

Reality TV Show Follows Arabs in America

By ANNA JOHNSON
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CAIRO, Egypt -- A new reality TV show in the Middle East has a familiar set-up: Take a group of young adults, put them in an RV and film their every move as they drive across the United States.

But producers threw out the formula of partying, petty fighting and outrageous physical competitions and instead focused on a loftier goal _ trying to bridge the cultural gap between Arabs and Americans.

"On the Road in America" debuted earlier this year on the Saudi Arabian-owned satellite channel MBC. It follows four young Arabs _ three men and a woman _ as they travel from Washington, D.C., to California to discover the "real" America.

It was produced by a nonprofit company backed by a string of Washington heavyweights _ Republicans and Democrats _ including former President George H.W. Bush, who aim to fight negative stereotypes of America in the Arabic-speaking world.

The company, Loyalina Productions Inc., has a board that boasts such names as former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and James A. Baker III and former U.S. Representative Lee Hamilton.

But unlike the Bush administration's attempts to win over Arab hearts and minds through radio and TV stations here, Loyalina, which means "our nights" in Arabic, is privately funded.

Loyalina founder Richard Fairbanks, a U.S. ambassador-at-large under President Reagan, said he hopes shows such as "On the Road in America" have something the U.S. government-financed programs do not _ credibility.

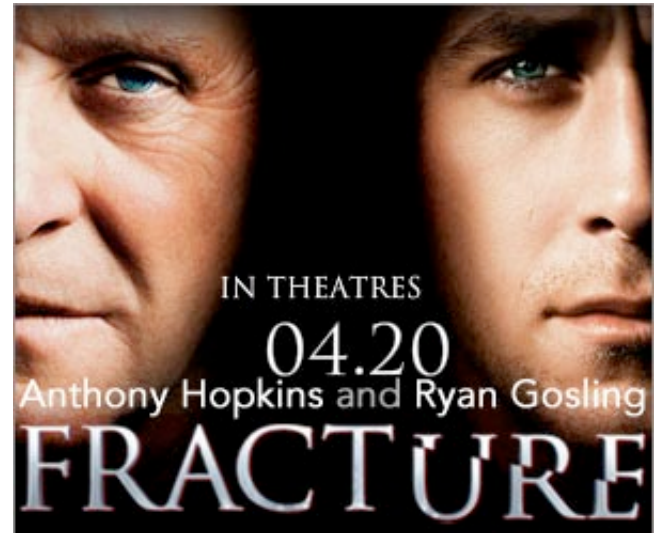
"I thought the best way to do it was with the private sector and have it appear on media outlets in the region and appeal to people there," Fairbanks said. "I hoped we could produce programming ... that would have a positive impact on critical thinking and show a different view of the United States."

During filming of the 10-week road trip, the show's quartet _ an Egyptian, Ali Amr; a Saudi, Sanad Al Kubaissi; a Lebanese, Mohamed Abou Ghazal; and a Palestinian, Lara Abou Saifan _ met with politicians, blues musicians and church leaders as well as ordinary Americans while riding horses in Yellowstone National Park, playing softball in Chicago and touring Universal Studios in Los Angeles.

In the last two episodes of the 12-part series, they returned to visit their home countries.

The show is not an American lovefest. The foursome freely express their opinions _ both positive and negative _ about America and its relations with the Arab world.

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During one radio station appearance in Washington, for example, Saifan, a Palestinian who lived in Lebanon, declared her support for Hezbollah, which the U.S. considers a terrorist group. Her opinion drew objections from the radio host.

Haynes Mahoney, a public affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, said the show fills a void because it shows Arabs and Americans in way not often depicted in the news or movies.

"We believe that peace and our country's security in the long run really depends on having a mutual understanding between people ... This kind of program helps to do that by humanizing both sides," Mahoney said.

Series creator Jerome Gary carefully selected the show's cast, knowing he needed outgoing young adults who were skeptical about the U.S. _ but who also wanted to see the country for themselves.

He hopes the show will find a U.S. distributor and be aired in America.

"There is a big colossal misunderstanding between Arabs and Americans," Gary said. "And I want us to understand one another."

Before visiting the United States, Amr disliked the U.S. and worried everyone would think he was a terrorist. But said he was surprised that most people were friendly and interested in learning more about him.

Now that Amr is home in Cairo, he is trying to share his new optimistic American perspective with friends and family.

But some remain unconvinced, he said.

"My picture of the country has changed," Amr said recently at a Cairo coffee shop. "I hope this show lifts the gap between American people and Arab. I know my mind is open and my eyes are open."

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