

## Islamic superheroes



Written by Islamic Times

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In Saudi Arabia, a gawky teenager is transformed into a hulking creature. In Paris, a historian chases legends about mystical gemstones. In South Africa, a boy discovers a sparkling rock with healing powers. The characters are from a new genre of superheroes endowed with Muslim virtues and aimed at young Muslims in a comic book series called The 99.

Launched in July 2006, it is being billed as the world's first superhero project drawn from Islamic culture. Its creator, 35-year-old Naif Al- Mutawa, admits the series - based on 99 heroes who embody the 99 attributes of God in Islam - is tricky in a religion where attempts to personify God's power can spark protests.



But the US-educated Al-Mutawa hopes to create a new Islamic comic culture. His Kuwait-based company is also rolling out classic US comic books, from Archie, Spider Man and The Incredible Hulk, to the Middle East in the Arabic language.

Al Mutawa recently won the crucial blessing of Muslim clerics who manage a Bahrain investment bank and it approved a donation to help finance his company, Teshkeel Media Group, and pay for plans to launch an animated 'The 99 series' for television.

"If you look at the fictitious superheroes who exist in the world today, you have two groups: the group that comes out of north America and the group that comes out of Japan,"

"The idea of using religion as a modern-day archetype is not new - the West has been using it for a long time. No one has really mined Islamic

culture for that," he said.

The plot of The 99 blends a pivotal point in Islamic history - the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in the 13th century - with a big dose of fantasy.

In the story, the wisdom, tolerance and spirituality of the Baghdad caliphate are coded in 99 gemstones as the barbarians gather at Baghdad's gate. They are smuggled out as three prayer beads of 33 stones each and scattered around the world.

Heroes such as Jabbar the Powerful and Mumita the Destroyer must find them before the bad guys do.

"It's a metaphor for the spreading of Islam without mentioning Islam. These comics have no mention of Islam or the prophet or prayer," Al- Mutawa said.

Al-Mutawa studied at Tufts University in Massachusetts and earned a doctorate in clinical psychology and an MBA from Columbia University in New York. His past work includes treating survivors of political torture from the 1991 Gulf War. "It left me with the hollow feeling and realisation that we don't have any heroes in that part of the world," he said.

The 99 heroes boast Muslim virtues ranging from faithfulness to wisdom. When combined, they express the divine. To maintain peace with religious authorities, especially in important markets with strict Islamic laws such as Saudi Arabia, the series will likely peak with 70 heroes. Only God possesses all 99 characteristics in Islam.

Having spent childhood summers in New Hampshire, Al-Mutawa sees the project as a balance between the forces that have defined his life - the West and Middle East - for a new generation of Muslims heavily influenced by both cultures.

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