

10. "We want to deconstruct the radical discourses in society"

Julia Gerlach with Younes Al-Amayra

Julia Gerlach: Dear Younes, for many young Muslims and young Arabs in Berlin, you are a star. They follow your comedy show on YouTube. Would you please introduce yourself? Who are you?

Younes Al-Amayra: My name is Younes Al-Amayra. I have a degree in Islamic Sciences from the University of Kiel, and today I run the *Datteltäter* project with several colleagues. We started in 2015, and since 2016, we have been part of the FUNK content network program run by the ARD and ZDF. We are a YouTube channel and publish comedy videos every week. That's my main job at the moment. Before that, I worked on a project with young people dedicated to the deradicalization of extremism based on religious extremism. Some of these young people had IS experience or had just returned from Syria and other areas of conflict. I even worked as a primary school teacher at some point and have been involved in various other projects, as well. But in brief, that's what I do.

J.G.: One of these other projects is the Datteltäter Academy, right?

Y.A.: Exactly. We started in 2020. The idea behind it is to give young talented POC all they need to get their own creative projects started. These are primarily in digital formats. We offer everything that we ourselves might have needed when we started the *Datteltäter* channel. That ranges from training them to get the lighting just right to developing marketing and social media management skills. We provide sessions on how to develop ideas, how to write scripts, and how to create After Effects in animation. Most importantly, we offer a network and want to help this new generation of influencers make their voice heard.

J.G.: Who are the participants?

Y.A.: Most of them define themselves as Muslims. All of them are POC. We have some who already have experience in digital formats. Some have even been quite successful already. Others are just starting out in their careers.

J.G.: As for your own videos, it seems your topics have changed quite a bit in the last few years, right? When you started, you were famous for your jokes about Jihadists. Now you talk more about racism and other more general topics. Was that a conscious decision?

Y.A.: Yes and no: Our objective is to look at topics relevant to young people in our communities and to create comedy focusing on these issues. When we started on the whole topic of radicalization, IS played a significant role in the discussion. The other big topic was talking about refugees. Through comedy, we wanted to deconstruct the radical discourse and raise awareness and sympathy for the fate of the refugees. So, we created a large number of videos on these topics. As the discourse in society has changed, we have also shifted our focus to other areas. I think we have actually told all of the relevant stories we wanted to tell in the fields of radical thought and IS. And we find other topics more interesting now.

J.G.: Talking to some Imams and theologians, even those of Salafist orientation, it seems they are observing the same shift. Radical Islam is not trendy anymore.

Y.A.: We never tackled those topics from a theological perspective. That's not our role. We are not Imams – even if we sometimes dress up like imams. We're interested in the everyday experience of young Muslims and young POC. That's our angle. We look at relationships and conflicts in families, explore the problems of young people in school and with their peers, and so on. We initially started featuring topics on Muslims – that's true. In the beginning, it was essential to have a specific profile. People watch you because they want to see that particular thing. But now we have shifted more and more to topics on migrants in general, and we have more and more topics that are not at all related to Islam or Muslims. This is because the general discourse in society has shifted, and we have more and more viewers from various parts of society.

J.G.: So, do you make fun of racism now instead of Islamism?

Y.A.: No, we would never make fun of racism, and I wouldn't use the term Islamism in this context. What we do is use comedy as a way to raise awareness for these topics and deconstruct social discourses. Racism is a big topic in society and for our target group. That discussion started a long time ago, but since the death of George Floyd, it has been getting more critical for broader sections of society. It becomes apparent

in the way the media, in general, reports incidents. At the same time, anti-Muslim discrimination still plays a role in people's everyday lives. Just think of the whole issue of women wearing headscarves. When individuals are targeted, that can be very tough. Media attention has shifted away from the focus on IS, but just look at how they are now reporting on Arab clans. It's not better than what was before – it's just different.

J.G.: In 2016, you became a part of Funk, the social media content network run by the public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF. That was a big step.

Y.A.: Yes, we are very happy that we can reach many viewers outside our community. Even though we get a lot of criticism, some people believe that we have become part of mainstream media or even belong to the establishment.

J.G.: That wouldn't be the worst thing to achieve, I would say. – You grew up in an Arab family in Berlin. How has the Arabic landscape of Berlin changed since then?

Y.A.: I grew up in Pankow, and we spoke Arabic at home. Or let's say they spoke Arabic, and I would answer in German. Back then, there were not many Arabic goods or shops in this part of the city. My father often took us to Turmstrasse to buy meat, and we sometimes went shopping for Arabic food in Neukölln or Wedding. Now you can find Arab-owned shops in many parts of the city, and the variety is much more extensive. In recent years, the arrival of many people from Syria also added to the cultural scene. I must admit that I am not involved in this Arabic community. I belong more closely to the Muslim community, and my work is mostly online. So, I can't really comment on new Arab cultural experiences in Berlin.

J.G.: As a last question, I want to return to this book's title, Arab Berlin. Being an Arab in Berlin, what is your dream for the future? What would you like to achieve?

Y.A.: I would like the image of being an Arab to change. Just imagine, in some primary schools, students are still not allowed to speak Arabic or Turkish, not even during the breaks. Only slowly and only very few schools are teaching Arabic as a language. Being an Arab is widely viewed as something negative. That's a pity, especially considering our rich Arab culture and literature, our fantastic poetry. Think of cities like Aleppo in Syria. This is the city where our global civilization began, but nobody talks about it because the public is busy talking about violence, crime, clans, and other problems. To put it briefly: It's not always a lot of fun to be an Arab in Berlin. We need to work on it. How? We need education, documentaries – and perhaps TV series because this is how you might *really* change something in society. We need something *positive*. I don't want to be stuck with stories about Arab clans for the rest

of my life! I would like people to see Arab Berlin as controversial, perhaps, but mostly attractive – something they want to learn more about and will find very tasty!