

Preserving Palestinian Identity with Laughs



By Amer Zahr

Comedy, in its purest form, is a mode of protest. And for me, as a Palestinian comedian, it's my weapon of choice. Of course, in case the American or Israeli authorities are reading this, I mean "weapon" in the most nonviolent, freedom-loving, moderate interpretation possible.

And since Israel's main goal since 1948 has been the eradication of Palestinian identity (and of Palestinians), most forms of Palestinian protest have taken on the less explicitly political form of cultural preservation. That's right, everyone. Because of Israel's constant denial of our existence and history, we are always protesting. Our mere presence has a constant gravity. *Dabka* is protest. Publishing a Palestinian cookbook is protest. Speaking Arabic is protest. Even eating hummus (and claiming it) is protest.

Back in December, the Internet erupted when American Food Network star Rachael Ray celebrated an "Israeli nite" of cuisine, replete with tabbouleh, stuffed grape leaves, and, yes, hummus. Many commentators reminded her nicely of Israeli aggression, violence, and

appropriation. Some were academic. Others were angry. But I replied in the only way I knew how.

I produced a one-minute video detailing how to make Palestinian hummus. I quickly laid out my recipe. It's quite simple and tasty, if I may say so. And no, to my Lebanese and Syrian friends, I don't add garlic. After describing how to make Palestinian hummus, I turned to how one might make "Israeli hummus." It went something like this:

"Now I'm going to teach you how to make Israeli hummus. It's much easier. You just find a Palestinian who has made Palestinian hummus, kick him out of his house, and just say, 'Zis is iskhaelli khummus.'"

That video got 500,000 views pretty quickly. AJ+, both English and Arabic, made corollary videos about my video, getting almost two million more views. Comedy turned out to be the best way to combat that attempt to appropriate our food, even if Rachael Ray had

You can get away with a lot as long as you're making people laugh. Kings never cut off the jester's head because he was hilarious. Humor is funny like that.

absolutely no idea what she was doing, which, if you've ever watched her, is entirely possible.

As Palestinians, we spend a lot of time trying to keep our narratives alive. Many do it through writing novels. Others achieve it through poetry. Some sing. Lots of us engage in various kinds of activism, through legal channels, demonstrations, or simply sharing Palestine-related things on social media. I choose comedy.



A comedian has a sort of weird, disproportionate superpower. When I'm on stage, I'm holding the mic. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of people are waiting for me to say something. And I have the right to tell those who are rude or rowdy that they have to leave immediately. Of course, that comes with a huge responsibility too. I have to make people laugh. I can't have a bad day at work like most other people. If I'm funny, people love me. If I'm not, well... it's not good. If you were having a bad day, a good comedy show could turn that all around. A terrible comedy show could turn your bad day into something worse than you could have ever imagined.

To me, the best comedian is transparent, honest, and raw. And there's nothing more raw than talking about being Palestinian. We Palestinians routinely feel the full spectrum of emotions on a daily basis. Sadness. Happiness. Depression. Jubilation. Optimism. Pessimism. Sometimes we get them all at the same time. Seventy years of occupation can really mess you up. Freud could have written a dozen books about us.

In the preface to my book *Being Palestinian Makes Me Smile*, I write:

"As a Palestinian, it can be very easy to become consumed by depression and despair. But I have always noticed that laughter and crying are not as different as they might seem. We have all seen people laugh so hard that they begin to cry. But have you ever seen people cry so hard that they begin to laugh? I have. See, not that different."

Let me end by telling you a Palestinian story.

My mother was born in Akka in 1954. She's been an Israeli citizen her whole life. She and her family were exiled from their hometown when she was a teenager. They ended up in California, where she attended college in her early twenties. She met my dad, a



Palestinian refugee who was born in Yaffa. He was raised in Amman and ended up in California for a PhD program in the 1970s. They fell in love, married, moved back to Jordan, had me in 1977, and then got kicked out of Jordan in 1979. I know this all sounds weird to most, but it's pretty normal for us.

Anyway, I tell you all of that to tell you this. Even though I was born in Jordan and raised in the United States, I hold an Israeli passport. I always had the "right" to get it, thanks to an Israeli law that allowed for the children born abroad of Israeli mothers to get their passport. I never did it until 2014, when the Israelis denied me entry into Palestine when I was entering as an American citizen. I didn't want to get banned from my homeland, so I obtained the citizenship of my



Amer Zahr in action.

occupier through a legal loophole. I know this all sounds weird to most, but it's pretty normal for us.

Anyway, I tell you all of that to tell you this. I now enter my homeland as a citizen of Israel. Luckily, for now, they can no longer deny me entry. Of course, this also means they can easily arrest me as a "national security threat," give me "administrative detention," and hold me for months on end with no formal charges or due process. I can't reach out to my consulate. They're my consulate. I know this all sounds weird to most, but it's pretty normal for us.

Anyway, I tell you all of that to tell you this. I've now returned to my homeland a number of times using my Israeli passport. Now, you would think that, like in most countries, upon arrival, my fellow citizen border patrol agent would tell me something like, "Welcome home." But that's not exactly what happens.

Last time I entered, I handed the nice gentleman behind the glass window my native passport. Before opening it, he smiled widely, and then he uttered a few words in Hebrew. I smiled back, and I informed him, in English, that I don't speak Hebrew. His mood quickly changed as he opened my passport and noticed my quite obvious and, as it turned out, quite annoying Arabic name. He went from visibly jovial to noticeably irritated.

But then it got even weirder. He looked at my photo, and then looked at me, still totally perturbed. He proceeded to pose a question that seemed quite peculiar to be directed to a citizen entering his own nation.

"What is the purpose of your visit?" he said.

I replied, "I'm coming home. What's the purpose of *yours*?"

I think I ruined his day.