

How Hollywood Portrays Arabs

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

I love Adam Sandler. From Billy Madison to Happy Gilmore to the Chanukah Song, the predecessor of the Superbad generation has effortlessly conquered the domain of slapstick comedy and inappropriate jokes. But damn you Scuba Steve! If you're going to propagate misinformation about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, do it quietly—or at least in your non-comedic life.

You Don't Mess With the Zohan, Sandler's new flick, takes Hollywood chicanery and stereotypes that denigrate Arabs to an unprecedented level—surpassing hit flicks like the *Kingdom*, the *Siege*, and every Arnold Schwarzenegger and Chuck Norris movie that came before it. I group *Zohan* with other shamelessly racist action movies because a film should at least be minutely funny to be categorized as a comedy. For the Sandler diehards and hilarity-loving skeptics, I should clearly state: using race and prejudices to engender laughter is not the problem. Mel Brooks and the creators of *South Park* exploit stereotypes far beyond anything Sandler has ever done, but unlike *Zohan*, I don't think insidious propaganda and underlying racism drive their comedy. After all, if this hebetudinous clunker was just comedy, Sandler and company wouldn't have, as the *New York Times* reported, sought out Arab actors to give the movie "legitimacy." Their search was successful and a few token Arabs showed their presence to innocuously inform the public that it is okay to vilify the crazy towel-headed terrorists once again.

What makes this movie even worse than many of the unfavorable movies made post-9/11 is *Zohan's* disarming presentation; it is a comedic approach to understanding the inner workings of the substandard Arab people. Like the job stealing Mexicans, the liquor store robbing Blacks, and the HIV infested gays, negative stereotypes in *Zohan* strip down the Arab people to RPG wielding animals that senselessly thirst for Jewish blood.

From the start of the film, Sandler's character, Zohan, is positioned as the altruistic hero—an Israeli Mossad agent who reluctantly kills Palestinian "terrorists," while forgoing his real dream: to cut hair in the US for Paul Mitchell. Zohan is "brave," "lovable," and "funny," and even his stereotypical chauvinism is eaten up by women (and men) throughout the movie—including his eventual Palestinian love interest, Dalia.

Compounded with played out, corny penis gags, the Israeli narrative is interwoven into the fabric of the film, including propagandistic reminiscences by Zohan's father who recalls the oft-repeated myth of being surrounded "on all sides" by powerful enemies during the Six Day War—a war in which Israel preemptively struck and dominated those "enemies." In line with Israeli and Western intelligence, Israel won the war in six days (and five hours, as Zohan's father dutifully reminds us)—so much for existential threats and heroic narratives. Other historical revisions include a reference in a verbal battle between a Palestinian and

Israeli shop owner, in which the Palestinian proclaimed, “Give it up, like you gave up the Gaza Strip!” This biting taunt, while not as blatant as the common stereotype, infers that Israel “gave up” the Gaza Strip and further insinuates that Israel had claim to it. The “humorous” jeer glosses over the glaring reality: Israel still occupies Gaza’s borders, airspace, imports and exports, and has economically strangulated and suffocated 1.4 million Palestinians in the world’s largest open-air prison.

But rewriting history (and regurgitating jokes from 1996) is hardly the movie’s worst crime. The portrayal of Palestinians as ugly, dirty, incompetent, stupid, goat loving terrorists was jammed down the viewer’s throat more times than Zohan’s lame hummus jokes. It becomes obvious to the audience why these good looking, suave, kindhearted Israelis have to kill these evil Palestinian “terrorists”—because they hate Jews more than they hate soap. The most egregious grievance by a Palestinian “terrorist” throughout the film was the stealing of a pet goat. Israel has killed more than 4,000 Palestinians since the start of the second intifada, including nearly a 1000 children, yet the main gripe of these rabid “terrorists” is a stereotypical love for hillside animals. This “inoffensive” scenario is the equivalent of a scene in a Hollywood “comedy” made by a Palestinian filmmaker stereotypically portraying Jews as pissed off about being sent to Auschwitz because they found out that Hitler was going to make them pay for the train ride.

A particular scene in *Zohan* went beyond comprehension: Sandler’s casting agency rounded up a handful of children to play Palestinians throwing rocks at Zohan. What does Zohan do in response to the actions of these soon-to-be terrorists? He gleefully catches the stones and turns them into the equivalent of a balloon animal. One is supposed to toss aside any arising sensitivities and overlook the many instances Israeli snipers and soldiers have shot Palestinian children in the head or taken their eyes out with rubber bullets because of these rocks Zohan takes with a smile. The posturing of the noble and affable Mossad agent is a slick attempt to humanize Israel and make the Mossad (an outfit that has engaged in countless operations of state terrorism) look like the valiant GI Joe force in the Middle East combating jihadi thugs in the name of good. But Sandler’s character is not only a hero, he’s also a humanitarian. There are multiple scenes where Zohan informs the audience that Israelis do their best to minimize the loss of innocent Palestinian life, when an examination of the conflict by Israeli human rights organizations exposes quite the opposite.

Other stereotypes saturate the movie. The Palestinian salon that Zohan gets a job at is described as a dump, Palestinians constantly cheer for the “terrorists,” a crowd of Palestinians applaud the death of “heroic” Zohan (which he faked), and the “terrorists” are so stupid and illiterate that they purchase Neosporin instead of liquid nitrogen to make their bomb to kill Zohan. There is no distinction made between Hezbollah, Hamas, jihadists, and terrorist sexcapading sheiks. Furthermore, the film conveniently illustrates how Israelis in the US, as “fellow” natives of the Middle East, suffer the same discrimination and tribulations as Arabs in a post-911 world. Oddly, Israelis are passed off as “brown” and “other” like the Arabs in the film, yet Zohan’s parents look like European Ashkenazi Jews. Moreover, while Israelis are shown as native hummus loving Middle Easterners, Zohan’s family is portrayed distinctively differently from the backwards Arabs. Zohan’s parents are sweet, comforting, reasonable and accepting from beginning to end, not rigid like their Arab counterparts. Even when Zohan finally captures Dalia’s heart, his parents show up in America and warmly embrace their relationship without question—while Dalia and others resist the notion of a courtship between the two and tells Zohan that her family would never accept him. Ah, if only all Arabs could just get to know Israelis and see how kind, generous,

and amorous they all are, the sooner we could all sit in a circle singing Kumbaya over s'mores and unfunny Zohan hummus jokes.

The worst dialogue throughout this 102 minute laughless action flick is made by Dalia (played by Emmanuelle Chriqui), Zohan's eventual Palestinian love interest. She serves as the omnipotent propagandist—blaming the troubles of the conflict on “extremists” and “hate” on both sides. She endlessly and vaguely laments about how much “hate” there is “over there,” and describes to Zohan that things are “different here.” As any knowledgeable American knows, Palestinians and Israelis love each other here in the US; they frequently have bake sales together; they form sit-ins for blind coexistence on college campuses; and have Palestinian/Israeli karaoke nights where they sing their favorite Beatles tunes like Give Peace a Chance. What Sandler, and co-writers Judd Apatow and Robert Smigel, fail to understand is that before there was Hamas, Yasser Arafat, Fatah, the PLO, or any resistance movement, there was the dispossession of the Palestinian people, whereby 780,000 indigenous Palestinians were displaced from their homeland by Jewish gangs and terror groups. Flash forward 60 years and the Palestinian people are living in squalor in demolished towns and refugee camps enduring a 40 year occupation that strangulates their economy and diminishes any semblance of normalcy or a proper life. What we are to believe by watching this film is that if everyone would just stop “hating” (which Israelis are depicted as clearly willing to do, while Palestinians resist it vehemently) Israelis and Palestinians could effortlessly live together in harmony. But “hate” has little to do with a conflict rooted in a people's desire for basic human rights and an end to oppression.

In the end, everything ends up happy and joyful: Zohan gets the girl, he saves the block from a conniving mall developer, and the “terrorists” stop terrorizing. But the jovial ending left a sour taste in my mouth. As nearly a dozen “nameless” Palestinians were killed by innocent and heroic Israeli soldiers last week and another report of the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza went unnoticed in the US press, people were laughing all over the country at how stupid, feeble, violent and backwards Arabs are. A diehard Sandler fan proclaimed: “He's making it for 13 year old boys. It's Critic Proof.” That's what scares me most of all.

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