Blakeman claim that it can. Rather, at the beginning of the show, Kader made his intentions clear.

"We really just want to be part of the solution," he said.

— Ryan Torok, Staff Writer

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