



Teshkeel Media

Five of the characters in "The 99," the comic book featuring Islamic superheroes that is due out in September, are, from left, Mumita, Ramzi Razem, Rughal, Jabbar and Noora.

Zap! Pow! Islamic superheroes to save the day

By Hassan M. Fattah

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates: For comic book readers in Arab countries, the world often looks like this: Superheroes save American cities, battle beasts in Tokyo, and even on occasion solve crimes in the French countryside. But few care about saving the Arab world.

If Naif al-Mutawa has his way, that is about to change. Young Arabs will soon be poring over a new group — and new genre — of superheroes like Jabbar, Mumita and Ramzi Razem, all aimed specifically at young Muslim readers and focusing on Muslim virtues.

Mutawa's Teshkeel Media, based in Kuwait, says that in September it will begin publishing "The 99," a series of comic books based on superhero characters that battle injustice and fight evil, with each character personifying one of the 99 qualities that Muslims believe God embodies.

A burly, fast-talking Kuwaiti with a dry wit, Mutawa, 34, said existing superheroes fall into two main genres: the Judeo-Christian archetype of individuals with enormous power who are often disguised, like Superman, and the Japanese archetype of small characters who rely on each other to become powerful, like Pokemon.

His superhero characters will be based on an Islamic archetype: by combining individual virtues — everything from wisdom to generosity — they build collective power that is ultimately an expression of the divine.

"Muslims believe that power is ulti-

mately God, and God has 99 key attributes," Mutawa said. "Those attributes, if they all come together in one place, essentially become the unity of God." He stresses that only God has them all, however, and 30 of the traits deemed uniquely divine will not be embodied by his characters.

Still, this is tricky territory. Muslim religious authorities reject attempts to personify the powers of God or combine the word of God in the Koran with new myths or imaginative renderings more typical of the West.

But Mutawa is seeking to reach youngsters who are straddling the cultural divide between East and West. They like comics and Western entertainment, and yet are attached to their roots and intend to hold on to their customs. He, too, faced that divide, going to summer camp in New Hampshire in the 1980s — he says his parents wanted him to lose weight — while grappling with Arab culture and pressures.

In his flowing white robe and traditional Arab headdress, Mutawa looks every bit the Kuwaiti; when he opens his mouth, however, he is every bit the New Yorker who spent his formative years reading comics and much of his adult life in the United States, training as a psychologist at Bellevue Hospital Center in New York and writing a series of children's books on assimilation, race and prejudice.

"I was the kid that was thrown out of class for not being willing to accept what the teacher was teaching us about Jews," he said. "I had Jewish friends at camp, and I knew that they were not the

stereotype." With three boys and a fourth child due soon, Mutawa says he wants his children to be able to find a balance between East and West.

Others too have seized on the opportunity for comics in the Middle East but not graphic representations of the principles of the Koran.

In Cairo, AK Comics has published Middle East Heroes, four larger-than-life Arab characters who face the chal-

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lenges of most Arabs by day and fight for them by night.

Mutawa, an avid reader of "Archie" and other comics who has a doctorate in clinical psychology and an MBA from Columbia University, said he dreamed up his Muslim superheroes during a taxi ride in 2003 with his sister, Samar, in London.

The plot of the series, drawing on stories and history familiar to most Muslim youths, involves the wisdom and learning that characterized the Muslim world at its apogee, when it reached from northern Pakistan to southern Spain in the late Middle Ages.

The story concerns 99 gems encoded with the wisdom of Baghdad just as the Mongols are invading the city in the 13th century — in his version, to destroy the city's knowledge. The gems are the

source of not only wisdom but power, and they have been scattered across the world, sending about 20 superheroes (at least in the first year, leaving another 49 potential heroes for future editions) on a quest to find them before a villain does.

"To create the new, you have to tap into the old," Mutawa says of the deep historic connections in the comic. "The real goal is to teach kids that there's more than one way to solve a problem."

The characters in "The 99" are not all Arabs, but Muslims from all over the world. Jabbar, the enforcer, is a hulking figure from Saudi Arabia with the power to grow immense; Mumita is from Portugal with unparalleled agility; and Noora, from the United Arab Emirates, can read the truth in what people say and help them to see the truth in themselves.

There's a burka-wearing character called Batina, which is derived from a word meaning hidden.

But that is where religion stops and mythology begins, Mutawa says.

"I don't expect Islamists to like my idea, and I don't want the ultraliberals to like it either," he says. So far, he has managed to get Kuwait's censors to approve the early mock-ups, he says. But to keep the orthodox at ease, he has included women in head scarves and plays it by the book as far as religion goes.

But what may give him the biggest edge is a seasoned team, including writers like Fabian Nicieza, who wrote for X-Men and Power Rangers comics, and a group of managers and advisers who are old hands in the industry.

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