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'The 99' Muslim comic superheroes land in U.S.

While rooted in Arab and Islamic culture, the series is geared toward a wider audience, says its Kuwait-based creator.

Teshkeel Comics has brought its 99 Muslim superheroes to the United States.

By Beckie Supiano, Religion News Service

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Move over, Spider-Man. There's a new team of superheroes in town.

Meet Jabbar the Powerful, a Hulk-like strong man, and Noora the Light, who can create holograms. Darr the Afflicter wields powerful pain waves. One hero, The Hidden, wears a burqa.

All are part of "The 99," Muslim superheroes created by Kuwait-based Teshkeel Comics. Each has a power based on one of the 99 characteristics of God described by Islam.

The comic, already sold throughout the Middle East, made its U.S. debut in late October, and the new issue, "Welcome to America," finds Jabbar, Noora and Darr -- like other immigrants -- arriving at New York's JFK Airport.

While the comic has its roots in Muslim and Arab culture, creator Naif Al-Mutawa said the series is geared toward a wider audience. An American reader wouldn't need to know anything about the Muslim world to understand the story line, he said.

Edina Lekovic, a spokeswoman for the Muslim Public Affairs Council, thinks the comic could find a broad American audience. The key, she said, will be appealing to human values rather than faith principles.

"These 99 names of God are attributes people aspire to," Lekovic said. "These are not shared solely by Muslims -- they are human values and characteristics." "The 99" features a diverse cast of characters, each from a different country. But the comic's back story is decidedly Arab. It's based on the destruction of Baghdad's ancient libraries in the Mongol invasion of 1258 -- a familiar story in the Middle East.

Al-Mutawa said it was important to create modern cultural heroes for kids in the Middle East. His superhero concept merges the American/Judeo-Christian model of go-it-alone action heroes with the Japanese model of heroes who work as a team.

That kind of cultural hero can also resonate with American Muslims, even those with no connections to the Middle East. Eboo Patel, who heads the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core and is a frequent commentator on Muslim culture, said heroes serve a dual function: exemplifying values to humanity at large and speaking specifically to the group that shares their cultural background.

Hidden jewels of wisdom

In Al-Mutawa's fictionalized history, the Mongols invaded with the express purpose of razing the library and destroying Baghdad's knowledge. This wisdom, however, was hidden in 99 jewels, which were scattered throughout the world. In the comic, modern-day character Dr. Ramzi Razem has learned of the gems' ability to provide individuals with superhuman abilities and coordinates the heroes' activities.

While the 99 heroes display attributes of God, each has only one, and they must work in teams of three.

Female characters are dressed more modestly than those in most comics, but are shown in various forms of Muslim dress. Some, but not all, wear head scarves, and those who do display different countries' interpretations.

And while the diversity of characters demonstrates Al-Mutawa's conviction that "there is no one Islam," he is nonetheless conscientious of Muslim social mores.

"The 99 won't be dating each other," he said.

By design, the comic never mentions Islam, Allah or the Qur'an. Nonetheless, it has been banned in Saudi Arabia; apparently censors thought a promotional tagline that mentioned the 99 characteristics of God was blasphemous, Al-Mutawa said. This decision was arbitrary, he said, noting that while the comic books themselves are censored, a comic strip featuring "The 99" runs in Saudi newspapers.

A broader aim

Even if not every American reader is dazzled by "The 99," the real purpose of the U.S. launch is "visibility," Al-Mutawa said in a phone interview.

"Our eye is on animation and the film market," Al-Mutawa said. Branching out in those markets would probably require American resources.

Troy Brownfield, a columnist for the comic book news site Newsarama, said that in the publishing industry at large, and for comic books in particular, most revenue comes from advertising and licensing. Comics alone rarely pay the bills.

"The 99" is Teshkeel's first original title, but the company also translates and distributes books from comic-book giants DC and Marvel in the Middle East.

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