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Jordanians Can Take a Joke, Comics Find

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Comedians from North America found an audience hungry for laughs, even at its own expense, at the Amman Stand-Up Comedy Festival this month in Jordan.

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

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AMMAN, Jordan — For all of the animosity, mistrust and lack of understanding between the West and the Muslim world, this small Middle Eastern country has demonstrated that most people here have the capacity to laugh at themselves — and at jokes about bodily functions, too.

Multimedia

When comedians from North America faced a theater packed with Arabs this month and poked fun at the local practice of marrying a cousin, tweaked Palestinians as being skilled stone throwers, feigned fright at an audience member named Osama, everyone laughed, and laughed hard.

When it comes to humor, apparently, there is no clash of civilizations.

“Back at home people ask me, do Arabs laugh?” said Dean Obeidallah, a stand-up comedian originally from New Jersey who was executive producer of the Amman Stand-Up Comedy Festival. “I will be honest, you guys laugh more than Americans.”

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Indeed, for seven nights in a row, thousands of Jordanians packed into a theater in the center of this city and laughed so hard, hooted, hollered and cheered so easily, the comics themselves were a bit taken aback. Jordanians were hungry for a laugh, even at their expense. Two of the shows were in Arabic, and they sold out, too.

"To make fun of ourselves is good; maybe we can change bad things," said Nader Shaksheer, 16. "Maybe if we made fun of ourselves, there can be more honesty."

Make fun, they did.

Mr. Obeidallah, who hosted the show on the fifth night, teased the audience about their driving and the Muslim practice of taking four wives. "You guys are the greatest multitaskers, Jordanians. I saw one guy driving with a cigarette in one hand, a cellphone in another, driving with his feet."

Big laugh.

He even talked up [President Obama](#), saying his election gave hope that someday an Arab could be president of the United States and then introduce America to "my first lady, and my second lady, and my third lady and my fourth lady."

Amman, which has a reputation as the sleepest capital city in the Middle East, has decided it wants to be the center of stand-up comedy in a region not exactly known for freedom of speech or self-deprecating humor. Stand-up generally requires a political atmosphere that tolerates the challenging of taboos and the mocking of conventions.

That is not the case here, or around the region. In Egypt, insulting the president can lead to a jail term, and officials even grew furious last year when a comedian poked fun at the national airline, EgyptAir. In Lebanon, Mr. Obeidallah said, "We were told, 'Make fun of whoever you want, but if you make fun of [Hezbollah](#), you are on your own.'"

In Dubai, all scripts must be approved in advance by the official censor. In [Jordan](#), where insulting the ruler can lead to prison, as in Egypt, social codes and religious values emphasize conformity, tradition and respect.

So it was a risk when the mayor of Amman, Omar Maani, decided he would try to find a way to bring some levity to a city mired in crisis, with Iraq on one border and the Israeli-occupied West Bank on another.

The experiment started in 2007 when an American comedy group, [Axis of Evil](#) — comics of Iranian, Egyptian and Palestinian ancestry — came to Amman.

"I was nervous it would not take off," Mr. Omani said.

But it did, in a big way. The next year, Mr. Omani invited them back, and this year his city organized the festival. He said he hoped to make it even bigger next year. But there are rules.

No cursing. No making fun of religion. No making fun of the king (or his family). No sex jokes.

No drug jokes. And, of course, no alcohol allowed.

The comedians did not always obey the rules during the festival, at least when performing in English, easing into the occasional profanity and joke about sex or drugs. As long as the audience laughed, no problem.



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The Arabic performers had to be far more careful. "I don't talk about sex, religion, politics, and I don't cuss," said [Wonho Chung](#), a Korean who grew up in Jordan with Arabic as his first language. "It limits you a lot."

To say the least.

Still, Arabs are not new to comedy. There is a long tradition of comedic theater and cinema, and even comic monologues and impersonations. But stand-up and its emphasis on self-deprecation and crossing red lines is uniquely American.

[Aron Kader](#) performed with Axis of Evil before he was asked by Amman officials to give a workshop for young Jordanians. It was as much a learning experience for Mr. Kader, who is half Palestinian and grew up in Washington, as it was for his students. For starters, he said, they didn't know what a punch line was.

That was relatively easy to explain. The more fundamental problem, he said, was that they could not grasp the concept of a point of view. Expressing your opinion is not encouraged in most Arab countries.

"They were surprised you have to have a point of view," Mr. Kader said. "You can't just repeat what you see. How do you see it? You're on stage, why?" Teaching that "was the challenge."

When Mr. Kader returned this year, he found that the audience was already far more sophisticated. "They really didn't understand when we first came here," he said. "So much has changed."

So far, the festival's organizers have been able to keep the social and political commentary within accepted boundaries and laws. But as the comedy develops, many here say, it is inevitable that Jordan will have its own "[Lenny Bruce](#) moment," a reference to the groundbreaking American comedian from the 1950s and '60s who was convicted on obscenity charges, [and finally pardoned](#) a generation later.

"One day, there will be a kid who will say, 'I have something to say,'" said [Russell Peters](#), the Canadian-born comedian who had top billing on the two biggest nights of the show.

Mona el-Naggat contributed reporting.

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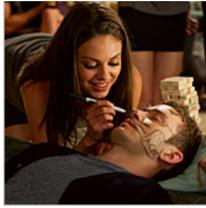
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