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Author Looks to the Koran For 99 New Superheroes

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KUWAIT CITY -- Naif al-Mutawa was in a London taxi with his sister when she asked when he'd go back to writing children's books. Mutawa, a Kuwaiti psychologist with two doctorates and an MBA from Columbia, said the question sparked a chain of thoughts:

To go back to writing after all that education, it would have to be something big, something with the potential of [Pokémon](#), the Japanese cartoon that was briefly banned by Saudi religious authorities. God would have been disappointed by that, he thought; God has 99 attributes, or names, including tolerance.

"And then the idea formed in my mind," Mutawa said. "Heroes with the 99 attributes."

He mixed his deep religious faith, business acumen and firsthand experience with other cultures -- his childhood summers were spent at a predominantly Jewish camp in New Hampshire -- to create [The 99](#), a comic-book series about superheroes imbued with the 99 attributes of God. Those traits represent one of Islam's most recognizable concepts.

Mutawa's superheroes are modern, secular and spiritual, moving seamlessly between East and West. They come from 99 countries and are split between males and females.

The heroes include Darr the Afflicter, an American paraplegic named John Wheeler, who manipulates nerve endings to transmit or prevent pain. Noora the Light -- Dana Ibrahim, a university student from the United Arab Emirates -- shows people the light and dark inside themselves. Mumita the Destroyer, a ferocious fighter, is Catarina Barbarosa, a Portuguese bombshell in tight clothes.

They distribute aid to starving Afghan villagers, battle elephant poachers in Africa, fight the evil Rughal and train to increase their powers.

"I wanted to create something that would be a classic, not another made-in-the-fifth-world product," said Mutawa, 37, who has four sons. "It was either going to be Spiderman or nothing."

After returning from London to Kuwait, Mutawa raised \$7 million -- some from his old Columbia classmates, the rest from [Persian Gulf](#) investors -- and set up the Teshkeel media group in 2004. He hired some of the best people in the industry, including writers and artists who had worked at Marvel and [DC Comics](#). His current writing partner, Stuart Moore, is a writer on the new Iron Man comics.

In November 2006, Mutawa's first comic book hit the newsstands.

Since then, his creation has gained many fans but also faced a rumble of criticism across the Muslim world. Some have disapproved of heroines' makeup and tight clothing. Others view the personification of God's attributes as blasphemous. One Kuwaiti cleric said the series promotes reliance on humans instead of God, counter to the Koran's teachings.

Mutawa acknowledges he did not consult a cleric before creating the series. "We should not allow a very limited number of people to tell us how to practice our religion. An Islam where I can be an active participant is the only Islam I can belong to. I believe in Islam and I also believe in evolution," he said, sitting in his office in a traditional long white robe and headdress.

When it was time to raise a second round of financing in 2007, Mutawa sold 30 percent of Teshkeel to Unicorn Investment Bank, an Islamic bank based in Bahrain. "Now, when people ask me religious questions, I ask them to go to the board of Unicorn," he said, smiling.

Over the past year, he said, he has given dozens of lectures around the world, focused on pushing an Islam at odds with no one. "We shouldn't be fighting globalization," he told a crowd in Indonesia at the launch of the series there last year. "We should be participating in it by putting our own ideas out there."

Mutawa describes *The 99* as a modern tale with an ancient Islamic architecture. Ninety-nine gemstones imbued with the wisdom and knowledge of Baghdad's famous Dar al-Hikma library during the 13th century, the golden age of Islam, are scattered around the world, some on [Christopher Columbus's](#) ships, after an explosion of the dome in which the stones were embedded. The stones seem to find the people who become the superheroes, whose mystical link to the gems gives them special powers.

Worldwide sales of the comic in English and Arabic, including in the United States, have yet to exceed 30,000 copies a month, including Internet downloads, but Mutawa has been inundated with licensing demands. An American company wants to brand its halal hot dogs with *The 99*. He has signed deals with Malaysian, Indonesian, Indian and North African publishing companies.

In his office are pencils, rulers, backpacks, notebooks and folders with *The 99* logo, by a Spanish company. A Dubai firm is interested in

making action figures. A deal for an animated series by a European company will be announced in July, Mutawa said. Last month, he signed a deal for six theme parks.

This semester, the American University of Kuwait offered a class, "The Superhero in the Arab World," that focused on The 99. As a final project, students created their own comic-book heroes.

When Mutawa recently visited the class, a young student in a black head scarf and makeup told him she was shocked by a scene in which Noora the Light said she was going to go pray to God, even though her hair was not covered.

"Why?" Mutawa asked. "Do you think only people who wear the hijab ask God for help? There isn't just one way to be Muslim. There are at least 99 different ways to be Muslim."

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