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Dancers rehearse on the set of the #DDX talent show organized by media action group Munathara ("debate") in Hammamet, about 65 kilometers southeast of Tunisia's capital. — AFP photos



A dancer rehearses on the set of the #DDX talent show organized by media action group Munathara ("debate") in Hammamet.

# Young Arab artists dream of freedom in unique talent show

Young musicians, dancers, actors and comedians from across the Arab world took to the stage in Tunisia to express their visions of freedom, more than a decade after the Arab Spring uprisings. The show, performed under the stars at a seaside theatre in the resort of Hammamet and broadcast across the region, featured winners of an online video competition to complete the phrase: "I will only be free when..." It was the latest in a string of talent and debate programs organized by media action group Munathara ("debate"), which aims "to spark much-needed conversations about rights, freedoms and social change in the Arab world", according to founder Belabbas Benkredda.

"Public debates even about fundamental rights can be very polarizing, especially on social media," the 43-year-old Algerian-German said.

Munathara was born in 2012, the year after the Arab Spring revolts, kicked off by the ouster of Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which had sparked high hopes for democracy in a region with an overwhelmingly young population. But ironically, as Munathara marked its 10th anniversary with the show in Hammamet on Saturday, it was overshadowed by President Kais Saied consolidating a power-grab that has sparked fears for Tunisia's democratic gains. Other coun-



Palestinian musician Ahmed Al-Grinawi performs with his Oud (Ud, or oriental lute) on the set of the #DDX talent show organized by media action group Munathara ("debate").

tries in the region have seen the rise of even more repressive systems than before, while others have witnessed devastating civil wars.

### 'Freedoms under attack'

Munathara was founded at "a time of great hope and aspiration-but the optimism has given way to cynicism, including among youth", Benkredda said. "The Arab world's Gen Z came of age politically amid

increasing despair and social division." Syrian refugee and stand-up comedian Mohamed al-Kurdi, one of the performers in Saturday's show, said that today, "young people's freedom is restricted, and not just in the Arab world".

"All over the world freedoms are under attack," the 23-year-old added, sitting at the edge of a stage bathed in spotlights during a break from rehearsals. Kurdi, whose TikTok account "MidoKrdi" has over



Participants pose for a photo with a cutout frame depicting an Instagram social media post on the set of the #DDX talent show.

2.3 million followers, said that rather than dealing with politics, he wanted to discuss "the limits we impose on ourselves: fear of failure, fear of success. These things rein in our freedom." For Saturday's event, he teamed up with fellow comedian and actress Dana Ali Makki, 22, in a comedy act about an overbearing husband and his wife.

Makki, from the southern Lebanese region of Nabatiyeh, said she believed young Arabs had slightly more freedom than a few years ago. "People can be a bit different from their parents and from the society and culture they grew up in," she said. "There's more subversion against customs, traditions, religion and society." Asked how she defined her own freedom, she said: "I'm free when I'm able to say whatever I want, loudly, without being afraid of anyone. Free of all the restrictions society imposes, especially on women."

### 'Learn to resist!'

The show, the fourth of its kind, also served as a showcase for up-and-coming talent, such as Ahmed al-Qrinawi from Gaza, a Palestinian enclave under Israeli blockade for the past 15 years. He was a twice-published poet when he started teaching himself the oud—a kind of lute widely played in the Middle East—at the age of 22. He would sit under a shelter he

built on the family's roof in Gaza City, to avoid the disapproving ears of his conservative family.

To learn music theory, he used copies of music books borrowed from friends at a music school he couldn't afford to attend. Last weekend, three years later, he appeared on stage playing an unusual seven-stringed oud, home-made with the help of a carpenter friend. He said he had only heard about the competition shortly after the deadline, and composed, recorded and submitted his song in just an hour. Fortunately, judges accepted the entry, and he went on to become one of the winners and perform with a professional band.

"I will only be free when I have a normal country, where death doesn't keep an eye on me," runs the first line of his song. "In Gaza there's no freedom," Qrinawi said. "Freedom's not just about food and drink. You can get a bird and put it in a cage and bring it food, but it's still in captivity." For Lebanese actress and comedian Makki, who has a tattoo on her forearm reading "resist", the show was a chance to deliver another message. "You can't stay in your house with your hands tied or stay silent," she said. "Learn to say no to oppression and repression." — AFP



Lebanese comedian and actress Dana Ali Makki speaks on the set of the #DDX talent show.



Sudanese leftist activist Ahmed Abuhuraira Hassan poses on the set of the #DDX talent show.



Syrian refugee and stand-up comedian Mohamed al-Kurdi, whose TikTok account "MidoKrdi" has over 2.3 million followers, gestures on the set of the #DDX talent show.

## Singer R Kelly gets 30 years in jail over sex crimes

Disgraced R&B singer R Kelly was sentenced to 30 years behind bars on Wednesday for leading a decades-long effort to recruit and trap teenagers and women for sex. The sentence, stiffer than the 25 years in prison that prosecutors had sought, caps a long downfall for the 55-year-old former superstar.

"I'm grateful that Robert Sylvester Kelly is away and will stay away and will not be able to harm anyone else," victim Lizzette Martinez told reporters outside the Brooklyn federal court. In September, the "I Believe I Can Fly" artist was found guilty on all nine charges he faced, including the most serious of racketeering.

"The public has to be protected from behaviors like this," judge Ann Donnelly said, handing down the term. Breon

Peace, the US attorney for the Eastern District of New York hailed the sentence as a "significant outcome" for the 11 victims who testified about the "horrific and sadistic abuse they endured."

Kelly's lawyers called for a lighter sentence with a maximum of approximately 17 years. Attorney Jennifer Bonjean told the judge that her client was the product of a "chaotic" upbringing that included being sexually abused as a child.



In this file photo singer R Kelly appears during a hearing at the Leighton Criminal Courthouse in Chicago, Illinois. — AFP photos

"Mr Kelly rejects that he's this monster," Bonjean said, later telling reporters outside court that she would appeal. Kelly, a three-time Grammy Award-winner, chose not to speak at the hearing due to pending litigation. The sentence comes just over a month before jury selection is due to start in Kelly's separate, long-delayed federal trial in Chicago on August 15.

In that case, Kelly and two of his former associates are alleged to have rigged the singer's 2008 pornography trial and hid years of sexual abuse of minors. The musician who once dominated R&B also faces prosecution in two other state jurisdictions.

### #MeToo milestone

Kelly's conviction in New York was widely seen as a milestone for the #MeToo movement: It was the first major sex abuse trial where the majority of accusers were Black women. It was also the first time Kelly faced criminal consequences for the abuse he for decades was rumored to have inflicted on women and children.

Prosecutors were tasked with proving Kelly guilty of racketeering, a federal charge commonly associated with organized crime syndicates that depicted Kelly as the boss of an enterprise of associates who facilitated his abuse. Calling 45 witnesses including 11 victims to the stand, they painstakingly presented a pattern of crimes they say the artist born Robert Sylvester Kelly carried out for years with impunity, capitalizing on his fame to prey on the less powerful.

To convict Kelly of racketeering, jurors had to find him guilty of at least two of 14 "predicate acts"—the crimes elemental to the wider pattern of illegal wrongdoing. Lurid testimony intended to prove those acts included rape, druggings, imprisonment and child pornography.



Jovante Cunningham, one of Chicago-born R&B singer R Kelly's victims, speaks to the media after the hearing at Brooklyn Federal Court in New York.

His accusers described events that often mirrored one another: Many of the alleged victims said they had met the singer at concerts or mall performances and were then handed slips of paper with Kelly's contact details by members of his entourage. Several said they were told he could bolster their music industry aspirations.

But prosecutors argued all were instead "indoctrinated" into Kelly's world-groomed for sex at his whim and kept in line by "coercive means of control," including iso-

lation and cruel disciplinary measures, recordings of which were played for the jury. Core to the state's case was Kelly's relationship with the late singer Aaliyah.

Kelly wrote and produced her first album—"Age Ain't Nothin' But A Number"—before illegally marrying her when she was just 15 because he feared he had impregnated her. His former manager admitted in court to bribing a worker to obtain fake identification allowing the union, which was later annulled. — AFP