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Muslim comics bringing laughs, awareness to Utah

Courtesy photo Aron Kader is a Palestinian American comedian who was raised Mormon. Kader is bringing his brand of humor to Salt Lake City on Saturday with several others in a show called "The Muslims Are Coming."

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Aron Kader thinks it's OK to joke about terrorists. In fact, the Palestinian American comic has made a career out of mocking Arab stereotypes.

Kader also was raised a Mormon, which handed him a minivan full of additional material.

"When I was 19, the Mormons asked if I wanted to be a missionary," Kader said in a recent routine. "You mean, I ride a bike, wear a name tag and sleep in a bunk bed with another boy for two years?"

To an Arab, Kader said, a mission is a whole different deal. "Generally, we don't come back from those," he said to a wildly applauding audience. Kader is bringing his brand of humor to Salt Lake City on Saturday with several others in a show called "The Muslims Are Coming."

The free concert is part of an awareness-raising effort to help Americans in red states better understand the Muslims in their midst.

It's the brainchild of comedians Dean Obeidallah and Negin Farsad, who have seen an upsurge in Islamophobia since the election of Barack Obama, with endless attacks on the Christian president as a "Muslim" (which seems to them code for "bad" or "outsider") and mosque controversies in a number of states.

The two decided to take the comedy tour across America, filming audience reactions and question-and-answer exchanges before and after the shows for a future documentary. They hope to reach people who don't hate Muslims, Farsad said in a phone interview from New York, but are misinformed.

"If each of them could have a Muslim friend," she said, "they'd have a jolly old time."



More than a decade ago, Kader joined Obeidallah, a Palestinian/Italian American, Maz Jobrani, who was born in Iran, and Egyptian-born Ahmed Ahmed in creating a comedy team they called "Axis of Evil," drawn from a George W. Bush speech in which the then-U.S. president used that term to describe Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

The comedians joked about their ethnic heritage, politics and getting frisked in airports. Kader's grandfather came from Palestine to Provo as a peddler in 1912. The comic's father, Omar Kader, joined the LDS Church, and together with his Mormon wife, Nancy, raised their four sons in the LDS faith. His Muslim grandmother lived with them for years, introducing Aron Kader to a Muslim way of life.

When Kader started working in stand-up comedy in 1999, he always threw in Arab/Mormon jokes and, he said this week, they always got a laugh.

"People didn't believe you," he said. "They'd never seen anything like it."

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the team worried that audiences would stay away. But the opposite happened. The comics became more popular than ever on campuses and in clubs, eventually landing their own Comedy Central special.

They mostly speak to non-Muslim audiences and to a more multifaceted, younger generation of Americans. They draw on the tension between modernity and ancient cultural traditions. "On the scale of one to Muslim, I am not the most devout," said Farsad, a Persian American who grew up in Southern California where the family spoke only Farsi. "We were culturally Muslim but didn't follow religious strictures."

She sees her role as "translator" to the larger American audience.

"I'm gonna take this Muslim experience and put it in my Palm Springs foul-mouthed lady dialect," Farsad said. "Then spit it out so the white people can hear it." She also battles another stereotype — being female.

"Muslims could be a little bit better about women," Farsad said, with obvious understatement. "I have boobs and with boobs comes extra responsibility."

Farsad does not worry about offending Muslims or other Americans.

"I am a comedian," she said. "I don't feel that any lines exist for me to cross."

Both Farsad and Kader believe Muslims should take themselves a little less seriously and laugh a little more.

The Arabs who come to the show, Kader said in his routine, "sit in back and say, yes, very good. ... Anyone who thinks Arabs don't have a sense of humor, I will kill you and burn your flag."