



■ Superheroine Noora

NAIF AL MUTAWA

Big ideas

The Kuwaiti entrepreneur who is building the Arab world's most powerful children's entertainment business talks to The Gulf

by Rosamund de Sybel

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DAYS before the world erupted over the Danish cartoon controversy in early 2006, Naif al Mutawa, a young Kuwaiti entrepreneur, was interviewed by the New York Times about his new comic-book series based on Islamic principles. "It was dumb luck," says Al Mutawa. "Anyone who went on Google to do a search for Islamic cartoons got us. That's what led to people knowing who we were."

This unlikely stroke of fortune helped Al Mutawa to line up a string of deals which have put him on course to build the Arab world's most powerful children's entertainment business. In November, Al Mutawa signed a multi-million-dollar co-production deal with Endemol, the world's largest independent television producer, to develop and distribute an animated TV series based on his comic book franchise, The 99.

"It's the first example I know of in the Islamic world, where intellectual property has been bought by westerners," says Al Mutawa. The TV series, based on 99 teenage superheroes who are imbued with the 99 attributes of Allah, will be distributed globally by Endemol International, which is responsible for programmes such as Big Brother. "By the end of the year,



Superhero characters from The 99

every kid in the world should know who The 99 are," says Al Mutawa.

Last month, Al Mutawa's Teshkeel Media Group, which is backed by Sharia-compliant private investors, also made its first foray into the theme park business. The company launched its first of six theme parks in Kuwait, after reaching an agreement with a local operator. At least one theme park, branded with The 99, will be rolled out every year. "We have a strategy of diversifying into the theme park business in the region. We would buy stakes - anything as low as 10 to 50 per cent - in existing products, but do a separate deal where The 99 gets licensed to the park," explains Al Mutawa.

Despite the downturn, he hopes to soon



Naif al Mutawa, creator of comic book franchise, The 99

'By the end of the year, every kid in the world should know who The 99 are'

expand The 99 theme parks into Saudi Arabia and Oman. "Superman and Batman did very well during the Great Depression," he points out. "So in some ways it's a market in which superheroes can survive... and here, if you're not at the mall and not

HIGH ACHIEVER

Naif al Mutawa is a practising psychologist. He earned a PhD in clinical psychology from Long Island University in the US. He obtained his MBA and a masters degree in organisational psychology from New York's Columbia University. He earned his undergraduate degree from Tufts University, in New England, where he triple-majored in clinical psychology, English literature and history.

Al Mutawa has extensive clinical experience working with former prisoners of war in Kuwait as well with patients at the survivors of political torture unit of Bellevue Hospital in New York. Such experiences spurred him to write a children's story that won a Unesco prize for literature in the service of tolerance. He is also the recipient of The Festival Internacional de Humour e Quadrinhos Comics Award presented at the Cartoons & Comics Festival in Brazil, The Academy Award from Columbia University School of Business and The Eliot-Pearson Award for Excellence in Children's Media from Tufts University. His writing has been published in several languages.

at the mosque, where are you?"

The 99 started life after Al Mutawa dreamt up the idea during a London taxi ride and secured KD 2 million (\$7 million), mostly from Kuwaiti investors. "Picture this. A guy comes with an idea which he pulls out of a taxi cab literally, and says to you I'm going to create these superheroes, I'm going to base them on Islamic archetypes and sell it globally," he says. At the time, "people wanted to give more money than less" he says. Instead, Al Mutawa took the minimum amount of financing needed, and set about hiring a team of writers and artists. "I didn't want to be an employee. I wanted to be the person making the decisions," he explains.

When it was time to raise a second round of financing in 2007, Al Mutawa sold 30 per cent of Teshkeel to Unicorn Investment Bank, an Islamic bank based in Bahrain. "Unicorn brought with them the cover of the sharia, which gave us a legitimacy which the market wanted," says Al Mutawa. Saudi Arabia, which had previously banned the brand, opened its doors. And more countries followed.

Despite the emphasis on Islamic morals, Al Mutawa is at pains to point out that the brand also draws on other cultures and religions

Al Mutawa has so far sealed licensing deals for his comics across the Middle East, Asia, Europe and the US. Licensing rights to the series have been sold in seven languages. Comic books are published in Indonesia, and in India, where they are printed in Hindi and Urdu. "We sold a licence in France a couple of months ago and we're about to announce a major one in Turkey," says Al Mutawa. "The story here is that this is Kuwait-based intellectual property which is being sold all over the place," he says.

The real money, explains Al Mutawa, is in the licensing and marketing agreements. Last year, the company inked a deal with a Spanish company which produces back-to-school products. Al Mutawa also signed a deal with Nestlé for The 99 characters to appear on bottled water sold in the Middle East. But even with such agreements, the brand is still some way off world domination – and profitability. The comics themselves pull in a tiny revenue, and Teshkeel only distributes one million copies a year. But the firm, which is increasingly being eyed as an acquisition target, will not need any further financing for at least a year, he says.

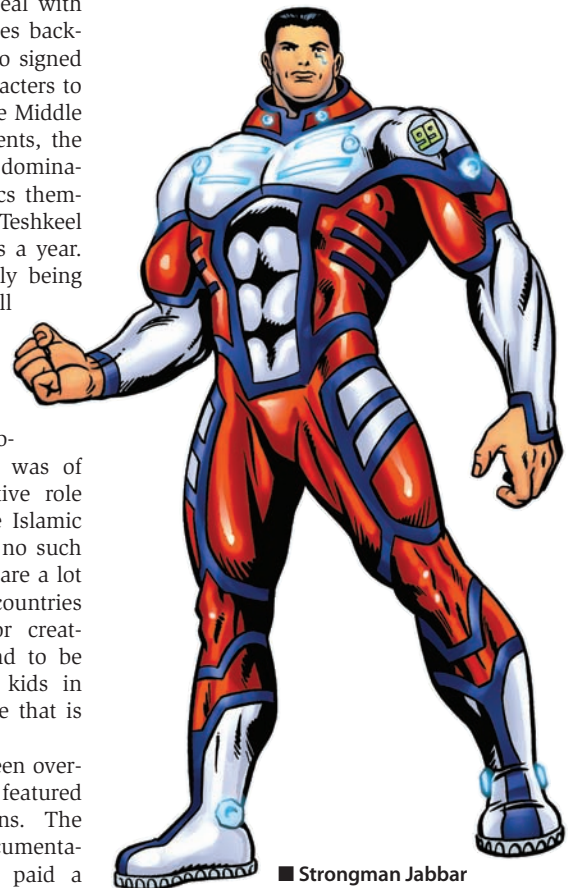
To become profitable, Al Mutawa is banking on the brand's global appeal. "The reasons are two-fold," he explains. "I thought it was of great importance that new positive role models be created for kids in the Islamic world. At the same time, there is no such thing as an Islamic market. There are a lot of poor countries, and they are countries more known for piracy than for creating intellectual property. So it had to be something that could appeal to kids in the western world as well because that is where the market is."

Global coverage of The 99 has been overwhelming. The brand has been featured in more than 1,000 publications. The BBC is currently filming a documentary about the series. "We never paid a

dime to a PR agency," says Al Mutawa. Despite the emphasis on Islamic morals, Al Mutawa is at pains to point out that the brand also draws on other cultures and religions. The characters' draw their powers from gems encoded with the knowledge of the Baghdad Library, once the largest store of information in the world, which was ransacked during the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. "The books in that library weren't just Islamic books," he says. "They were Christian books, and Jewish books and works by Greek philosophers."

The characters – which include Kuwaiti twins whose special power is creativity, a Saudi Arabian teenager endowed with enormous strength, and a young Emirati woman who can control light – come from all over the world, and are both secular and religious.

To children across the world, the stories should be new, yet familiar, says Al Mutawa: "The 99 will only be successful if every Jewish kid thinks The 99 is Jewish, every Hindu kids thinks its Hindu, and every Christian kid thinks its Christian. If they don't, then I've failed in my mission." ■



■ Strongman Jabbar