

# A Jordanian Spins Comic Book Tales to Counter Terrorist Ideologies

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By Danny Hakim

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OSLO — SULEIMAN BAKHIT has made a career of studying heroes.

Mr. Bakhit, 36, is a Jordanian comic book author and entrepreneur who creates Middle Eastern stories that are an alternative to terrorist ideologies. His field research has included surveys of children in poor neighborhoods in and around the Jordanian capital of Amman and in Syrian refugee camps.

All this, he says, has given him an insight into what fuels terrorism, and a specialist's appreciation for the propaganda strategies of the Islamic State, and how they have improved upon those pioneered by Al Qaeda. Where Osama bin Laden once lectured in didactic videos, the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has young jihadists speaking to potential recruits in their native tongues, whether English, French or Arabic, and connecting on an emotional level.

They "preach terrorism as a heroic journey," Mr. Bakhit said in an interview. "The biggest threat in the Middle East is terrorism disguised as heroism."

He says he believes that the terrorist narrative is essentially “copying Joseph Campbell’s work,” referring to the American mythologist. In Mr. Campbell’s view, a heroic journey is central to mythmaking. A hero has to be called to action, perhaps hesitate, then leave home and be tested. Among other things, Mr. Campbell’s work inspired the filmmaker George Lucas to create “Star Wars.”

Mr. Bakhit has studied Mr. Campbell as part of his fellowship at TED, a nonprofit organization known for sponsoring conferences on ideas. He expanded on this idea, and his story, during a recent speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum, a gathering of dissidents and activists, and in a series of interviews.

“The greatest heroic journey in our culture is the journey of the Prophet Muhammad, who left his village to go meditate in a cave in the middle of the desert,” he said. “He was meditating, and there the archangel came down and gave him the message of Islam. He came out of that cave transformed with a new vision of Islam and united all Arabs around that vision.”

“What’s interesting is that Bin Laden emulated that journey to the letter,” he continued. “Bin Laden left his life of wealth and aristocracy in Saudi Arabia, went to the caves in Afghanistan and emerged from these caves a new leader, with a new vision to cleanse the shame of the Muslim nation through violence. Similarly, this is the same message, the heroic message, that they push to all the terrorists in Western Europe who go join ISIS. And this has such a huge appeal for a lot of these youth, unfortunately.”

In the Islamic State vision, you win whether you live or die. “You get killed, you’re reunited with the prophet and Allah,” Mr. Bakhit said. “If you don’t, you’re still on your journey.”

Mr. Bakhit says he believes that comic books and video games can provide an antidote, coupled with the right storytelling, and he started a company in 2006 called Aranim Media Factory — Aranim being a fusion of the words “Arab” and “anime” — to produce them. But his path has not been easy.

IN many ways, Mr. Bakhit is playing out his own Campbelleque journey. Barrel-chested, with a cleanshaven head and a goatee, he certainly looks the part of an action hero. Like many people, he saw his life change on Sept. 11, when he was studying at the University of Minnesota. On the day of the attacks, before he even knew about them, he received a call from his father, Marouf al-Bakhit, a Jordanian politician who went on to serve two times as prime minister.

“He says, ‘Suleiman, if anybody asks you your name, tell them you’re José and you’re from Mexico,’” he said. “I should have listened to him. Sometime afterwards, I got attacked by a group of men for no other reason than being an Arab.”

## Image



Some of the art by Mr. Bakhit, who taught himself to draw as he prepared to make comic books with Middle Eastern stories. Credit Warrick Page for The New York Times

He decided to visit schools in the area to build community relations and explain to American children that most Muslims are not terrorists. When he was asked by a young boy if the Arab world had its own Superman and Batman, he realized the answer was no. He describes the moment as an epiphany. He taught himself how to draw and began creating stories and characters. Eventually, he moved back to Jordan and started his company.

Early on, he conducted focus groups with Jordanian children from different economic classes.

"I went there and asked the kids, 'Who are your heroes?' " he said. " 'We don't have any heroes, but we hear a lot about Bin Laden, about Zaraqawi,' " he said they told him, referring to the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zaraqawi, who led the group that evolved into the Islamic State. "I'm like, 'What do you hear about them?' The children replied, 'That they defend us against the West because the West is out there to kill us.' And this is the terrorist narrative and Propaganda 101."

At first, the Jordanian government embraced his company, even though he says his father was less than enthusiastic. "He was initially disappointed, and wanted me to become an engineer," he said. "Later on, he started to change his mind and see the value in it."

MORE than a million copies of his comic books were distributed in schools in Jordan, he said, and his company received a grant from the King Abdullah II Fund for Development. His early comics were about Jordanian war heroes. Then he began to expand his company's range, creating stories like the one about an all-women military unit, and he hired web developers to create games for Facebook. One of his most popular characters, Element Zero, was a kind of Arab version of Jack Bauer, the fictional counterterrorism agent in the television series "24."

He says he has not been offered American government support and would not take it.

"If I get any funding from the U.S., it's going to be perceived as propaganda, C.I.A., and doomed to failure," Mr. Bakhit said. "We as the Arab world, we need to take responsibility for this problem. We have to develop the solutions from the ground up."

Problems developed along the way. An assault by extremists has left a long scar above and below his left eye. And his relationship with the government became strained.

After he developed a post-apocalyptic "Mad Max"-style comic called "Saladin 2100," set almost a century in the future, the government was concerned that it did not show the ruling Hashemite dynasty was still in power. The comic was a collaboration with Tony Lee, the prolific British comic book author.

"It was deemed 'too dangerous' because I did not answer the question who is going to be the leader 100 years from now," Mr. Bakhit said. "Now you know why I don't have any hair."

Eventually, he shut his company as the government's pressure increased. Many of his comics, including one about a world ruled by teenagers after adults disappear, were left unpublished.

Mr. Bakhit weathers his struggles with good humor. Expanding on his baldness, he said, "I have a lot of hair, just really bad distribution." Of the attack that left him with a scar: "My dating life improved exponentially."

He says the government is softening its stance, and he is in the process of restarting his business with a new name, Hero Factor. But he says he is considering domiciling it in the British Virgin Islands. A spokesman for the Jordanian government did not respond to requests for comment.

"For every terrorist we kill, there's a hundred more being born," Mr. Bakhit said. The narratives pushed by the likes of the Islamic State are "light years ahead of what we have, and no one is fighting it at that level."

"It is at its core a war of mythologies," he added, one that can be fought "for a fraction of the cost of a drone strike."