

'Jihadi Cool'

Comic book action heroes may be better weapons against terror than bullets or bombs.

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Scott Atran is an anthropologist who studies the kids who keep Al Qaeda and its spinoffs going. They're young people like the ones who grew up to blow up trains in Madrid in 2004, carried out the slaughter on the London underground in 2005 and hoped to blast airliners out of the sky en route to the United States in 2006.

Atran has looked at whom they idolize, how they organize, what bonds them and what drives them. And he's reached an unconventional but, to me, convincing conclusion: what has inspired the "new wave" terrorists since 2001 is not so much the Qur'an as what Atran calls "jihadi cool." If you can discredit these kids' idols (most notably Osama bin Laden), give them new ones and reframe the way their families and friends see the United States and its allies, then you've got a good shot at killing the fad for terror and stopping the jihad altogether.

For Atran, a senior fellow at the Center on Terrorism at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, this is pretty much Public Diplomacy 101. But he's found that the battle of ideas is not just hard to win in the field, it's a very tough slog at home. In Washington last year he was briefing White House staffers on his findings when a young woman who worked for Vice President Dick Cheney said in the sternest tough-guy voice she could muster, "Don't these young people realize that the decisions they make are their responsibility, and that if they choose violence against us, we're going to bomb them?"

Atran was dumbfounded. "Bomb them?" he asked. "In Madrid? In London?"

So when Atran went back to Washington to brief National Security Council and Homeland Security staff in January this year, he went armed—with comic books. He wanted to show that nothing cooked up by the Bush administration's warmongers and spinmeisters comes close to delivering the kind of positive messages you can find in a commercial action adventure series called "The 99."

The comics are the creation of Kuwaiti psychologist and entrepreneur Naif Al-Mutawa, and—let me make a confession here—I've been reading them since my colleague Florence Villeminot first wrote about them [early last year](#). My reasons for following the series are probably as atavistic as analytic. I grew up with Marvel and DC comics, spending my impressionable pubescence getting deep into the gothic drama of Batman, delighting in the athletic insolence of Spider-Man, savoring the unsublimated sexuality of the women in X-Men. And, yes, there's something of all of that in "The 99," with its hulking fighters and sultry enforcers.

Did I mention that these are *Muslim* superheroes?

A graduate of Tufts University in the United States with a triple major in clinical psychology, English literature and history, the 37-year-old Al-Mutawa also has a keen sense of symbols. Mainstream comics in the West have drawn heavily on Judeo-Christian narratives and iconography, he says. Why not create a cast of characters whose powers echo Muslim history

and traditions? And because his company, Teshkeel, is the distributor of Marvel and DC comics in the Middle East, Al-Mutawa knows just where to find top writers, pencilers and inkers to make his new publications as polished as any on the market.

The core conceit of the series is that when the Mongols sacked the great city of Baghdad in A.D. 1258, their main target was its magnificent library. They "planned not only to conquer the greatest empire the world had ever known, but to eradicate its hope—its potential—thereby destroying its future," the narrator tells us in boldface block letters. "That would require more than sword and club, sinew and blood. That would require destroying the empire's true base of power ... that would require destroying its knowledge."

In the final cataclysmic moments of the Abbassid caliphate the scholars used alchemy to impregnate 99 magical gems with the vast knowledge held in the library. Those "Noor Stones," as they are called, have been scattered around the world, but when they are found and matched up with the right person, they give him or her a phenomenal power akin to one of the 99 names of God: Jabbar is a Hulk-like figure of enormous strength; Noora has power over light; Darr is the inflictor of pain; Raqib is the watcher; and so on. There are about a dozen so far, of whom my favorite is Mumita, a petite, street-smart girl whose name means "the destroyer."

(Reading down a list of the 99 attributes of Allah, it's clear some will be easy to interpret as superheroes, like Musawwir, the fashioner of forms, Mutakabbir, the tremendous, and Hakim, the wise. Some may carry too much religious weight for a comic, like Rahman and Rahim, the most beneficent and most merciful. And some present intriguing challenges to the imagination. I'm looking forward to a superhero called Latif, the subtly kind.)

The essential conflict in the story is an X-Men-like rivalry between Dr. Ramzi, who wants to gather together the Noor Stones and their bearers to do good, and Mughal, who wants to gather them together for, ahem, world domination.

In fact, these comics are tapping into many of the same themes exploited by bin Laden, who is, after all, bent on world domination. The message that Islamic civilization once was a mighty realm of learning and science is dear to jihadi firebrands, who tend to pine for days of old when Muslim knights were bold. The seminal treatise of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's leading ideologue, is called "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner." But the narrative in "The 99" is a great deal more accessible and potentially more inspiring to the eight-to-14-year-old crowd who will provide us with the next generation of suicide bombers—or not.

As Scott Atran points out, these kids dream of fighting for some meaningful cause that will make them heroes in their communities. Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri—and Arab satellite television and in some cases their own experiences—have convinced them that fighting against the most powerful country in the world and its allies is the most heroic thing they can do.

No, "The 99" comic books are not going to solve that problem. Their circulation is in the tens of thousands at this point, while bin Laden's violent message gets out to billions. But comic books are "likely to be a lot more helpful than our bullets and bombs in attracting young people away from jihadi cool," says Atran. They might even help convince Washington that "knowledge is the true base of power." But maybe that's hoping for too much.

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