Superheroes and Islam:
An Interview with Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa

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Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, a Kuwaiti psychologist, was riding in a taxi a year after the September 11th attacks when he had an idea: why not create a children’s television and comic book series about superheroes who embody the tolerant and peaceful aspects of the culture and history of Islam? Over ten years later, “THE 99” is one of the most popular comic book series in the Middle East and has been published in at least seventeen different languages. In 2011, Dr. Al-Mutawa collaborated with DC Comics’ “Justice League of America” on a special series written and illustrated in both English and Arabic. This series seeks to bridge the language and cultural gaps that impede the acknowledgment of common values between the East and the West.
Dr. Al-Mutawa has also collaborated with Endemol UK to produce twenty-six episodes of “THE 99” animated television series and has commissioned the production of another twenty-six episodes after the first series is completed. The idea of “THE 99” is to offer new role models inspired by Islamic archetypes that possess values shared by the entire world. Eventually, Dr. Al-Mutawa will reveal superheroes from ninety-nine countries. Each of the superheroes possesses a gemstone imbued with a special power, and they work in teams of three to enhance their respective powers. Together, the characters must decide which three heroes are best suited to solve each problem. By creating these characters, Dr. Al Mutawa has provided children from China to Chad to Canada with characters they can relate to as their own without the parochial influence of any nation, religion or individual.

The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center placed Dr. Al-Mutawa on the 2009, 2010 and 2011 lists of “The Most Influential Muslims in the World.” Dr. Al-Mutawa is the founder and CEO of Teshkeel Media Group, which created “THE 99” and became the first licensed entertainment property in the Middle East. Recently, Forbes Magazine added “THE 99” to its list of the “Top Twenty Trends Sweeping the Globe”, and President Barack Obama named Dr. Al-Mutawa the foremost of thousands of new entrepreneurs and innovators honored at the Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship.

Dr. Al-Mutawa has a Masters Degree and a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Long Island University, a Masters Degree in Organizational Psychology from Teacher’s College, and a MBA from Columbia University. He has done extensive clinical work with former prisoners of war in Kuwait and also has experience working with the Survivors of Political Torture unit in Bellevue Hospital in New York. He is the founder of The Soor Center for Psychological Counseling and Assessment, Kuwait’s leading professional foundation in psychological services. Dr. Al-Mutawa has won numerous awards, including the UNESCO Prize for Children’s and Young People’s Literature in the Service of Tolerance for a children’s book he wrote in response to the horrors he witnessed torture victims suffer. He also received The Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Award in 2009 and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Marketplace of Ideas Award. He has also secured a place on numerous councils concerning the role of media in economic development.
Interview

What controversies arose in your creation of female characters for “THE 99”?  

Surprisingly, we were not criticized for the powers that the female characters were given, such as Mumita the destroyer, one of the most aggressive characters who must learn how to train her power and use it for good. There were different controversies depending upon the region. In the Middle East, “THE 99” is criticized because not all of the women are covered. In the United States, “THE 99” criticized because one of the female characters is wearing a burka.

In your opinion, how do art and popular culture, if used properly, foster reconciliation between East and West?

Media does one of two things. It embodies fears or hopes and dreams. It has to be thought of in terms of what it can be more than what it is. Once you have a footing you can go on to do other things. It is important to have a solid idea. Once you have that, you can achieve anything you want. I am a big believer in media not just being able to reflect reality but create reality. By creating characters with values that people from any background can relate to, you can create role models that represent diverse societies in a positive light. By focusing on the universal aspects of the characteristics of Islam, it can be viewed in a tolerant and peaceful way. Extremists use media to justify terrible actions in the name of religion; “THE 99” uses it to spread justice and understanding.

What are the greatest barriers to entrepreneurship in the Middle East and how do you believe that these can be overcome in the future?

The Middle East is not monolithic, but I can speak for the Gulf region. In the Gulf, there is more appreciation for cash than ideas and money has come easily. This leads companies to hire CEOs who do not come up with creative projects, and the countries dictating the ideas for projects decide who is hired. In the United States, there are different classes of shares, but in the Gulf there is only one class of shares and that is not fair. For example, in the United States, investor obtain a certain amount of shares for a company, and therefore have a certain amount of say in what the company does. There is no such thing in the Gulf. Another problem is that there is no intellectual property protection, so after you create a company nothing can stop others from taking credit for your ideas or imitating you in a way that makes them more successful. Why should I risk everything and invest in new ideas when someone can steal them from me at no cost to them? Bankruptcy is also a problem. In the United States, bankruptcy is just declared, but in the Gulf it requires jail time. All of these factors discourage creative risk-taking.

What are your future goals for “THE 99” and spreading its accessibility and popularity in the West?

Australia, South America, Europe, Turkey and Ireland are broadcasting “THE 99” television series, and it will soon be coming to the United States. The U.S. was the first to buy television rights to the series after the deal with Endemol UK. However, the U.S. will be the last to air the series because controversy over “THE 99” appearing on television led to the pulling of commercial funding. Fortunately, it now seems that once again the series is ready to go. This will greatly enhance our outreach in the U.S. and expand our readership.
How can your leadership pave the way for greater creative risk-taking in the Middle East?

After Roger Bannister first ran the mile under four minutes, seventeen people soon did the same. Once people see something they once thought was impossible is possible, they will try emulate it.

As a parent, what do you hope that your work in promoting understanding and tolerance will teach the next generation, and how do you think they will have a different understanding of current events?

In the world of “THE 99”, it does not matter what country you are from or what religion you are: all that is important is the power you have and how it can help solve the problems of today. It is not about the color of your skin or your appearance. It is about how your power can be used to promote good in the world. By giving kids role models “THE 99” can go a long way in spreading positive values and preparing young people to disengage from stereotypes.