



## **New Series Explores Arab Perspectives on America**

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Ali Amr didn't mince words when he auditioned for a spot on a new reality TV series, "On the Road in America."

"To be honest," the 24-year-old Egyptian said during the tryout, "we have a bad picture of the United States. People say America is a champion of democracy. ... I would like to see that for myself."

Amr had never visited the United States and thought the series would be an exciting way to understand American culture. "You have to travel to a country to really be able to judge the people," he said in an interview last week.

"On the Road in America" follows Amr; Sanad Al Kubaissi from Saudi Arabia; Mohamed Abou-Ghazal, a Jordanian living in Lebanon; and Lara Abou Saifan, a Palestinian living in Lebanon. The 12-part documentary first aired on the Middle East Broadcasting Centre early last year and attracted nearly 4.5 million viewers per episode.

Now it's making its debut in the United States. There will be a preview Tuesday at Landmark's E Street Cinema in Washington, D.C., and the U.S. TV premiere will be Wednesday night on the Sundance Channel.

Production of the documentary began during the summer of 2006, just as conflict erupted in Lebanese and Israeli border towns between Hezbollah paramilitary forces and the Israeli military. The series — produced by Layalina Productions, a D.C.-based nonprofit, bipartisan group that was created after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to examine Arab-American issues, in association with Visionaire Media of Los Angeles — started out as part of a public diplomacy initiative.

"Our original goal was to make a series to provide Arabs with an American perspective," Executive Producer Leon Shahabian said. "We also wanted to make sure it was culturally appropriate so Arab broadcasters would put it on the air."

"The whole purpose was not to have PBS-style documentaries, but a television program that people would actually watch," said production board Chairman Richard Fairbanks, who also served as ambassador-at-large and special negotiator for the Middle East peace process under President Reagan. "It succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

The series begins in D.C., where the cast dines with Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Reps. Sam Farr (D-Calif.) and George Miller (D-Calif.) at Marty's restaurant on Barracks Row. Boxer coordinated the dinner and invited the other lawmakers because they represented regions that the four young people would be visiting.

Farr said he remembers feeling shocked during the dinner conversation. "They said the United States is the most violent nation in the world," he said. "They thought that they would be shot here. That's what they get from our movies and media."

Amr said his family was afraid when he decided to participate in the project. "To be honest with you, we don't like America. We call it the 'mother of terrorists,'" Amr said. "My family called me every day to make sure everything was OK."

While in D.C., the cast also volunteered with the mayoral campaigns of Adrian Fenty and Linda Cropp — who were facing off in the 2006 Democratic D.C. primary — to experience democracy in action.

"I loved the experience," Abou Saifan said. "I like the idea that [Fenty] meets with the people one-on-one and asks them to support him."

Other D.C.-based activities included a meeting at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a tour of the city by Segway, eating at Ben's Chili Bowl, kayaking in the Potomac, appearing on a radio show and singing with the Urban Nation HIP-HOP choir. Although the cast attended other events, including a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing and a meeting with Muslim staffers on the Hill, the producers were not able to include all the footage.

After 60 days of traveling through nearly half of the American states, the cast members felt they had a greater understanding of America.

"Before I came here I saw everything through the government and what it did to the world," Amr said. "But then I found people with different opinions — people who don't support the [Iraq] War, people who are excited to know about other parts of the world. ... I found that people are people everywhere."

The other cast members had also changed their minds by the time Farr reunited with them in California at the end of their trip. "They said that the United States is not a violent nation, but a loving nation. But they also thought this nation has done injustice with its resources because there is so much consumerism," Farr said. "They thought Americans were not appreciative."

Encouraged by the series' success, the producers plan to create a second season with an entirely new cast that will cover even more ground.

"While filming, the cast had the opportunity to visit 24 out of the 50 American states," Shahabian said. "We are hoping to make a second season to visit even more."