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[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Saudi Comedy Festival]

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Backlash Over Star-Studded Saudi Comedy Show]

ADRIANA DIAZ: Moving on now to another international story. Some of the biggest names in comedy have been performing at a controversial festival in Saudi Arabia this past week. They've been criticized for appearing to give legitimacy to a government with a troubling human rights record. Holly Williams has reported inside Saudi Arabia many times and says the festival has divided the world of stand up comedy.

HOLLY WILLIAMS: The Riyadh Comedy Festival is pulling some of the biggest names in stand up to Saudi Arabia, including Dave Chappelle and Kevin Hart.

KEVIN HART: Your Majesty, Your Highness. Me, you friends. You here next time.

WILLIAMS: The Saudi government is reportedly paying some of them over a million dollars each to perform. It may seem incongruous in Saudi Arabia, an ultra-conservative Islamic kingdom, but in recent years, the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman has tried to reshape his country's image, investing billions in sporting events and entertainment, including the recent takeover of Electronic Arts, an American video game powerhouse. As we discovered back in 2017, Saudi Arabia has plenty of comedy fans, though, one Saudi stand up admitted he was stealing his material.

UNIDENTIFIED COMEDIAN: I take from Chris Rock, nobody know. Don't tell anyone.

WILLIAMS [TO COMEDIAN]: You stole a joke from Chris Rock?

UNIDENTIFIED COMEDIAN: Yes, I do it. I do — but you know, I apologize.

WILLIAMS: Human rights groups accuse the Saudi government of doing something much more serious, using its oil wealth to try to whitewash its abuses, which include execution as punishment for criticizing the regime, the alleged torture of women who have campaigned for more freedom, and the murder of a journalist inside a Saudi consulate. Joey Shea works for Human Rights Watch. [TO SHEA] Are the comedians hypocrites for saying, our business is all about free speech, but then to go to a country that doesn't give people the freedom of speech?

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH'S JOEY SHEA: It's certainly deeply disappointing. Comedy needs a radical free space to be able to poke fun at everyone and anyone, and so far, I haven't seen anyone make a joke at Mohammed bin Salman or his authority's expense.

WILLIAMS: One comedian who boycotted the Saudi festival posted the term she rejected including a ban on making fun of the Saudi government or religion.

JESSICA KIRSON: That was fun!

WILLIAMS: Another stand up, Jessica Kirson, performed in Riyadh, but later apologized to her outraged fans for a poor decision. Others have defended themselves for taking Saudi money.

BILL MAHER [on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, 10/03/25]: So you're going to Saudi Arabia.

WILLIAMS: Louis C.K. explained his thinking on *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

LOUIS C.K. [on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, 10/03/25]: I love stand-up comedy, and I love comedians. So by the fact that that's opening up and starting to bud, I want to see it. I want to be part of it.

DIAZ: That was Holly Williams reporting. We reached out to Kevin Hart and Dave Chappelle for comment, but they did not respond. Chappelle apparently said on stage in Saudi Arabia that "it's easier to talk here than it is in America."

TONY DOKOUPIL: I wonder if he tested that notion —

DIAZ: I do wonder as well.

DOKOUPIL: — with jokes about the Kingdom.

DIAZ: Yep, but as Holly has reported previously in her travels, many Saudis would definitely disagree with that claim about freedom of speech inside the kingdom.

DOKOUPIL: Louis C.K. talking about it there with Bill Maher. He made it sound like it was a charity event. Like he's just happy to be spreading the joy of comedy.

DIAZ: Yeah.

DOKOUPIL: Oh, by the way, there's a check.

DIAZ: Yeah.

DOKOUPIL: I don't know. I can see why it divided the worlds of comedy.

DIAZ: Yeah, the human rights record. And especially for women in Saudi Arabia, it's all there are a lot of questions.

DOKOUPIL: Yes, very much so.