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### Arab-Americans use laughter to tackle post-9/11 stereotypes

By James Hossack

*Beneath the laughter, the comedy festival raises some of the startling misconceptions and stereotypes confronted by Arab-Americans on a daily basis*

DESPERATE to dispel stereotypes, suspicion and outright racism, a group of Arab-American comedians are out to prove not only that they're not terrorists but that they can also make you laugh.

Ever since the attacks of September 11, 2001, life for America's 3.5 million people of Arab descent has meant being subjected to extra security checks at airports, surveillance and the distrustful glances of those around them.

But for the organisers of the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, now in its fourth year, laughing about it offers the opportunity for people to know they're not alone and to portray the community with a distinctly human face.

"We want to be funny. We also want to change the world," festival co-founder Dean Obeidallah said ahead of this week's shows, which run until Sunday and include stand-up, scripted sketches and film.

Aron Kader, one of the leading names in the festival who normally plies his trade at Los Angeles' Comedy Store, is one of those willing to squarely tackle the whole question of Islamic extremism in his set. "If I were to have a child and if he's a boy, I'm definitely gonna name him Al. Al Kader," joked the 32-year-old, who says he has to thank his Palestinian father and Mormon US mother for giving him so many reasons to be a comedian.

"I've got a cousin named Jihad. It's not a good time to be named Jihad. To Arabs it means a lot of different things, the word Jihad, like 'motivation from God'. Now it just means 'Can't get on this flight!'"

His cousin planned to change his name to Raymond, he said, to avoid the hassle.

"Ok, that's great, then you'll be Raymond ... Abdul Majid." He said he struggled to explain his Palestinian heritage to Americans, even once soliciting the observation: "Oh! You're Jewish?"

"How many rocks do we have to throw?" he joked. Ahmed Ahmed, born in Egypt but brought up in California, is one of the stars in the "Axis of Evil" comedy tour, which has been running since last year.

"It's myself, an Egyptian and two Palestinians. We're still looking for a North Korean," he said, deadpan.

For those who thought even his name might be a joke, he had news:

"It really is Ahmed Ahmed. If you Google my name it comes up on the FBI's 'Most Wanted' list. "When I get on a plane, I know who the air marshal is. He's the one reading 'People' magazine upside down and staring at me," he joked, earning plenty of laughs from the mixed crowd, more than half of whom were Arab-American.

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For Syrian-born Helen Maalik, not even Islamic dress is off limits.

"In some Middle Eastern countries the women cover up from head to toe. What if you're an Arab kid and you get lost in the mall? How do you describe your mother to security? She has no eyes?" She said she pitied the men. "How do they check out the women?... 'You can have the one wearing the flat sheet, I want the one wearing the fitted sheet. Look at the high thread count on her'," she joked.

For co-founder Obeidallah, the most important role of the festival is to show that Arabs can be funny. "Of course I'm half Italian, so it could be the Italian half that's funny," he said with a wry grin. "We want people to have fun and think at the same time," he said. "It's humanising us. We're doing everything we can to redefine us accurately."

But beneath the laughter, the show raises some of the startling misconceptions and stereotypes confronted by Arab-Americans on a daily basis. Obeidallah said telling people he was half Palestinian solicited reactions ranging from "Oh! I love humus" to "But you look so nice," with people even asking him if he could tip them off in the case of a repeat of September 11.

He says a friend suggested he translate his name into English to avoid discrimination. "If I did that I wouldn't be flying anywhere. I would be walking to every show," he says. The translation of Obeidallah? "Servant of Allah". AFP

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