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Middle East

Palestinians Soak Up Soap Opera

by **Martin Patience**

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Editors' Note: Seriously Joking was co-produced by Search for Common Ground. In addition to pre-production commencing for the next 20 episodes, the first series is scheduled for rebroadcast on the Palestinian Ma'an Network's 10 local Palestinian TV stations, beginning December 3, to air Saturday, Monday, and Wednesday at 7:30 pm with the three shows being repeated Fridays at 1:30 pm.

BETHLEHEM - A male suitor has approached Zein's family in this West Bank town to ask for her hand.

Some family members have accepted the proposal, but Zein, 15, insists she's too young and doesn't want to get engaged.

How will the problem be resolved? Tune in for the next instalment of Seriously Joking, the first Palestinian television soap opera.

Produced by Bethlehem TV, a Palestinian production company based in the West Bank town best known as the biblical birthplace of Jesus, the 13-part nighttime drama is aimed at Palestinians in their teens and 20s.

Seriously Joking is no Dallas or Dynasty. There are no melodramatic scenes accompanied by swelling music, no tangled love stories. Characters aren't miraculously resurrected as Dallas' Bobby Ewing was one season after his apparent death. If anything, Seriously Joking is closer to British soaps that tend to focus on the nitty-gritty of characters' lives such as the BBC's Eastenders, set in downtrodden East London.

Seriously Joking's appeal is that unlike other fare on Palestinian TV, it focuses on everyday life. It also shatters Palestinians' stereotypes about themselves. "The people in the soap are not dressed in traditional clothing and talking all the time about Palestine and the nation," says Raed Othman, executive producer. "It's about ordinary people."

Show addresses serious issues

The soap revolves around the children of two Palestinian Muslim families and a Palestinian Christian family.

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In addition to looking at social issues including early marriage and young Palestinians falling in and out of love, *Seriously Joking* addresses high unemployment, the impact of nepotism and corruption, and the decision to emigrate in search of a better life.

In one episode, Abu Ali, a father of three, is suspended from his job as an office worker at the local municipality while charges of bribery against him are investigated. In another, Sami, a recent college graduate, applies for a work visa in Canada. His application ultimately is rejected.

Seriously Joking also includes characters not normally associated with Palestinians - at least not on television, says Raeda Ghazaleh, director of the series *Kholod*, a Muslim divorcee and mother of one who successfully runs her own hair salon, is a central player.

Ghazaleh says there was a conscious decision not to concentrate on Israel's occupation of the West Bank because this has become a "normal" part of Palestinian life. "The Israeli occupation is a big thing, of course, and it affects so many details of our life," Ghazaleh says. "But this does not mean that we don't have stories like the whole world, like people loving each other, getting annoyed with each other, not knowing how to find the way to communicate sometimes. We are a nation full of life and stories."

Some subjects such as inter-religious marriage and homosexuality were deemed too controversial. "Palestine is a community that is open to touch upon serious subjects," Ghazaleh says. "But to be able to gain trust and keep building a relationship that could continue to grow, you start slowly."

Mixed reviews

The show was broadcast three nights a week during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on the Ma'an network, which includes 11 local Palestinian stations in the West Bank and Gaza.

The first show was broadcast on Oct. 4 and the last aired on Monday. The entire first season will be rebroadcast in December.

Planning for *Seriously Joking* started in November 2004 when focus groups asked young students at three West Bank universities what problems they face. In January, four young Palestinian writers were drafted to develop the soap opera's script.

While it's supposed to be set in Bethlehem, the soap was filmed mostly in the neighbouring town of Beit Jala. With \$170,000 provided by U.S. Agency for International Development and a relatively inexperienced cast and crew of 32, Othman concedes there were problems. "We did a night shoot which left some of the actors exhausted," he says. "They just weren't used to it."

At Bethlehem University, where some of *Seriously Joking's* scenes were filmed, students gave the soap mixed reviews.



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Salah Suliman, 22, a sociology student, says the series is "great" because "Palestinian actors show the Palestinian situation in a realistic way."

Ali Abraham, 20, a nursing student at the university, criticizes the soap. He says the characters "are always happy" and that it doesn't represent "the hardships that Palestinians face under occupation."

A 20-part second series of *Seriously Joking* already has been commissioned for next year's Ramadan, Othman says. Some characters who were single will be married and have children in the next series.

As for Zein, she didn't get engaged. Her family agreed it should be up to her, so the 15-year-old turned down her suitor.

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* Martin Patience writes for USA today.

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