

A troupe of Muslim comedians prepares to unleash its satirical jihad on the Bible Belt

Sharia Guffaw

by Jack Silverman

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Dear Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey, Murfreesboro anti-mosque activist Laurie Cardoza-Moore and Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain: We've been pretty hard on you in these pages and on our blogs, chastising you for your blatant Islamophobia and laughing at your absurd contention that Sharia law could be imposed in the U.S. in a matter of years. But maybe we've been rash. Here you've been attempting to whip us into a frenzy, warning us that the Muslims are coming, and we've done nothing but mock you.

And now, it turns out you're right. The Muslims really *are* coming to Middle Tennessee. And the latest weapon in their terrorist arsenal? Stand-up comedy.

On Sunday night, "The Muslims Are Coming" — a national tour of Muslim-American comedians — will unleash its satirical jihad at the Mercy Lounge. Stand-up comics Dean Obeidallah and Negin Farsad organized the tour in part to ply their trade, but more importantly, to counter the gross misperceptions about Muslims in America that permeate the media. To that end, they are focusing their efforts on the red states of the South, where anti-Muslim sentiments are highest.

Obeidallah and Farsad aren't naive about the difficulty of their undertaking. "Concerning the people on the far right, I could tell a million jokes to them and I'm not going to change their minds," says Obeidallah, who was featured in the 2007 Comedy Central special *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*. "And the progressives are probably already supporting us. It's the ones in the middle we hope to reach." And because their tour is as much a goodwill mission as a comedy tour, the shows are free, in hopes of attracting the widest possible audience.

Asked how religious he is, Obeidallah replies, "On a scale of what? Zero to jihadist?" He explains that he identifies as both a Muslim American and Christian American — his father was born in the 1930s in Palestine, and his mother is an Italian-American and practicing Catholic. The family celebrated both Christmas and Ramadan. "I didn't find that to be inconsistent," he says. "In Islam, Jesus is a prophet." Furthermore, Obeidallah says that he is like a typical secular person of any religion, as was his father.

Farsad, who is of Persian descent, also describes herself as secular. "We asked the comedians on the tour to rate themselves on a scale from 1 to Muslim," she says. "I'd definitely be at the '1' end. I grew up culturally Muslim, but I don't think about the religious strictures that often, or ever."

But Farsad adds that the comedians on the tour represent a range of levels of Islamic practice. In fact, one of her tourmates is going to try to fast during the tour, because it's Ramadan.

And that's part of the mission of "The Muslims Are Coming" — to counter the monolithic stereotype of Muslims held by many Americans. "I don't want to sugarcoat in any direction," Farsad says. "There are some non-awesome Muslim people. And some non-awesome Christian people too. But I think people have a really warped perception of the Middle East. It's not a monolith. What happens in Saudi Arabia, with women not being able to drive, does not happen in Iran. In Iran, women vote, they drive, they have a higher rate of degree attainment than men. They become doctors, lawyers, engineers."

Farsad and Obeidallah are bringing along two other Muslim comics, Omar Elba and Maysoon Zayid. Elba, an Egyptian-born actor and comic living in Los Angeles, was featured on the Showtime comedy special *Legally Brown*. Zayid describes herself as a "Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey," and says she is a virgin by choice — her father's choice.

They're also traveling with a film crew and recording the tour for an upcoming documentary. (In addition to her stand-up career — she founded the multicultural comedy troupe The Dirty Immigrant Collective — Farsad is also a filmmaker who co-directed *Nerdcare Rising*, a 2008 documentary that follows "Godfather of Nerdcare" MC Frontalot on his first national tour. The film, which Salon's Andrew O'Hehir described as "hilarious and delightful," played the 2008 festival circuit.)

Besides capturing the comedy performances, they plan to film various community outreach activities in each city on the tour. "We're going to set up an 'Ask a Muslim' booth on the street and try to meet people," says Obeidallah. "And we're going to set up a little table and play 'Name That Religion,' where we read passages from the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran, and see if people can guess where they're from."

The comics are well aware that they're heading into the heart of enemy territory, but that's their goal: to get to the core of the cancer that is American Islamophobia, and to try to dissipate it with knowledge, understanding, tolerance and humor. Essentially the message they preach is "Love thy neighbor as thyself" — ironically, a sentiment that seems to be in short supply here in the buckle of the Bible Belt.

In fact, they're so fearless that on Saturday night, they're heading into Tennessee's anti-Muslim ground zero: Murfreesboro, where arsonists famously set fire to construction equipment at the future site of an Islamic center. (Just a month earlier, Ramsey, who was a candidate for governor at the time, publicly criticized the project, saying, "You could even argue whether being a Muslim is actually a religion, or is it a nationality, way of life, a cult, whatever you want to call it.")

The Murfreesboro performance, at MTSU's Wright Music Hall, will also feature Jewish comedian Peter Depp and Christian comedian Monty Mitchell, both from Nashville. Depp is openly gay. "I think it's great," Obeidallah says. "It just happens that we're dealing with the Muslim issue, but we're against homophobic stuff, anti-Semitic stuff, anti-Christian stuff. We happen to be defending our own, because we have to. But the people who hate us tend to hate more than just us." Depp and Mitchell won't appear at Mercy Lounge, but Iraqi-born Nashville comic Ali Alsalman will perform, as will Nashville acoustic pop duo Channing and Quinn.

Obeidallah says that, red state or not, he doesn't anticipate any negative reaction at the Tennessee shows, and he believes that the large majority of Americans are far more tolerant than new reports and talk radio might have us believe. "I don't think the average person is walking around hating us," he says. "They might not be loving us, but they're trying to make it in a tough economy, and I think that's their No. 1 concern. We're way down the list for most people. There are others, though, who have made it a boutique industry, like the Pamela Gellers and Robert Spencers out there, who sell books, and get on TV, and make their living from it."

That's a big part of what the documentary is about, he says — showing that the majority of mainstream Americans are truly tolerant and have no problems with any religion. "The ones who are doing all the demonizing are really extremists on the far right," he says. "They don't represent mainstream America. But sadly enough, they're influencing mainstream America."

And the far right's attempt to foment anti-Muslim sentiment is making Obeidallah increasingly suspicious of Republican politicians. "I just read the other day that David Duke, the former Klan guy, might run for the Republican nomination for president," he says. "And all I could think was, 'Finally, a moderate!'"

But what if all the yahoos on the far right are actually correct, and all American Muslims really are conspiring against us? On behalf of the Ramseys, Cains and Cardoza-Moores of this world, we have to ask: Is the U.S. under imminent threat of Sharia law?

"That's just a bonus if it happens," Obeidallah says, laughing. "We're not really trying to do that. We're just trying to make people laugh. But if we manage to get Sharia law *and* make people laugh, bingo!"

All joking aside, Obeidallah says the whole panic over Sharia law is patently ridiculous. "Frankly," he says, "I have never met a Muslim in America who goes, 'I think America is great, but what would make it better is more laws like Afghanistan.' Muslims here don't want Sharia law. My father and cousins didn't leave the Middle East to turn America into the place that they ran from. They came here for economic opportunities and freedoms. People come here for a reason. America is a special place.

"And even if they wanted to, which they don't, the idea that 2 percent — the Muslim population is 1 to 2 percent of America — is somehow going to overpower the other 98 percent and impose Sharia law, makes you question people's logic, or their own fortitude."

And how can we be sure that Obeidallah and his cronies aren't terrorists, part of a sleeper cell attempting to lull us into a false sense of security?

"If you've seen my act, some would argue it's a form of terrorism," Obeidallah says. "So there might be some support for that. But it's not my Palestinian side you have to worry about. It's my Sicilian side."

"The Muslims Are Coming" Comedy Tour performs at 9 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 14, at Mercy Lounge. Admission is free.