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TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East
“The Information Bubble”

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FEATURING

Khalid Albaih

Artist and Political Cartoonist

CSIS EXPERTS

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Jon Alterman: Khalid Albaih is a Sudanese cultural producer, artist, and political cartoonist. Khalid, welcome to Babel.

Khalid Albaih: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

Jon Alterman: You've been doing political cartoons for years and years. How did you get started doing political cartoons?

Khalid Albaih: I started doing comics. I really liked comics—reading translated DC and Marvel Comics. After that, I was introduced to the two things that collided the two worlds that I was interested in: comics and politics. I wanted to know more about politics because at the time I was a teenager, and my dad had to leave Sudan. My dad started getting these two Egyptian political cartoon-based magazines, *Sabah El Kheir* and *Rose al-Yūsuf*. And this changed my life.

Jon Alterman: This is the early 1990s, mid-1990s?

Khalid Albaih: This is exactly 1996. I was 16 years old, and I had been in Doha for two years. I had to change schools, and education systems. I used to go to a Catholic school in Sudan, and I ended up in all Arabic school in Doha. I was just very frustrated as a teenager, of course, at having to leaving my family and home behind in Sudan. Now, we're in this very new country and don't know a lot of people, so political cartooning really gave me a way to think about how you can criticize the situation when you're in a place where you're not supposed to criticize—whether it's in Sudan under the new Bashir regime or in Doha where everything is starting up right now. So, it was amazing discovering all these new artists.

Jon Alterman: It was during the Arab Spring when your identity as a really prolific, powerful cartoonist became known. And one of the characteristics of a lot of your cartoons during that period is they ended up being stenciled on walls throughout the Arab world. Did you design with an intention that your art could be stenciled?

Khalid Albaih: Absolutely. As I said, I lived in Doha, and at the time graffiti would definitely get you in trouble, especially here because everything is like squeaky clean and new. So, I did my work, and at the time, of course, the art of Banksy really stood out because he was also using art to talk about politics and to talk to the public about politics and satire. So I started to do work in black and white—very simple, using pop culture. And I thought, if I can't stencil it, I'll make it as if people could stencil it. I'll make it as if it's something that you would love to wear on a t-shirt, because one of the biggest issues that we had in the period was that people don't want to talk about things. And all the cartoons that we had at the time—or most of it—was the very old school,

typical editorial cartoons. They had a lot of text and inside jokes. I wanted to bypass that. I wanted to have something that was international and something that everyone can relate to because I thought that one of our main issues was that our message is not getting through to the other side. We're here in the region, and we're listening to news about us. We're listening to news from the *CNNs* and the *BBCs* of the world, and they're talking about us. For a lot of the Arab world, education is in two languages—Arabic and English or Arabic and French—so we understood what the West thinks of us. And it was awkward, really, because it was like you're watching someone gossip about you while you're there. I really wanted to bypass that dynamic. I wanted to do something that was our news from us, in a way that was international and that a lot of people could understand and relate to. And I didn't want to make it about one country. I didn't want to make it about Sudan because it's not about Sudan. The same issues that we have in Sudan are the same issues that people have in the United States. It's police brutality. It's racism. It's those same issues—the global issues that need to be talked about. I wanted to challenge the idea that this area is a mess. This is what you always hear when people talk about the region. I really wanted to challenge that.

Jon Alterman: You talked about having a dialogue, and one of the striking things is you really are almost entirely internet-based, rather than traditional editorial cartoons that gets sent out to readers who then look at them and change the page. Your most active platform seems to be Facebook. There was something intimately interactive about the way your career has unfolded. What does that conversation look like? How does that conversation influence your art?

Khalid Albaih: We're the generation of the internet. I grew up with the Internet—from the dial-up connection in the early 2000s to the 5G now. I grew up with every stage of it. I was on the internet before the age of social media and microblogging. I grew up when Facebook became what it is today. I saw the rise of Twitter, and now I could see—I hope not, but—the fall of Twitter. At the time, the internet was what was needed. I didn't work in a newspaper. I actually tried to work for a newspaper, but I was actually kicked out of an editor's office. That was one of the most inspiring things that ever happened to me because he asked, "where are the speech bubbles?" And he said, "this is going to get us in a lot of trouble. You should find something else." And he kicked me out of his office. Then, I thought about it, and asked myself, "how many people are going to read this newspaper anyway?" If I have something online—if I have my own blog or Myspace—that's what I'm going to do. So, I started with Myspace and with Flickr, and I kind of went up the ladder with social media and the internet. Then, I kind of came down the ladder trying to get out of the internet.

Jon Alterman: What do you mean by getting out of the internet?

Khalid Albaih: I mean that the internet today is not the internet that we had. It's not the internet that we fought for. It's not the public square that used to foster these conversations. When you would post a cartoon, people had a conversation from different points of view, but it ended up with algorithms and policies that basically only show your work to people who are the people that are supposed to like your work. Conversations are not happening as it was before—at least not to the same degree. In the meantime, over the last 10 years, we have research that shows that nobody really agrees online. No one really changes their mind at all. I was sad that I just found myself running in this hamster wheel of news. And I asked myself if I was adding anything new, and I don't know. So that's why I've decided to take a step back and look at what I'm doing and work on other projects that will make it easier for us to come back to an internet that is different. In the meantime, I would love to step out. I still work. I still try to do as much as I can with cartoons, but these are not the right platforms. I think that the internet today is exactly where newspapers were 10 or 15 years ago—the censorship, how divided the attention is, that people that read one newspaper are known as the type of people who read that kind of newspaper. That's exactly what the algorithms have done today. The people seeing my account were exactly the people supposed to be following my account. I don't want that. This is not why I stated. I started because I wanted to have a conversation—a global conversation.

Jon Alterman: You talked about the impact that the internet had on you as a 16-year-old, as a 20-year-old as, as you were sort of growing up. What impact do you see on the generation below you—today's 15 and 20-year-olds? Are they really different from your generation? How are they different in terms of their worldview, in terms of their openness to other ideas? Do you find them substantially different because the internet is different? Or do you think there's something about young people that's always creative because they're young?

Khalid Albaih: I can't say that the internet is different. I think the internet evolved, and it will keep evolving. And with that, our rules and how we look at things will evolve. But the most important thing about the internet is the amount of information that someone can find in a click of a button—especially the young generation. Now, it's not Google anymore. It's TikTok that's becoming more of the search engine now. There are questions about how dangerous that is. Who does TikTok belong to? Where is all this information going? It's very complex, but at the same time, it is true that they have the whole world of information at their fingertips. But what comes after that, I don't think a lot of them realize because that's just the reality for them. This is exactly how our generation looked at newspapers and magazines. We looked at them like, "This is the truth, and this is how you get information." I think it's just a stage of where we are right now. It's very similar to how the pre-internet world was, at a certain point, where we were trying to find a new way to

communicate.

Jon Alterman: I found it striking in another interview, when you talked about how when you were reading Superman comics, Arab countries had different supermen, and the characters were different. Is that more true or less true now? Is there more of a unified Arab culture because of the internet, because of communications? Or do we still see countries or pockets that are more insular because of the algorithms and the targeting you've talked about?

Khalid Albaih: One thing, I think, that shows that the region as a whole kind of wants a point to unite about is the World Cup right now. Most of the region was united around Morocco, for example, as a winning team. This is what we're looking for—these players being kissed by their moms in front of the world. They're putting up the Palestinian flag and doing all of these things that are really intimate to the region's culture. Those things were kept from newspaper at a certain point, and now are kept away from the internet to a certain point as well. "Shadow-banning"—hiding accounts or posts from users' feeds without actually banning them—is the new censorship. During the Sheikh Jarrah events unfolding last year, Arab-speaking people had to basically write Arabic without the dots for them to bypass censorship and shadow-banning on Instagram. So, yes, there are things of course that unite us and bring us together on the internet, and it's because of this globalization and because of the algorithms. But one of the main things that bypassed everything was the World Cup and the Moroccan team. There are these small beams of light that unite.

Jon Alterman: How do you think about balancing hope and despair in your art? There is a critical angle in your work, but it's not all dark. Do you think consciously about the balance?

Khalid Albaih: I really do. And I try as much as I can to always bring hope to my work—not only for the people who are looking at it, but also for me. I need hope. I need hope to go on as well. The last 10 years since the Arab Spring were very tough. We've watched people that gave most of their lives to prison. They're in prison now—people like Abd el-Fattah in Egypt and poets like Ahmed Doma. Syrians by the thousands gave up their lives. But I always try to inject hope into my work because that's what I need as well. If a person like Alaa Abd el-Fattah can still talk about hope now, it's the least that we can do to talk about hope as something that's not fictional.

Jon Alterman: What's the most inspiring thing you see in the Arab world today?

Khalid Albaih: It's definitely the World Cup. Definitely. I'm very happy that I caught the last three days here in Doha. I'm happy I got to see the amount of art from the Arab world, and the amount of young, social media, "influencers" who are in Doha right now. It's unbelievable. It's something that I don't think I've seen

since the Arab Spring—people united over something joyful, over something that is different, and saying that we are like the rest of the world. We can do things that are happy and that can bring people together. This region is united not only because of our ethnic ties. We're united because we all live in this region, historically, and it doesn't matter if you're Amazigh or Kurdish. It doesn't matter. We're all here, and we all belong here. This is what's happening, and it's such a beautiful thing to see.

Jon Alterman: How do you sustain that enthusiasm? How do you sustain that togetherness? Because the Arab world, in many ways, has been breaking apart in recent years much more than it's been coming together.

Khalid Albaih: I think it's hope that something positive can happen—that people can come together. Even, when for example, Tunisia is going through what it's going through now, Sudan is trying to get back together. The World Cup and the unification that we see right now shows us that we don't need a superficial stability that comes with force. That unification can continue, and we can have the stability that comes through accepting differences. There are different policies in the region, and different parts think differently. Democracy can bring interesting results from those differences. Stability doesn't have to be forced by an army or by a "good dictator." There are different views, and if you're given the chance, different things can happen. It doesn't always have to end up in a civil war.

Jon Alterman: But there's also a way in which all celebration about the World Cup, and in some ways the criticism of the World Cup, is about Qatar's insistence this isn't about politics—"We're not going to be making political statements." You're a political cartoonist. And in some ways, you're seeing this moment of maximum hope being one of the most avowedly apolitical moments in the region. Does that sort of force a tension in your mind between the politics and political cartooning and the criticism and the moment of hope of where the region needs to go and where young people need to take it?

Khalid Albaih: Absolutely, but I think everything is political. Everything is political. It doesn't matter what people claim. Everything is political, and it comes from a political point of view at the end of the day—whether it's buried deep in that point of view or it's superficial. Having the World Cup here and all this artwork, political cartoons, and music that goes from here to the rest of the world reflecting a new thing—even with the criticism—is all political. That is definitely an excellent conversation to have because at the end of the day, we get to see what we always get to see: how the West looks at us. But at the same time, we get to think, objectively, about how we look at what's happening. How are we going to defend ourselves? Do we need to defend ourselves? Do we need to defend the sheikhs? Do we need to defend these authoritarian regimes? Is that what we need to do? How are we dealing with this? So it all brought back to my mind the idea of how we can all work

together and the solidarity that comes with that. That's the kind of moment I've only witnessed once in my 40 years of life, which was during the Arab Spring. This is the second time I'm seeing it now, and it's not as political on the surface. But it is political. It absolutely is.

Jon Alterman: Khalid Albaih, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Khalid Albaih: Thank you so much for having me and thank you for the very interesting conversation.