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Younger Muslims Tune In to Upbeat Religious Message

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CAIRO -- Muna el-Leboudy, a 22-year-old medical student, had a terrible secret: She wanted to be a filmmaker. The way she understood her Muslim faith, it was haram -- forbidden -- to dabble in movies, music or any art that might pique sexual desires.

Then one day in September, she flipped on her satellite TV and saw Moez Masoud.

A Muslim televangelist not much older than herself, in a stylish goatee and Western clothes, Masoud, 29, was preaching about Islam in youthful Arabic slang.

He said imams who outlawed art and music were misinterpreting their faith. He talked about love and relationships, the need to be compassionate toward homosexuals and tolerant of non-Muslims. Leboudy had never heard a Muslim preacher speak that way.

"Moez helps us understand everything about our religion -- not from 1,400 years ago, but the way we live now," said Leboudy, wearing a scarlet hijab over her hair.

She said she still plans a career in medicine, but she's also starting classes in film directing. "After I heard Moez," she said, "I decided to be the one who tries to change things."

Masoud is one of a growing number of young Muslim preachers who are using satellite television to promote an upbeat and tolerant brand of Islam.

Television preaching in the [Middle East](#) was once largely limited to elderly scholars in white robes reading holy texts from behind a desk, emphasizing the afterlife over this life, and sometimes inciting violence against nonbelievers. But as TV has evolved from one or two heavily controlled state channels to hundreds of diverse, private satellite offerings, Masoud and perhaps a dozen other young men -- plus a few women -- have emerged as increasingly popular alternatives.

Masoud and others promote "a sweet orthodoxy, which stresses the humane and compassionate" as an alternative to "unthinking rage," said Abdallah Schleifer, a specialist in Islam and electronic media at the American University in Cairo.

As a "contemporary figure," Masoud is fast becoming an influential star among youth from "a middle-class full of yearning" who will eventually become decision-makers across the Middle East, Schleifer said. And as a product of American-founded schools in the region, Masoud is able to speak with authority about Western values in a way many others can't. His most recent show, a 20-part series that aired this fall on Iqra, one of the region's leading religious channels, attracted millions of viewers from [Syria](#) to [Morocco](#). Clips of the show appeared immediately on [YouTube](#), and fans downloaded more than 1.5 million episodes onto their computers.

"We don't need someone to tell us that if we don't pray we will go to hell -- we need someone to follow," said Adham el-Kordy, 23, an Egyptian who is studying to be a gynecologist. "He talks about things that happen to me every day."

The new Muslim televangelists are riding a satellite TV boom that began after the [Persian Gulf](#) War in 1991, when the region's elites were shocked by the power of [CNN](#). The Middle East now has at least 370 satellite channels, nearly triple the number three years ago, according to Arab Advisors Group, a Jordan-based research firm. Among channels that offer news, movies and music videos are 27 dedicated to Islamic religious programming, up from five two years ago.

On the religious channels, some funded by governments and others by wealthy investors, voices such as Masoud's still compete for attention with extremists'. It is too soon to fully gauge the long-term impact of the youthful preachers, but interviews with viewers as well as religion and media analysts made it clear they are a rising force.

"Governments have realized that the good old days of controlling what people watch on TV are over," said Jawad Abbassi, general manager of Arab Advisors Group. "This has also rattled the religious conservatives. They don't like it that suddenly there is competition."

In her home in northern [Egypt](#), Leboudy teared up when talking about Masoud. "Without satellite, I never would have heard of Moez," she said. "He is something I have been searching for my whole life."

'I Try to Give Them Hope'

On a recent Monday night in [Alexandria](#), the ancient Mediterranean city on Egypt's north coast, more than 1,500 people poured into a huge hall to hear Masoud speak.

The crowd divided by sex, as is customary in much of the Muslim world. Women sat on folding chairs behind men who sat close to the stage on large red carpets. A few women wore black veils covering everything but their eyes, but most wore brightly colored veils that covered only their hair. Many wore tight designer jeans and carried expensive purses. The men were mostly cleanshaven and stylish, wearing jeans and

[Timberland](#) and [Nike shoes](#).

They were mostly in their late teens or 20s, university students or young professionals who had heard about the event on Masoud's Web site or on his popular page on [Facebook](#).

Most of them had first seen Masoud on his recent series on Iqra, called "The Right Way." The show was filmed in [MTV](#) style, with quick-cut camera shots showing Masoud on the streets of [Cairo](#), [Istanbul](#) and [London](#), and Jiddah and [Medina](#) in [Saudi Arabia](#). Masoud interviewed young Muslims and non-Muslims on topics such as alcohol and marijuana, veils for women, romance and terrorism. As he spoke in London, the bare legs of British women in miniskirts walking past him were blurred out to conform to Muslim standards of modesty.

As the lights came up in Alexandria, Masoud, tall and trim, wearing corduroy pants and a maroon, open-necked shirt, descended stairs at the back of the stage to loud applause.

"Salaam aleikum," he said, urging his audience to bow their heads for an opening prayer. For the next 90 minutes, Masoud worked the stage like a seasoned performer, his voice rising and then falling to a whisper, mixing Koranic verses with jokes and parables.

"We will be responsible to God on Judgment Day," he said, arguing that violence against non-Muslims violates God's will. "He will ask: Did you represent our religion correctly? If you feel happy that non-Muslims are being killed, this is wrong. They are our brothers."

Many Muslim preachers say it is sinful for unmarried women and men to mingle without supervision. But Masoud told his young crowd that while sex before marriage was wrong, it was important for men and women to get to know one another.

"A lot of Muslims act as if we can't enjoy this life, we can only enjoy the afterlife," he said. "That is not right. We should enjoy life, enjoy music and art. This life is ours and we should enjoy it." But, he added, "If you really truly love God and feel that all your pleasure comes from God, anything else will pale in comparison."

As soon as Masoud finished, dozens of young people pushed toward the stage to talk to him. "He's better than [Brad Pitt](#)," one woman said.

Some handed Masoud their cellphones. He punched in his number, so they could send him a text message with their question.

"He talks to young people the way we talk," said Raguia Rihane, 21, an electrical engineering student wearing a veil and a denim jacket. "I want to be right in everything I do, but to live happily while being right. He makes us understand our religion in a correct and simple way."

For nearly two hours after the end of the lecture, Masoud took people aside and listened to their problems, some told through tears.

"They feel there's no hope for them, so I try to give them hope," he said, when an aide finally coaxed him from the crowd. "There's a market gap for that. There's a niche that needs to be filled."

Redefining 'Muslim'

Masoud speaks like an advertising executive because he is one; his preaching is only part time. His day job is producing and directing commercials. He has written some musical jingles, including one for a Chinese restaurant called Wok and Roll, set to the American oldie "Rock Around the Clock."

He grew up in [Kuwait](#) and attended American high school there, later graduating from the elite American University in Cairo.

His easy fluency with English and American culture adds to criticism that Masoud and other new-generation preachers, such as the well-known Amr Khaled, are pushing a sort of Westernized "Islam lite." After his speech in Alexandria, an angry older woman in a black veil pushed her way to the front of the crowd. "Why don't you talk more about punishment?" she said, urging a more tough-love approach to preaching.

Masoud smiled at her and said, "Thanks for your advice."

In an interview in his Cairo apartment, where he lives with his wife and young son, Masoud said he has memorized the entire Koran -- he recites long passages with ease. He said he has spent the past six years in intensive study of Islam with renowned scholars, including Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt.

As fundamental teachings, Masoud advocates adherence to prayer five times a day, peace toward all and abstinence from alcohol, sex outside of marriage and violence. Beyond those principles, he said, Islam is suffering from a "crisis of interpretation."

"I'm sure [Osama bin Laden](#) knows a lot of the Koran," he said. "But when a Muslim celebrates when the Twin Towers collapse, you have a big problem."

When a Danish newspaper printed unflattering cartoons of the prophet Muhammad last year, Masoud and three other young Muslim preachers went to [Denmark](#) for dialogue, over the angry objections of more traditional preachers who urged confrontation.

In recent years, Schleifer said, the Arab world has been increasingly "Westernized" by [Hollywood](#) movies, sexually charged music videos and even television's [Dr. Phil](#) and "[The Price is Right](#)." Some Muslims have reacted with extreme, fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, while others have turned secular. Masoud, Schleifer said, offers a middle-ground solution, balancing religious devotion with an acceptance of modern life.

Relaxing with a cup of Nescafe, Masoud picked up his acoustic guitar and strummed the catchy theme music he co-wrote for his recent TV show. It has become a pop hit in Egypt and is used as a cellphone ring tone by many young people.

"There is no contradiction between real Islam and the modern world," Masoud said. "We have to redefine the word 'Muslim' for the world."

Masoud has bookshelves filled with illustrated Korans and Bibles alongside [James Joyce's](#) "Finnegans Wake" and "Ulysses." His video collection contains dry religious titles next to "The Godfather" and "Reservoir Dogs."

He interrupted an interview to pray. When he spoke, he frequently invoked the prophet Muhammad. But he also quoted [Bob Dylan](#), [Metallica](#) and [Eddie Vedder](#) of [Pearl Jam](#), whose songs he stores on the USB memory stick hanging from his key chain.

Masoud said that when he was a student he "lived a party lifestyle," drank, smoked, experimented with drugs and had many girlfriends.

That changed in 1995, when six people he knew died: three in car crashes, the others from cancer, a fall and a drug overdose, respectively. That year, Masoud learned he had a tumor on his spleen that required emergency surgery.

"People were dying all around me," he said. "I said, 'Allah, get me out of this one and I'll be a better person.' "

On the first day of 1996, he said, he devoted himself to God and began memorizing the Koran. He started giving talks about Islam and eventually caught the eye of producers at Arab Radio and Television, a satellite network that aired his first shows in the fall of 2002.

Compassion for Gays

In a shopping mall in Amman, Jordan, about 300 miles northeast of Cairo, a 30-year-old man named Ibrahim settled into a coffee shop chair. Two months ago, he said, he was channel surfing on his satellite TV when he came across Masoud talking about homosexuality.

"Finally somebody was speaking for me; this changed my life," said Ibrahim, who spoke on the condition that his last name not be published.

Ibrahim said he has had homosexual desires since he was 10. He said he asked his parents about sex, but they were not comfortable discussing it. He turned to religious books and came to the conclusion that sex between two men was "wrong and unnatural."

He said he has been trying to suppress his desires ever since. Filled with guilt and suicidal over his attraction to men, he said he eventually turned to a psychiatrist who prescribed antidepressants.

"I kept my secret for 18 years," he said.

In his TV show, Masoud preached that Islam forbids gay sex. But he argued that people who feel such urges cannot help feeling them. He said that those desires were a test from God, and that resisting them was a sign of strength and faith. He urged Muslims to show compassion rather than condemnation.

Ibrahim said that changed the way he felt about himself.

"Because of Moez, I am more self-confident," he said. "He told me that God selected me out of everyone to give me a very difficult test. So I have tasted a very unique flavor of spirituality that others haven't."

Ibrahim said too few people in his country discuss homosexuality -- he can't tell his family. He said he would like to create a center where gays can meet with religious counselors without fear of stigma.

"Moez has inspired me," he said. "Maybe I can even be a religious preacher one day."

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