

COMICS Islamic superheroine unveiled this week will not use any weapons other than her mind

Superheroes land in Dubai!

Shahid Seth
News Reporter

Dubai residents are soon to be protected day and night by a clutch of new superheroes.

The heroes are the creation of the Comics Club of Dubai and Kuwait's Tishkol Media Group.

Dr. Naif Al Mutawa, from the Tishkol Media Group, presented the Islamic superheroes to the public in a lecture organized by the Department of Mass Communications of American University of Sharjah and the Comics Club of Dubai.

It was learned the superheroes hail from a universe called The 99, the website for which will be launched in January.

"These characters are based in different parts of the world including Dubai, Saudi Arabia, New York, Indonesia and Atlanta," Dr. Al Mutawa told his Sharjah audience.

Among the superheroes introduced were Jabbar, a character

from Saudi Arabia, Soora, from Harlem, New York, Darr, also from the United States, Sami, from France, Hidayat, a Palestinian living in the United States, and Bari, another character from Saudi Arabia. "They will each have one special power and will work in teams of three to solve problems," Dr. Al Mutawa said.

What build the students' attention was the bold-eyed Nura, Dubai's own superheroine, dressed in yellow and orange. Her special powers? To see the "light of truth" in others and force them to realize it. "Our heroes won't use weapons. They will use their mind, eyes, ears," Dr. Al Mutawa said.

But Nura is not the only superhero who will be charged with protecting Dubai. Students from Dubai Men's College, who founded Comics Club of Dubai, said at the presentation they will be bringing out their own set of superheroes.

"We are working on five

Islamic superheroes - three boys and two girls," Abdelrahman Mohamed, president of the Comics Club, said.

The group of students who formed the club have created their own universe, too. "We will be adding characters from other cultures as well. Dubai is a multicultural society. And our comics will reflect that," Mohamed said.

The Comics Club, based on a shared love for Superman and his kind, consists of students from Dubai Men's College, Zayed University and Dubai Women's College. The club's team is working on concepts for comics in two graphic styles.

The Dubai comic universe will be based in the future. "We don't have that much history to top into. So our universe is based in 2015."

"By then everything that is being built will have been built. The Blue Dubai will be done so we have a lot of locations to play with," Mohamed said.

» THE COMICS CLUB UNIVERSE

There will be five characters, three boys and two girls. One of the girls, who will be wearing an abaya and a shayla, will be a masterpiece of arts. The boys will be dressed as superheroes, sometimes wearing ordinary clothing.

"We want characters that students can identify with. So, their ages are between 15 to 21. And they have concerns that are shared by high school and college students in the city," Abdelrahman Mohamed said.



■ The sketchy birth of a superhero



■ Jabbar, a Saudi Arabian superhero, created by the Tishkol Media Group

» HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 99

The story of The 99 takes place in Baghdad in 1238 when the city was attacked to destroy the knowledge contained in its libraries.

Hiding the knowledge contained in 99 gemstones, its scholars set out from the city. After a series of events,

the gemstones were scattered all over the world. Some stones have the power of good, others of bad.

Dr. Ramzi Razeem, who is a Lebanese official based in France, has searched for these heroes and now has found the first lineage of them.

The superheroes will each have a uniform with an aspect of their culture embodied in it. They take their stories from life around them.

Jabbar, for instance, was injured when he slipped on a mine and takes

his powers from the stones embedded in his body.

The story will be released in May next year.

Dr. Al Mutawa said: "By Ramadan next year, the world will have new heroes."

Focus Today

Arabic superheroes are



JAMES REIL
DEPUTY FEATURES EDITOR

A Kuwait-based team have their pens at the ready to bring the world a new breed of Islamic comic book characters

On the surface, green-eyed Dana Ibrahim is just an ordinary Emirati teenager who studies hard at the American University of Sharjah, receives too much pocket money from her wealthy dad and gets taken for a ride by her fair-weather friends.

But, after she discovers an ancient gem imbued with one of Allah's 99 characteristics, she becomes Nura, an 18-year-old with the extra-sensory perception of being able to detect falsehoods.

Yes, it is time to say Bluff! Bash! and Kapow! to Wonder Woman, Batgirl and Levantine cartoon combatant Jalila, because UAE comic book fans are about to get their first superheroine.

NEW BREED OF HEROINE

Nura – one of dozens of comic creations from a forthcoming Muslim-based series *The 99* – is expected to attract flocks of Emiratis to cartoon books as she and her fellow icons tackle evil in their illustrated world.

"She's a great character," says 25-year-old Nabeel Mohan, one of the writers for Kuwaiti-based publishers Teshkeel Media Group. "She comes from a very

wealthy family and her dad is a tycoon. She's spoiled rotten by him, but not too snobby, and has a few problems with her friends."

"The family's affluence proves disastrous when Dana goes on holiday to Mauritius, says Mohan, and her father's business rival traps her in a hole in a bid to extort a cash ransom.

But Dana is no damsel in distress. While using her manicured hands to claw through the dirt, she uncovers a buried ancient gem that provides her with a special power – the ability to see through phonics.

"Her name is Nura, which means 'The Light'," says Mohan. "She has the ability to see through façades and, in doing so, sheds light on different situations."

"She sees the light of truth and is, effectively, a walking lie detector. Not just in what people say, but she can also see through people's characters and personalities."

Cynics may say that Nura's

ability to detect untruths pales in comparison to Superman, for example, who can leap buildings with a single bound, bend steel and roast objects with his eyes.

But, according to Dr Naif Al Mutawa, the publisher's vice chairman and CEO, the super-

can variety, the characters of DC and Marvel and the Japanese concepts, like Digimon and Pokemon," explains the 34-year-old Kuwaiti.

"The American ones come from a Judeo/Christian/Greek background. Like the prophets from the holy books, they are all orphans. Superman left his parents on the planet Krypton, while Batman sees his mother and father gunned down in front of him on the streets of Gotham."

"They are a new breed from an old world. They are the 99 and their time is now"

SUPERHERO WEAKNESS

Like the legendary character Achilles, who was vulnerable only on his heel, Western comic book heroes often possess a single flaw, says Al Mutawa, with Superman's weakness clearly visible when he is exposed to his home-world rock kryptonite.

"Of course, these similarities only make sense in an abstract way," he adds.

"But it is the fact that these characters use the archetypes from these old stories as their

basis – you create the new by tapping into the old."

In the absence of "Western concepts of individuality", the Japanese characters in Pokemon possess single attributes that become more effective when used in conjunction with the powers of other characters, says Al Mutawa.

"This represents the tradition of team work that is more prevalent in Japan and in Asian culture," he says.

"Because of this, around two years ago, I said to myself: 'What would happen if I tried to tackle superheroes specific to the Muslim world?'"

Last week, having secured \$7 million (Dh27m) of investment and created a "universe" of characters and their relevant "back-stories", Al Mutawa expounded his comic book philosophy to 150 enthusiasts in the main auditorium of the American University of Sharjah.

"The Quran describes how Allah has 99 attributes," he says.



■ Rughal, like all the characters possesses one of the 99 characteristics of Allah

JABBAR

WHITE MILITARY TANK TOP

"99" LOGO ON KNEE GUARD

ONLY EXPOSED GEM IS UNDER EYE SCAR. THE REST "GLOW" WHEN HIS POWER INCREASES.

THE GPPX IS SIMILAR TO RAYS OF LIGHT PIERCING THROUGH HIS SKIN



DAN PANOSIAN

Comics are thought to have their origins in Egyptian hieroglyphics and material published on Europe's early printing presses of the 15th Century. The modern form of comics – in which illustrated characters talk in

panels – originated in the late 19th Century. British magazine *Punch* began including satirical illustrations of politicians following its launch in 1841 and the publication of *Ally*

Sloper's Hall Holiday in 1884 is considered to be the first comic strip magazine with a recurring character. In 1929, comic strips started to expand on their humorous content with action characters, such as *Buck*

Rogers and Tarzan in the same year, Tintin made his first appearance in a Belgian newspaper. Superman did not burst onto the scene until 1938 in the first issue of *Action Comics*.

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on a mission

"At least two-thirds of these are also human attributes, like strength, generosity and wisdom."

Although the illustrated icons do not possess these attributes in anywhere like equivalent quantities to Allah, Al Mutawa says, they are each powerful avatars of a single skill who use their talents together to tackle wrongdoing.

"From this kind of narrative you can teach kids how to solve problems," he says. "If the strong character wants to break through a wall, the wise one will tell him to walk around it."

A BRIEF HISTORY

Blending historical facts with Al Mutawa's fiction, the story begins in 1258 when the Mongol hordes of Hulaga Khan are slaughtering thousands of Arabs as they descend upon the cultural centre of Baghdad.

A group of anxious scholars, worried the knowledge of their civilisation will be lost forever, secrete information from the city's libraries into 99 gemstones and send them to a safe haven in the Spanish city of Granada – then a key site in the Islamic world.

By 1488, the Spanish army is attacking the south Iberian city and the 99 beads are split into three, with each set of 33 being disguised as threaded prayer beads. One set ends up on the ship of Christopher Columbus en route to discovering the Americas, one is passed along the Silk Road through the Middle East and the other is spread across Europe and Africa.

In the present day, Dr Ramzi Razeem is scouring the globe for evidence of the story that was passed down by his grandfather.

"Years of searching are about to yield their harvest," says the comic book blurb.

"He finds the first of a whole barrage of superheroes – men, women and children who have come into possession of a jewel that is quite unique. They are a new breed, birthed from an old world and the future is in their hands. They are the 99 and their time is now."

While the Emirati superheroine Nura possesses the power of truth, Saudi Arabia's Jabbar had shards of the bead embedded into his flesh after standing on a land mine thus developing great strength.

The many other characters are cleverly poised to attract Muslim

readers from around the world, with British teenager Mumita coming from a Pakistani immigrant family, and other superheroes living in far flung places like Malaysia, Indonesia and China.

WORLD-CLASS TEAM

The Teshkeel team includes former *X-Men* artist Dan Panossian, ex-*Rolling Stone* publisher

Larry Durocher, Marvel's former publisher Michael Hobson and the US-based comicbook firm's former marketing chief Sven Larsen.

The team expects Teshkeel – already Marvel's distributor for the Middle East – to sell more than 20,000 comics across the Gulf each month.

"There will be 48 pages in each issue and the first issues will be introducing the new characters," says Larson.

"We are saying that by next Ramadan, the world will have Islamic superheroes."

Following Al Mutawa's lecture, called "From Metropolis to Mecca and Back Again", more details of *The 99* will be released in the coming months, whetting the appetite of the UAE's comic fans, including the 14 members of the Dubai Comic Club.

"It will be great to have an Emirati character," says the club's president Abdelrahman Mohamed, who has ambitions to create his own animated series set in Dubai 2015.

"Comic books like these really create their own universe and more and more people here are getting into them."

"When we start producing Islamic comics there will be stuff that kids can relate to easily – [that] deal with our issues and say things about us," he adds.

However, the Teshkeel universe has courted controversy, with rival comic book creators in the Middle East questioning what role religion has to play in a cartoon universe.

NO RELIGIOUS TENSION

Al Mutawa says his characters will steer clear of the religious tensions of the outside world, with his superheroes not being seen to pray, kiss or take drugs, and the women will not wear either an abaya nor the revealing outfits of their Western counterparts.

Sara Kareem, from Cairo-based company AK Comics, which is responsible for Arab superhero characters, including Jalila, Saviour of the City of All Faiths, claims Teshkeel's editorial policy makes no sense.

"*The 99* does not relate to us in any way," she says. "The characters come from the names of God. They want to create characters from Islam and at the same time, say that they are not Islamic."

"They say there will be no sex, no nudity and no drugs, so they are very Islamic."

AK Comics deliberately avoids mentioning religion in any of its stories, says Kareem, but they have allegorical references to a 55-year war between Palestinians and Israelis and deal with the gritty social issues of the modern Arab world.

"We are trying to teach people about all of these social issues and, sometimes, we teach practical issues in an indirect way – just to make children aware about what is going on," she explains. "It is not just about action, it is about what is going on in the region."

But Al Mutawa knows there are sacrifices he has to make if his comics are going to be a success and, one day, become the protagonists of movies and the toys of Muslim children.

Dubai's Comic Club chief Mohamed agrees with Al Mutawa, and hopes to get his own collection of Emirati creations published on Teshkeel's glossy pages. "AK Comics are too political," says the Emirati. "One of the characters is Jalila and everyone knows they are talking about the situation between Palestine and Israel."

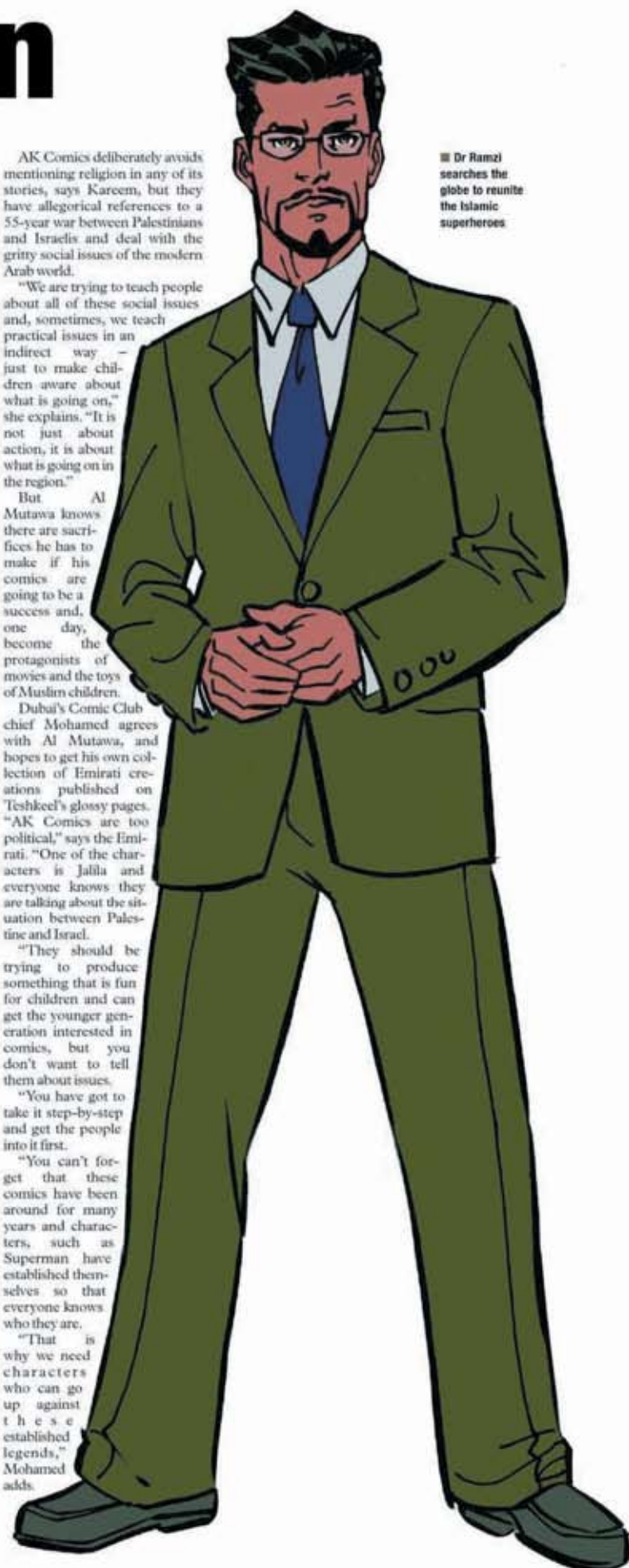
"They should be trying to produce something that is fun for children and can get the younger generation interested in comics, but you don't want to tell them about issues."

"You have got to take it step-by-step and get the people into it first."

"You can't forget that these comics have been around for many years and characters, such as Superman have established themselves so that everyone knows who they are."

"That is why we need characters who can go up against these established legends," Mohamed adds.

Dr Ramzi searches the globe to reunite the Islamic superheroes



British-born Pakistani Mumita has been created to attract Muslim readers from the European island nation