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In pop culture, new heroes emerge in Arab world

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CAIRO -- Abu Essam's footsteps echo loudly as he walks through the narrow alleys of Damascus' old city. Around him in 1930s Syria, tall stone buildings block the scorching sun.

Cautiously, he walks on. Around the next corner he could find the key to the gate to free prisoners captured by Syria's colonial ruler, France. Or he could face a shot from a French soldier's rifle. As he turns the corner, a shot rings out _ but it is the soldier who is dead.

This is not Syria of 75 years ago, however. It is a rolling, 3-D video game on Wael El-Zanaty's cell phone, and his thumb is a blur of motion as he navigates the alleys and fires at soldiers.

"The best thing about this game is that this is something that Arabs can relate to," said El-Zanaty, the technical director for Egypt's Good News Group, which developed the game "Bab el-Hara" based on a hit television series that airs during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"It's about part of (Arab) history _ the resistance to the French occupation."

From video games like "Bab el-Hara" to a Kuwaiti entrepreneur's comic book empire featuring Muslim superheroes, the Arab world's private sector is leading a push to provide Muslim and Arab youth with homegrown heroes, something sorely needed as a bulwark against the trend toward radical Islam throughout the Middle East.

Clearly, heroes in games or comics won't offset all the problems that stoke radicalism _ anger at corrupt Arab regimes and at Israel over its treatment of Palestinians _ but El-Zanaty said he hoped these pop culture characters could give young people a sense of hope and a positive image of themselves as Arabs.

"We wanted something that reflected our culture ... developed with an Arab perspective," he said.

In Kuwait, Naif al-Mutawa had a similar vision. The Teshkeel Media Group founder, a psychologist, drew some inspiration for his comic book empire from treating Iraqi soldiers suffering trauma after the first Gulf War in 1990. Some of these men told him they'd been raised to view Saddam Hussein as an Arab hero.

"What kind of message are we sending to our children about what a hero is, and what a hero does?" al-Mutawa asked, seated in his Kuwait City office.

His "The 99" _ as the comic book series is called _ draws from the heyday of Muslim civilization. Each hero is named after one of the 99 qualities the Quran attributes to God, such as "The Powerful" and "The Loving."

While Teshkeel has yet to turn a profit, al-Mutawa has raised about \$23 million from investors, including a Bahrain Islamic bank. The company also recently signed a multimillion dollar deal with Dutch media giant Endemol _ behind hit shows like "Big Brother" and "Power Rangers" _ to animate "The 99" for global distribution.

Al-Mutawa's stories are based on a pivotal moment in Islamic history: The 1258 Mongol invasion of Baghdad that left the city in ruins and led to the dumping of books from its famed library into the Tigris River, with the ink by legend turning its waters black.

In his stories, some librarians escape and are able to place special stones in the river to suck up wisdom otherwise lost.

Hundreds of years later, the 99 stones are found in different corners of the world by heroes who come from 99 different countries, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, Portugal, Hungary and Indonesia.

Jabbar, the Saudi hero, is a Hulk-like figure whose name means "The Powerful." The American hero, Darr, or "The Afflicter," is a young man paralyzed from the waist down when a drunk driver crashed into his car, killing his family. His power is to take away or inflict pain.

While al-Mutawa used Islam as the basis for his comics, none of the heroes prays or reads the Quran. There is no mention of religion, and the characters are roughly divided between men and women _ one of the main figures is Noora, an 18-year-old woman _ and only a few of the women in the comics wear the Islamic headscarf.

Such moves were calculated, said al-Mutawa.

"Our (Islamic) story has become (more) about what not to do, than about what to do," he said. "I wanted to ... go back to the same sources others have pulled

out a lot of negative ideas from, and pull out positive, tolerant, multicultural, accepting ideas.

"I'm not trying to sell religion here. I'm trying to sell the idea that at the values level, we're all the same."

The message has resounded in the Muslim world and beyond. About 1 million of the comics are distributed monthly in several languages. The first of six theme parks built around "The 99" is to open in Kuwait later this year, and the superhero characters will appear on water bottles under a deal signed with Nestle SA and at an Arab arts festival next month at Washington's Kennedy Center.

While his comic books are broadening their reach, the computer games developed by Egypt's Good News Group also have a potential for a widespread audience.

Across Cairo, small storefronts and apartments are converted into video game salons, where an hour in front of an LCD TV hooked to a Playstation 2 console costs \$1 to \$5 an hour, doing brisk business day and night.

"What else is there to do?" 22-year-old Mustafa Abdel-Rahman said when asked why he was playing a soccer video game at 3 p.m. on a weekday. "I've put in applications, but still haven't found work."

Youths like Abdel-Rahman can be found in large numbers in much of the Middle East where sluggish economies do not provide nearly enough jobs to keep up with fast-growing populations. The situation provides a healthy market for the Good News Group's video games, said Ayman Shoukry, the company's managing director.

In Egypt alone, a country of about 78 million, "there are 40 million mobiles," said Shoukry, referring to cell phones. "We don't have 40 million (other types of) devices anywhere in Egypt. Not 40 million TVs, not 40 million washing machines."

Shoukry declined to reveal any revenue figures from the games, saying only that they had registered "hundreds of thousands of downloads."

Al-Mutawa, also the author of a prize-winning children's book, said part of the motivation for his comics was to introduce Arab youths who have grown up in a world dominated by the West to heroic characters similar to those from the Arabs' glorious history.

"I really think that we (Arabs) limit ourselves with this catastrophic thinking that the world is controlled by others and there is nothing we can do," said

al-Mutawa. "I think this is rubbish."

Associated Press Writer Diana Elias contributed to this report from Kuwait City.

Good News Group:<http://goodnewsgroup.com>

The 99:<http://www.the99.org/>

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