

Saudi TV show becomes a hit by mocking Islamic State

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Dubai, United Arab Emirates: A new TV satire program has become a hit in the Arab world by mocking some of the region's most serious issues, from the intractable Sunni-Shiite divide and religious extremism to the brutality of militants like the Islamic State group.

The show, "Selfie," has also brought a backlash. Islamic State group sympathizers have made death threats against its Saudi star and top writer on social media. One mainstream Saudi cleric denounced the show of heresy for mocking the country's ultraconservative religious establishment. That has made it the buzz of the current Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is the peak television viewing season in the Middle East.

Naser al-Qasabi, the series' star, and its writer Khalaf al-Harbi told The Associated Press in their first interview with foreign media that they expected the backlash, but weren't prepared for the popularity. It's one of the top shows on MBC, the privately owned Saudi network that airs it, and has been the talk of the Gulf press.

Al-Qasabi says the series' dark humor reveals just how tragic the situation across the Middle East has become.

"What's coming is darker," he said. "Maybe I am a bit pessimistic, and I hope that I am wrong, but I don't think I am."

In one of the show's episodes, al-Qasabi plays a would-be "caliph" starting his own Islamic State group-style militia, but he's surrounded by buffoons and hypocrites. His "mufti," or top cleric, never finished school. He struggles to find ways to differentiate his group – his group's flag is the same as IS's notorious banner but with the black and white colors flipped. When one of his cronies boasts of plans for a mass beheading, the "caliph" complains that he wants a new form of execution.

"Behead, behead, behead. That's all you got?" he groans, before suggesting the captives be put in a freezer. It's particularly bitter humor, given the increasingly grisly ways IS has used to kill its captives.

In the show's most popular skit, al-Qasabi plays a Saudi father whose son has run off to join IS. He smuggles himself into Syria, pretends to be a jihadi joining IS and tries to convince his son to return home. It's a more serious episode, showing his horror at IS "perversions" of Islam and at the group's atrocities – and his torment as he tries to avoid committing atrocities himself in his disguise. But it has comic moments as well, as he fumbles his way through militant training and is chased around the bed by a militant bride who is forced on him by the group and who has dedicated her life to pleasing jihadis as a means of going to heaven.

Other, lower-budget Iraqi and Syrian TV shows have mocked IS and other militants. But "Selfie" stands out with its high production values – and the fact that it's a show with Saudi actors on a Saudi network at times mocking attitudes on religion in the kingdom, where there is little tolerance for discussing the many taboos.

In one episode, two Saudi men meet at an airport in Europe and bond over their love of women, alcohol and hard partying. But, though neither is religious, their budding friendship takes a nosedive when they discover that one is Sunni and the other Shiite. They argue until airport security detains them. When police discover they are fighting over a split that happened 1,400 years ago, they send the two a mental hospital.

Another skit lampooned Saudi Arabia's powerful ultraconservative religious establishment and its stance against music. That was the show that prompted cleric Saeed bin Mohammed bin Farwa to accuse al-Qasabi and MBC of heresy.

Columnist Hamad al-Majed also criticized the show in the Asharq al-Awsat newspaper, saying that in its attempt to ridicule extremism the series also disrespected Islamic traditions and made generalizations, especially about Saudi Arabia.

Al-Qasabi told the AP he views his acting career as his own form of "jihad" â€” which in Islam literally means any struggle in the path to God.

"Offering something positive that raises awareness of issues, I see this as jihad," he said. "Jihad is that you raise your children well. Jihad is that you work and are on a path to doing things well. Jihad is that you are good at your work ... Life is one great jihad."

Al-Qasabi and al-Harbi are no strangers to controversy. They both worked on "Tash ma Tash", a long-running comedy that ruffled feathers for its handling of sensitive issues in Saudi society.

Al-Harbi says he wanted to kick it up a notch with "Selfie." He explained the title, saying the show is trying to give a snapshot of Arab society today.

"Selfie's" biggest success, said al-Harbi, is in exposing how extremist groups manipulate religion. He said the show delivered that message to the Arab public more effectively than lectures or government-controlled newspapers.

"I felt this is a weapon that will reach the audience," he said. "If it was just something comical, we would have focused on easy societal issues that aren't dangerous and are guaranteed safe."

- AP