

MAKING ARABIAN HEROES

It is an industry that has fueled the imaginations of millions of children across generations and around the world. Yet, despite the region's dire need for heroes, the comic-book market in the Middle East may not be the easiest to break into. Nevertheless, Jordan's Aranim Media Factory is looking to do just that, and even more. **Naseem Tarawnah** talks to its founder, **Suleiman Bakhit**, to find out what heroes he's been developing in his workshop.



Despite the collar shirt and dark tattoos, the scars on Suleiman Bakhit's neck are still visible. He does not hide them. They are his reminder; his "back" story so to speak. It may be safe to assume that most businessmen do not have a physical memento that tells the story of how they came to do what it is they do. A socially-active student during his undergraduate career at the University of Minnesota, Bakhit was attacked by four students on campus one night, soon after the events of September 11, 2001. The racially-driven crime left him in stitches and in need for reconstructive surgery to his face.

Instead of returning home to Jordan, Bakhit began to devote his time to visiting six- and seven-year-old children in American elementary schools. His goal was to plant the right seeds by simply talking to them about Arab culture, in hopes of changing future perceptions. Bakhit attempted to assuage their fears in a post-9/11 world, where confused children had been left to make sense of the terrible realities. They asked him one question after another, about where he came from, what he ate, which TV shows he watched; and one by one, Bakhit answered. However, when asked one day about what the Arab equivalent of Superman looked like, he was overwhelmed with the realization that superheroes did not really exist in the Arab world. Armed with nothing more than his imagination and a pencil, he began to draw for the first time in his life.

After two semesters into his master's program, Bakhit left university at 26, quit his job, taking the \$50,000 he had saved up, and headed straight back to Jordan to bring a world of Arab superheroes to life with that small investment.

The beginnings and makings of the average superhero always involve that initial obstacle to overcome, and it was no different for Bakhit when it came to establishing the Aranim Media Factory in 2005. Arriving in Jordan only months before his father, Marouf Bakhit, unexpectedly became prime minister, who

would have thought that in a country like ours, such an event would become more of a problem than the key to success.

"I had no idea my father was going to become prime minister, and that complicated things," said Bakhit in an exclusive interview with Jordan Business. "To have the son of a prime minister create comic books is not exactly a very 'prestigious' thing in our society," he explained. What complicated matters further was his financial backer, who became more interested in receiving political favors from Bakhit's father than actually investing in the company. Suffice to say, complications and conflicts of interest arose, leading to a falling out with the backer. Leaving him with another scar on his journey, Bakhit says it was a learning experience; one he will not soon forget.

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After running out of his personal savings, Bakhit went out to find the right investors that would help turn his dream into a reality, whether through financial assistance or professional guidance. Fortunately, he found both, starting with the

King Abdullah II Development Fund. "Financially, they've helped me just like any other company, but the biggest help from them has come from their encouragement," said Bakhit. "Their job is to provide moral support, through the process of establishing the business and making contacts. They believed in me when no one else would, and those are the kinds of partners I needed."

Since then, Aranim has started to receive funding from local partners and investors, allowing it to expand from a one-man operation to a small team of around 15 employees that include calligraphers, designers and artists. While Aranim is still in the capital-spending stage, 2008 is set to be the company's most ambitious year yet, with plans to enter the market for the first time as a seller. Although the animation and comic market in Jordan remains a relatively virgin one, with many previous attempts having failed, the obstacles remain numerous. If anything, in a culture that is not accustomed to reading or buying many magazines, let alone comics, it will be difficult to sustain a business that has, based on international experience, depended solely on sales rather than advertising, akin to local magazines and various other publications. Affordability may prove to be another problem, and Aranim will have to rely on market demand to set prices and drive sales. This is especially true in a region where most youths have understandably limited allowances.



Indigenous Content

To overcome many of these obstacles in an industry where some have come and gone, there are two key components to success, according to Bakhit. The first involves creating world-class quality artwork to ensure international appeal, while the second is to rely on developing stories and content that are indigenous to Arab youths and the Arab market and, at the same time, maintain an international appeal. Bakhit points to Arab competitors such as Taskheel and AK Comics as retaining a model that is very American and Western. “In my opinion, this won’t work in the Middle East, so we’re trying to adapt another model based on indigenous content,” said Bakhit. “Aladdin, an Arabic story, has been one of Disney’s top-grossing films of all time,” he explained, “so we should not shy away from doing our own content, our own stories, culture and mythologies.”

In establishing this model, Aranim published a comic book last year depicting the heroic story of First Lieutenant Muwaffaq Al-Salti, the martyred Jordanian pilot who engaged a superior Israeli Mirage III jet with his Jordanian Hunter in 1967. The eight-minute dogfight is one of the longest in history.



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Depicted in comic book format, the artwork vividly documents a piece of Jordanian history, with its final pages looking more like an artsy textbook, detailing some of the significant history of the Royal Jordanian Air Force. Roughly 50,000 copies were printed and distributed in local

newspapers for free in an attempt to soften the ground for the planned 2008 launch.

Within days of their distribution, Bakhit received dozens of inquisitive calls, curious to know more about the series. Days later, the same comics could be found in downtown Amman, being sold (illegally) by various street vendors for JD1. In any case, this specific series of 24 issues will see a printing of 2.4 million copies, to be sold nationwide in the coming months.

Meanwhile, Aranim's indigenous content stands out in every character and storyline Bakhit develops. Mansaf and

Ouzi are two average Jordanian blue-collar workers with an active imagination and a love for their favorite national dishes. Yet another character is Nar, a young superhero who wakes up in a hidden city beneath Petra along with other supernatural friends, only to discover that the year is 2050, oil has run out in the Middle East, and not a single adult remains alive. An even more mature comic is being developed based on the first Arabian assassins in the world, all sporting futuristic-looking swords dowsed in sharp Arabian calligraphy.

Expanding The Business Model

While sales for comics may be predictably low given the initial culture that is yet to be converted, Aranim's business model sees its money-making sources in a much larger context. "Even if I distribute a comic [book] for free, I create readership. I end up with hundreds of thousands of fans of characters or a series," said Bakhit. "This is an intel-

lectual-property business that opens up all kinds of possibilities such as books, games, movies, animation, TV series and merchandising. You have loyal fans who want this product, who want to see their favorite character on a T-shirt or as a toy."

However, with such a business model in mind, it may take a few years in order for Aranim to establish a solid fan base, and before it can start venturing off into high revenue-generating diversifications. Based on Aranim's current business model, the tipping point, according to Bakhit, should be within three years. With a business keen on developing its own work into other multimedia facets, it is not far from the realm of possibility to see Aranim turning its lovable comic-book characters into animated films and video games for the Arab market within a matter of years.

In the meantime, the factory is working nonstop to produce some cutting-edge material in a related field. While still in its scripting phase, Aranim hopes to announce in the weeks to come its plans to develop a feature film about the true story of legendary local boxer Abu-Khadija and the tragedies he endured throughout his life. Unemployed, and with sick children at home, Abu-Khadija boxed to make money, and while his story was originally pitched as a comic book, Bakhit felt it would be better depicted on screen. "This year will [financially] be a tough time for most Jordanians," said Bakhit. "We are in desperate need of a story about the underdog; a hero everyone can identify with; a positive role model that represents perseverance. I think the story of Abu-Khadija will embody [just] that."

The Time Is Now

At a time when the Arab world is in dire need of heroes and characters that embody qualities we can all relate to, Aranim's entry into the market of imagination could not be timelier. Operating in an environment of endless possibilities and within an industry of hope and creativity, Suleiman Bakhit's endeavor into the comic world and beyond may just be the stuff of legends. ■