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## Event Report

# *The 99:* Superheroes for the Muslim World

MAY 15, 2007

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*Are comic book superheroes compatible with Islamic culture? Kuwait-based Teshkeel Media Group has attempted to answer this question by creating comic books infused with Islam. Naif Al-Mutawa, MBA '03, Teshkeel's founder and CEO, returned to campus on May 15, 2007, to speak about his successful comic book publishing company in the Middle East. He introduced Teshkeel's newest venture, The 99, which is due to debut in the United States in October 2007. He also shared his thoughts on the overall business environment in the Middle East. This event was sponsored by YALA, the Young Arab Leaders Association of Columbia Business School.*

Teshkeel Media Group has its origins in conversations its founder, Naif Al-Mutawa, had with friends shortly after he completed his MBA in 2003. Reflecting on how often many Middle Eastern mullahs railed against Western pop culture, Al-Mutawa wondered if he could put his entrepreneurial talents and past work experience as an author and psychologist to use in bridging this cultural divide. Within months, he decided to found a comic book company in Kuwait that markets both Western comic books, such as Superman, and proprietary comic books influenced by Islam.

Teshkeel's cornerstone project focuses on a collection of 99 male and female superheroes, dubbed The 99, who use their superhuman strengths to help people and fight evil. Islam holds that Allah possesses 99 traditional attributes, such as foresight, wisdom and mercy. Each superhero possesses one of these divine attributes. Working in teams of three and each hailing from a different country, the superheroes teach children the importance of teamwork and the value of diversity. Most important, Mr. Al-Mutawa wants to use *The 99* as a vehicle with which to not only tell a compelling and entertaining story but also teach children about conflict resolution and tolerance. Prior to his time at Columbia Business School, Al-Mutawa wrote

children's books and was recognized in 1997 with a UNESCO award for Children's Literature in the Service of Tolerance.

Since Teshkeel has as its primary audience the Muslim world and its Western diaspora, Mr. Al-Mutawa sought to use Islam as a symbolic framework for *The 99*. However, he went to pains to stress that religion in no way plays a central role in this project. While the superheroes are "cosmetically" Muslim, the traits that define them are by no means exclusive to Islam and could actually be described as panreligious.

Mr. Al-Mutawa emphasized that *The 99*'s broad appeal lies in its strong storyline, flashy artistry and positive takeaways. For this reason, he intends to bring the series to the United States later this year and to Spain, Indonesia and Malaysia in 2008. In the Middle East, *The 99* has created so much buzz that cobranded theme parks, hotels and merchandise remain distinct possibilities in the near term. The company also distributes lucrative Marvel, DC and Archie comic book titles for the Middle Eastern markets, which generate revenues that help underwrite *The 99* project. Teshkeel employs several dozen people, some of whom are Marvel alumni who have worked on such blockbuster titles as X-Men, Batman and Spider-Man.

As so often happens to entrepreneurs, Mr. Al-Mutawa and Teshkeel benefited greatly from blind luck. In the weeks following the decision of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* to publish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in late 2005, search engines directed thousands of surfers interested in learning more about these "Islamic cartoons" to Teshkeel's Web site, generating both interest from the public and sales of the company's products.

Mr. Al-Mutawa also described some of the challenging aspects of doing business in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf region. Most notably, he recounted his difficult but successful efforts to win approval from government censors in several Middle Eastern countries. Raising money in the Middle East is also challenging, as the prevailing cultural practice dictates that families provide financial support to business endeavors regardless of their merits. However, Mr. Al-Mutawa eschewed this type of financing—much to the bewilderment of some potential investors—and set out to raise capital in a manner more consistent with practices in the United States. With a business plan in hand, he succeeded in raising \$7 million from 54 investors in eight countries to start Teshkeel. Most of the second round of funding comes from Islamic Investment Bank, a tactic designed to help crack the Saudi market.

Throughout his talk, Mr. Al-Mutawa exuded passion for pro-social, for-profit business endeavors, conveyed in an unmistakably moderate Islamic voice. Because of its unique vision, it

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seems certain that *The 99* will leave a lasting impression on the global comic book industry. However, one can not help but wonder what its social impact, however minor, might be on the volatile Middle East. Can *The 99* compete effectively for airtime with radical mullahs and help influence the next generation of Muslim youth? That remains to be seen, but if the project succeeds, it will have taught us all a lesson in tolerance, cooperation and conflict resolution.

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