

Mo: Netflix series shows complex, painful, comic sides of an immigrant's life

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Mo is an American comedy-drama streaming television series that premiered August 24, on Netflix. It features Mohammed Amer as an undocumented Palestinian refugee, Mo Najjar, living in Houston. The eight-episode season was co-created by Amer and Egyptian-American Ramy Youssef. The latter has his own award-winning series, *Ramy* (2019-present) on Hulu, about a millennial American Muslim in a New Jersey neighborhood.

Mo Amer is well known as a standup comic in the US, with two Netflix comedy specials ("Mo Amer: The Vagabond" and "Mo Amer: Mohammed in Texas") under his belt.

Amer's parents were displaced from Palestine to Kuwait, where he was born before the family was forced to flee to Texas during the 1991 Gulf War.

With an ebullient, captivating presence, Amer delivers rapid-fire, humorous and insightful material that targets several different circles of hell in America: the chaotic, crisis-ridden state of affairs in the US and in Houston—one of the country's largest cities—as a whole, the horrific plight of the undocumented immigrant in general and of Palestinians and refugees from the Middle East in particular.

"It speaks to a second generation statelessness ... and the ripple effect that happens from being stateless ... Once you're waiting for your asylum to be granted, you're just out there, no home on paper," Amer commented in an interview. A "refugee free agent," is how he terms his status.

Unlike a good many films and television programs at present that aim at capturing social reality, *Mo* proceeds in a vivid, multifaceted, compassionate manner, devoid of self-pity or self-conscious gloom. In the sometimes desperate conditions the creators see more than oppression, they see life and struggle. *Mo* moves forward as a series of vignettes, but also has a core drama. A review like this can only provide an overall sense of the program, so the reader must see it for him or herself.

The series is semi-autobiographical. It follows Mo Najjar, who lives with his mother Yusra (Farah Bsieso) and brother Sameer (Omar Elba), a young man clearly on the spectrum. The three have been waiting to be granted asylum for over 20 years—since Mo arrived in the US when he was nine. Estranged sister Nadia (Cherien Dabis) resides in nearby Galveston with her son and Canadian husband, through whom she obtained legal status.

Other central characters include Mo's Latina girlfriend Maria (Teresa Ruiz) and his childhood friend Nick (Tobe Nwigwe), a

Nigerian-American.

As the series opens, Mo loses his job in a cellphone store. Trilingual (in real life as well) and tech-savvy, he is an asset to the business. But his boss fires him for fear of an ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raid. "Not the first time ICE ran me out of a job," Mo complains. Survival now means hawking fake luxury merchandise out of his car's trunk. His fast-taking salesmanship generates hundreds of dollars from the cheap knock-offs.

The relationship with Catholic Maria is complicated by Yusra's displeasure that she is not a Muslim. Always insisting to his family that Maria's on the verge of converting to Islam, Mo strains to find cultural points of convergence, such as likening a nun's habit to a hijab.

Later on in that same episode, Mo is in a grocery store buying cat food for Sameer, whose feline companion helps him function. "Would you like to try some chocolate hummus?", asks a worker giving out free samples. Appalled, Mo retorts, "Did you say chocolate hummus? You just insulted my grandmother. Yeah. F---your lineage. To hell with your culture." "Lo siento [I'm sorry]," responds the store employee, apologetically, "I didn't know that hummus was Mexican."

Ruffled feathers are smoothed when Mo offers her some of his mother's homemade olive oil, which he carries around in a small bottle like holy water.

When Mo gets wounded during a shooting in the store, he refuses to be brought to the hospital for lack of insurance, telling his mother that "I got shot-[shootings in the US are] a craze."

(In an interview with *Vulture*, Amer talks about the incident in *Mo*: "But absolutely I wanted that in there. It's such a unique thing for a refugee to end up in America and then get shot in Texas, right? To flee war for that. And quite frankly, it happened to someone from our village who ended up in Houston, Texas, who worked in a convenience store and unfortunately was killed. It wasn't a mass shooting, but he was killed. God have mercy on his soul. It was deeply personal to me. I was just worried about so many different implications.")

Periodic flashbacks that include scenes of the family being terrorized at checkpoints in the Middle East and the Najjar family's wrenching separation in Kuwait both elevate the tension and create something of a historical context for the comedy-drama.

Frequently mistaken as "Mexican" or "Pakistani," Mo, in identifying himself as a Palestinian to a Texan, and hearing

“Shalom” in response, curtly replies: “Yeah, it’s a real branding issue.” At another point, he describes an arcade game to his friends: “It’s like throwing rocks, Palestinians should be the best at this.”

Intervals of card playing at an Arab cafe generally involve a Jewish American (Alan Rosenberg) and some of Mo’s boisterous relatives, one of whom marries a very blond and very large Texas woman. One card-game discussion centers on the 1967 War which exiled “millions of Palestinians.”

An atmosphere of emotional anxiety is almost ever-present. Mo argues at one point: “Never tell someone to relax when they’re in a stressful situation. It never works—when has screaming in Arabic calmed anyone down?”

The lines are clever and pointed throughout. In one scene, a shop clerk’s tasting of Yusra’s olive oil leads to the barbed remark: “This is the oil we should have invaded Iraq for.”

(In his television special, *Mohammed in Texas* [2021], the comic commented about the “three trillion dollars” that “appeared” in the COVID crisis amid the danger of financial collapse: “Let’s funnel it into the Ponzi scheme that is the stock market. Because the stock market is a direct reflection of American hearts everywhere. … It’s skyrocketing! … We’re at home … How is this thing going up? … Homelessness is at an all-time high … Fifty million people unemployed … How is this arrow still going up?”

And more: “Who you voting for? Red or blue?,” he’s asked. “All of you are gangsters. I’m with the people. Always will be with the people. … They’re trying to separate us.”)

One of Mo’s job-seeking efforts involves applying at a strip joint. In offering him employment, the seedy club owner says, “You wouldn’t be the first illegal, but you would be the first Arab.” “Glad I could break that glass ceiling for you,” counters Mo.

In a biting sequence, Maria approaches a wealthy former classmate and her “crypto”-complacent husband for a business loan. What emanates from the couple’s “we want to give back” liberalism is nasty condescension and arrogant stupidity.

Eventually, Mo lands a job in an olive grove run by a fiddle-playing white Texan. He is now “a refugee picking olives with immigrants.”

The family’s journey through the asylum system is comically painful and surreal. Their claim is based on the fact that Mo’s now-deceased father had been tortured. The Najjars’ incompetent, self-involved lawyer is quick to take money without producing results. She expects the business because she is Palestinian and a family acquaintance. In a recurring joke, she is never able to locate Sameer’s citizenship application. “It’s OK, we’ll just Xerox yours and change the name,” she tells Mo.

To everyone’s surprise, Mo replaces her with a Jewish immigration attorney, Lizzie Horowitz (Lee Eddy), who overcomes numerous obstacles and much callous officialdom to bring the Najjars’ case before a judge.

“We needed to highlight how much of a mess the immigration system really is,” says Amer in an interview, whose real-life immigration attorney consulted on the show. “You would think that in a technologically advanced world that it wouldn’t be.”

The wall separating Texas and Mexico receives treatment in the

series, as Mo inadvertently finds himself south of the border (“I deported myself”) in the hands of coyotes, who are profiting from the nightmarish ordeal of the undocumented.

Towards *Mo*’s season finale, the protagonist sums up: his family was forced out of Haifa, Palestine by the Israelis; there have been “80 years of bombs. Bullets and teargas. Hell they built a wall separating families … separating people from their own land.”

In the *Vulture* interview, Amer notes that “walls have never worked. We’re trying to build one now in between Texas and Mexico … Having borders to understanding another person’s plight, trying to separate yourself from it, is not going to work. What you resist shall persist. Once you have a wall up, it’s not going to resolve your issues. It’s only going to make matters worse. Creating more separation is not the answer, and creating more understanding is.” Amer refers to the “anger and the emotions [that followed] what happened last year in Sheikh Jarrah.”

(In May 2021, a number of Palestinian families living in the occupied East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah were ordered by the Jerusalem District Court to permanently leave their homes so that Jewish settlers could move in. News footage showed Israeli police and settlers attacking Palestinians in the occupied neighborhood and during Ramadan prayer services at Al-Aqsa Mosque.)

There is an element of retribution in history. The irony of this appropriately piercing series is that a Palestinian-American is now in a position to bring to a mass audience elements of the Middle East’s tragic encounter with US imperialism. Despite countless bombs and relentless propaganda aimed at suppressing the truth, *Mo* is appealing to young Americans in particular who themselves are being radicalized.

Along the way, *Mo* also demolishes various stereotypes about “Arab terrorists and fanatics.” At the same time, the series’ humor is directed against the moneyed elite (“nothing is enough for the rich”). Amer’s history as a Palestinian makes him keenly aware that the official version of America’s “forever” wars in the Middle East is a pack of lies, as is the hogwash that Texas is nothing but the land of “rednecks.”

In fact, the series shows that in Amer’s “beloved” Houston working-class suburb of Alief, cultural fluidity finds expression in many aspects of life, not the least of which is the fact that some 80 languages are spoken there. In showing the “planes, trains and automobiles of a refugee,” as he told *Variety*, and especially his family’s agonizing history, he wanted to puncture the image that Texas is “a bunch of people just hanging out, bein’ racist!…It’s nice to shift that cognitive frame and show people how diverse Houston is and how much it has to offer.” The same can be said about *Mo*’s presentation of the human condition as a whole.



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