

REVIEW: YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE ZOHAN

Adam Sandler makes fun, not war

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There have been plenty of movies since 9/11 that have tackled the topic of terrorism, but not one of them has featured a commando in denim cut-off shorts or a terrorist who starts a chain of fast-food restaurants.

Leave it to Adam Sandler to grab hold of the third rail of global politics - the Arab-Israeli conflict - and turn it into a raunchy, silly, slapstick comedy.

Having already tried mining material from the controversial subject of gay marriage in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, the Jewish comedian turns to the Middle East's more violent struggle in *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, which opens in Toledo theaters today.

Sandler plays the title character Zohan, Israel's top commando who can beat a bull in tug-of-war and catch a bullet with his nostril. Tired of fighting and harboring a dream of working as a hairstylist, he fakes his own death and escapes to America.

Hypersexual and outrageously dressed, Zohan starts a new life in New York, where he is amazed to find a street where Israeli businesses on one side coexist with Palestinian ones on the other. Self-trained through careful study of a 1987 Paul Mitchell style book, he eventually finds a job in a salon owned by a Palestinian, Dalia (Emmanuelle Chriqui).

To a great extent, all of this is just a platform for Sandler to show off his usual brand of straight-up stupid humor. Over the course of the film, he pees in a kitty litter box, uses hummus as toothpaste, and plays hacky sack with a cat.

Review:
Four stars out of five

That's what you've come to expect from a Sandler film, right? Zohan gleefully struts around the screen in his too-tight pants, charming his aging, female customers and treating them to highly eroticized haircuts, followed by an actual roll in the hay.

The action sequences are taken to ridiculous lengths, sort of a mix between *The Matrix*, a Jackie Chan flick, and a cartoon. When Zohan is not twisting evil-doers into pretzels, he's doing no-hand push-ups and kicking through walls.

It's all juvenile, of course, and crass to the extreme, but the film directed by Dennis Dugan works for the most part, and even repeated gags don't get too stale throughout the film's 113 minutes. It helps that Sandler brings an earnestness and enthusiasm - and an accent - that only adds to the film's overall charm.

The movie, which was dreamed up before Sept. 11 and shelved for a while because of it, keeps coming back to the polarizing conflict at its center. Stereotypes abound as Robert Smigel (*Saturday Night Live*) and Judd Apatow (*Knocked Up*), who joined Sandler as screenwriters, poke fun at both sides.

When Palestinian shop owners lament that Americans hate them, the Israelis say they have the same problem. "They think we are you," they say.

And when a group of wannabe bomb makers, eating Baked Lays potato chips, calls the "Hezbollah Phone Line" for



Adam Sandler plays an Israeli commando who wants to be a hairstylist in 'You Don't Mess With The Zohan.'

supplies, they get a recorded message that materials are unavailable during peace negotiations with Israel; please try back when talks break down.

John Turturro is a blast as Zohan's spastic nemesis, the Phantom. A sunglasses-wearing Palestinian terrorist - whose dossier includes these facts, Bombs: left handed. Hates Israel: Yes - he opens up a chain of restaurants after he thinks his rival is dead.

And Rob Schneider returns in yet another film from his buddy Sandler, this time as a Palestinian cabdriver with a long-standing grudge against Zohan. When he recognizes his enemy in New York, he begins a string of misguided attempts at revenge. Schneider's parts are hit and miss but he remains useful by uttering lots of funny-sounding foreign words.

Other subplots abound, all of which have been done before: The evil developer who wants to force out the locals. The forbidden love that Zohan develops for his Palestinian boss.

It's worth noting that the Israelis and Palestinians of Zohan seem to have more in common with each other than anyone else in the U.S., including a love of disco and Mariah Carey, who makes a half-hearted cameo appearance. That said, there are no new thought-provoking lessons to be had in this can't-we-all-just-get-along movie - unless it's to make wall-shaking love, not war.

For anyone looking for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, this is not the movie for you. For anyone looking for a laugh, definitely.

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