

WEST OF MIDDLE EAST

A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Maz Jobrani

TITLE: The Axis of Humor: How Comedy Dispels Myths About Middle Eastern Immigrants

SUMMARY: We go to West Hollywood to see how comedy can be a tool to educate people and dispel ugly myths about the Middle East diaspora.

When I met [Maz Jobrani](#), he was hosting a Persian cancer awareness event at a club called The Laugh Factory. Maz is an Iranian comedian in Hollywood, California.

There are a lot of Iranians and others from the Middle East diaspora here to see Maz host. But there's a lot of Americans too.

"Part of breaking all the stereotypes of us being terrorists is that when somebody comes to the show, it's not just about me," Maz says after the show. "But when they look around and they see, in an audience where there's another 100 or 200 people that are of Middle Eastern descent – they're laughing. They go, 'Oh wow, they laugh.' Like, that in itself is a stereotype breaker."

Maz is also an actor. But he's more into comedy these days because, well, Maz has brown skin, a shaved head, and a very Middle Eastern nose. Early on his career, he immediately got typecasted -- as the Middle Eastern Terrorist.'

"That was one where I played an Afghan terrorist who tried to blow up a building in Chicago," Maz says. "And they made me wear a turban even though I was playing an Afghan, and I tried to explain to them that Indian Sikhs wear turbans but they wouldn't listen."

Maz is referring to the CBS special 'A President's Man: A Line in the Sand.' Chuck Norris is a secret agent trying to stop an Arab bad guy with a bomb. Maz is the bad guy. He kept getting these types of roles. Marshall Law with Arsenio Hall. The show 'Twenty-Four' with Kiefer Sutherland. Then one day, Maz's agent showed him a script for a Harrison Ford action film — he'd be auditioning for the role of an Iranian guy in Los Angeles who murders his younger sister in an honor killing. Maz explained Iranians don't do honor killings. Not in Iran, definitely not in L.A.... Maz didn't audition for the part. Or for any other terrorist role ever again. Because Maz started thinking about stereotypes.

"The problem was that we see enough of that in the news," says Maz. "We see enough

of Middle Eastern people being depicted as terrorists. And if you look at it, Middle Easterners, Iranians, Arabs, Muslims, Pakistanis, whatever, I would say probably a very small percentage are actually terrorists. But, if you look at the main stream media, you hear more about us being terrorists then you do about us being successful businessmen or Silicon Valley innovators. So, I realized that, oh wow, these parts don't help anybody."

Maz noticed that when someone plays a Middle Eastern bad guy in a movie, it's received rather differently than when someone plays an American bad guy.

He says one good example of that is the movie *Argo*. In *Argo*, Ben Affleck is secret agent in Iran. In one scene he's in a crowded bazaar with some other Americans. While they're in the bazaar, they pretend to be a film crew. One American takes a picture of an Iranian shop owner's merchandise, and the shop owner goes crazy, yelling and waving his hands belligerently at the Westerners.

"What's interesting to me is that if you had this idea that all Iranians are animals, you would see this movie and go, 'See, they're all animals. They're yelling at these people at the Bazaar. They're just yelling at them for taking pictures.' But the difference is if you go down to Venice Beach down here in L.A., you're going to see the same thing."

Maz says if you go to Venice Beach in Los Angeles County and try taking pictures of a homeless person, or of a street artists without paying him, there's gonna be some yelling.

"And so, when you see that, you go, 'Oh that's just some crazy homeless guy that's American,'" says Maz. "But when you see the Bazaar with the people yelling, you go, 'Ah, told you. They're all like that.'"

Argo is a movie about the Iranian Hostage Crisis in 1979. During the Iranian Revolution, 66 Americans were held hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Iran in protest of America's support of the king, the Shah. Maz had just moved to California a year earlier. Every night, there was news about the hostage crisis. And every day, there were more 'Bomb Eye-Ran' bumper stickers.

"I got a little bit of stuff around the Hostage Crisis. I was in the fourth grade and there was sixth grader who would call you an effing Iranian. And I just remember, you know, feeling bullied by the kid."

That stuck with Maz. Especially now that he has two young kids of his own. Because this xenophobia of the Middle East diaspora hasn't gone away. Last year, in 2016, an [Iraqi graduate student at UC Berkeley got kicked off a SouthWest Airlines flight](#) for saying 'Inshallah' on his cell phone. 'Inshallah' means, 'God willing' in Arabic. It made another passenger uncomfortable. Later an FBI agent interrogated the Iraqi student and told him, 'Tell us everything you know about martyrdom.' Maz jokes if a person is going to bomb a plane, he's not going to be standing out by speaking in Arabic.

“He’s not going to be walking down the aisle with a phone going, ‘Inshallah,’” says Maz. “He’s going to be quiet and have a L.A. Dodgers hat on. But it’s in our minds. It’s in all our minds. And we see it enough in the news where you realize wow, this stuff is real sometimes.”

It is real. Xenophobia about Middle Eastern immigrants is on the rise. A recent AP Poll shows over half [of Americans think the U.S. takes in too many refugees](#) from the Middle East out of fear of getting attacked by one of them. But here’s the thing: there aren’t that many Muslim terrorists in the U.S. FBI data shows that [90 percent of all terrorist attacks in the U.S. since 1980 were not by Muslim Americans](#). Maz shines a spotlight on these false perceptions about the Middle East diaspora, through laughter.

“Laughter is a great way to open the door,” says Maz. “It’s a great way to introduce your community. It’s a great way to get people to listen to you without feeling they’re being preached to. We actually got e-mails – we went on Comedy Central [on our [Axis of Evil Comedy Tour](#)] and we got emails from people going, ‘I never knew you guys laughed.’ Because they didn’t, we’ve never seen us laugh in American film or television programs.”

Maz still takes movie roles once in awhile. He doesn’t mind being a Middle Eastern cab driver, or a security guard. But wouldn’t it be great to be Middle Eastern hero in a movie? Hollywood isn’t quite there yet. So Maz co-wrote and starred in his own movie, called ‘[Jimmy Vestwood: Amerikan Hero](#).’ It’s a comedy about an Iranian immigrant who saves mankind from the next World War.

“There aren’t a lot of people writing scripts where the lead is a Middle Eastern guy who saves the day,” Maz says. “There’s not a Middle Eastern James Bond. There just aren’t those parts. So, if no one else is going to make it, then it falls on our own shoulders to make it, and I did.”

Maz says comedy dispels myths about people from Middle East, because with comedy you share your own community’s story through laughter. It’s like giving people a dose of diaspora medicine, but with a spoonful sugar. Because there’s a lot of division these days. A lot of talk of building walls. Maz Jobrani says finding our common ground through comedy, is one way to break down those walls.

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