

## **Stand-up Comedy in the Middle East**

*Stand-up comedy is a fairly new form of expression in the Arab world. Comedian Dean Obeidallah has performed in Comedy Central's Axis of Evil comedy tour and the Amman Stand-Up Comedy Festival which when it debuted in 2008 was the first comedy festival in the Middle East. He says that young Arabs are finding their own voice.*

*Use the audio player to hear clips from the Amman Stand-up Comedy festival.*

This is Dean Obeidallah. I am an Arab-American Comedian. I performed across the Middle East. I am also the producer of the New York Arab-American Comedy festival and the executive producer of the Amman Stand-up Comedy Festival.

In America, numerous generations have seen stand-up comedy. In the Middle East, it's three or four years that people have seen stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy is a unique way of expressing comedy. Arabs have a long history of storytelling – a long story with one punch line. The idea of punch line after punch line after punch line, talking about things with a point of view, having an opinion on issues, is a little different to them.

When the young people laugh, the older people tend to stare like they are watching magicians trying to figure out the trick. Every now and then you will hear them go "Ha-Ha-Ha! Very funny." And after the show, "It was very funny. I laughed three times! Very good tonight, very good."

It's only the young people who taken to it. Young people because of YouTube and watching television comedy understand this format. [It's] the same jokes here about pop culture. They will get jokes about Justin Bieber the same way the young people get it here.

There is no doubt that young people in the region want to have a voice just like the American young people want to have a voice and impact in politics and policy. There are certain limitations they are going to have there. They are going to run against it even as comics. They are going to [come] up against criticism from government leaders in certain countries. You really can't do it.

In Egypt, you can't make any jokes about President Mubarak or his son, to be quite honest, you can go to jail. There are limitations. There are expressed red lines in most places. You can't make fun of leaders of that country. You can't talk about sex graphically and they don't like cursing that much. They don't want you to make fun of anyone's religion.

Comedy in America and probably in the Middle East as well, you can get away with more because it's comedy. You say, "Oh, they are just joking" and you make these subtle points and sometimes more expressed points. A comedy can be subversive. It has a history of that in America.

Only time will tell if stand-up comedy has a long-term impact beyond entertainment on some social level, like comedy in America's has a social impact.