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by [Ed Halter](#), 09.05.2006

**I**n summer 2006, an Iranian political group called the Union of Islamic Student Societies revealed that it was planning on entering the videogame business. Via the fundamentalist state's semiofficial Fars news agency, a spokesperson for the group announced that its members were developing an as-yet unnamed game revolving around one fictitious Commander Bahman. In the game, American troops kidnap an Iranian nuclear engineer who is traveling through Iraq en route to a Shiite holy shrine in Karbala, and Bahman must then cross the border to battle U.S. Special Forces and rescue the scientist, thereby ensuring the success of Iran's undoubtedly peaceful nuclear energy program.

What's more, the Union announced, the untitled project would be produced in retaliation for a 2005 game called *Assault on Iran* by American "news gaming" company Kuma, whose [KumaWar](#) series notoriously re-creates recent and historical military events in playable minigame form, ranging from the American raid that killed Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay, to John Kerry's Swift boat mission in Vietnam. Rather than draw on past operations, however, *Assault on Iran* presents a speculative future premise based, Kuma's website explains, on what "our experts believe to be an extremely plausible scenario for delaying or destroying Iran's nuclear arms capabilities without kick-starting World War III." The UISS presented a signed petition to Kuma to have this anti-Iran game removed, and met with no success. Now, its activist strategy has changed to a more pragmatic entrepreneurship: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Kuma, for good measure, issued a subsequent press release that they in turn will create a third game: a sequel to Bahman's adventures, to be played from the American perspective once more.

This volley of international vaporware proposals between the Iranian group and Kuma may have merely provided a couple days' diversion for various game blogs, but it arrived around the same time as a number of other stories about gaming's fantasy realm bleeding into real-world politics. Under the influence of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez's oft-voiced theories of imminent American invasion, Venezuelan politicians denounced the upcoming [Mercenaries 2: World in Flames](#) (PS3), which depicts the storming of Caracas by American troops, as a form of stealth propaganda from an administration that had its eyes on acting out the real thing. *Mercenaries 2* developer Pandemic Studios told the Associated Press that its company has "no ties to the U.S. government" despite the fact that Pandemic indeed worked closely on the Army's payroll to create the 2004 first-person squad trainer [Full Spectrum Warrior](#). In the U.S., several states began pursuing laws banning violent and explicit videogames, perhaps to curry favor with older voters allegedly still fearful that games like [Grand Theft Auto](#) were teaching kids to steal and kill. As the newest form of global entertainment, videogames had once again become a political football for the publicity maneuvers of savvy public servants and demagogues.

Spiked with the tensions surrounding U.S.-Iran relations, the untitled Commander Bahman project is not the first Islamic videogame to appear in the Middle East. In fact, in the past half decade a number of projects have emerged from the Muslim world, all sharing a similar goal: to subvert the typical gaming stereotype of Arabs as bad guys by replacing the typical American or European action hero with a recognizably Muslim protagonist. Like many of their American counterparts, these games often base their narratives on real-life wars and battles: While Westerners replay WWII and Vietnam, they twitch through virtual recreations of the Palestinian intifada and the 1982 Israel-Lebanon war. Though relatively small, Islamogaming is also a diverse field, ranging from amateur projects by students, unabashed anti-Zionist propaganda produced by an internationally recognized terrorist organization, religious games produced to teach Islam to kids, and a set of more sober games designed to explore the complex realities of Middle Eastern history.

THROW THE FIRST STONE

What is probably the first widely disseminated Muslim game appeared in 2001. Called [The Stone Throwers](#), this downloadable microgame was created by Mohammad Hamza, a Syrian medical student, and was meant as a show of solidarity with the Palestinian uprising initiated that year, known as the second intifada. The game begins with a photo of what appears to be a dead child held in a woman's arms, with text reading (in English) "Dedicated to the ones...who gave their lives...for their Homeland." In the simple game? a crudely rendered but spirited affair that evokes early versions of Street Fighter? a figure representing a Palestinian youth must punch, kick, and throw rocks at the waves of Israeli riot police who menace him. As he kills off the cops, his score increases at the top of the screen, superimposed upon a skull decorated with the Star of David. The action takes place in front of a digital rendering of the monumental Al-Aqsa Mosque. Located in within the Temple Mount complex in disputed East Jerusalem, the Al-Aqsa Mosque bears special significance: some point to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's controversial visit there in 2000 as the starting point of the second intifada, which was subsequently nicknamed the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

Players can choose between three poetically named levels of difficulty: 1) The Stone Child, 2) I Fear No Enemy, or 3) I Fear Not Death. But, like old-style agitprop films, The Stone Throwers makes no other attempts at subtlety in conveying its message. At the conclusion, the game announces: "Game Over: Well maybe you have killed some Israeli soldiers...in the Computer world...But..." then switches to a photo of a crowd carrying a young man in a casket, draped with the Palestinian flag, reading "...THIS IS THE REAL WORLD. Stop the killing of the Innocents in Palestine...Before the game is really over." On the Yahoo! group "Damascus University," a forum for Syrian students worldwide, users recommended the game, one remarking that it's "a nice game 'cause you feel yourself as a stone thrower, killing the Arab's number one enemy, Israel. I recommend that all of you go to this website and download this game and enjoy killing the Israeli soldiers. LOL." Not surprisingly, the Simon Wiesenthal Center soon issued a press release denouncing the game as "the latest weapon in the campaign against Israel."

#### KORANIC KID STUFF

The Stone Throwers caused a bit of controversy, but once the War on Terror commenced, anti-Muslim paranoia made even the most innocuous children's games appear ominous to certain journalists. In 2005, the Wall Street Journal revealed that the suspects of that year's London Underground bombings had frequented a shop that sold titles by American software company IslamGames that the paper claimed "made videogames featuring apocalyptic battles between defenders of Islam and their opponents" in which "the player's goal is to seek out and destroy the disbelievers."

When Slate reporter Chris Suellentrop ordered IslamGames titles Ummah Defense I, Ummah Defense II, and Maze of Destiny, he found them clunky but far from troubling. In the Ummah Defense series, for example, the "disbelievers" are in fact merely robots, while the boss enemy of Maze of Destiny is neither American nor Israeli, but rather a fantasy baddie named Darlak the Deceiver. Perhaps, the reporter surmised, "radical Islam dreams not only of restoring the borders of the Caliphate, but also of freezing gaming technology at the level of the old Nintendo Entertainment System."

Another Islamic educational software firm, the U.K.-based Innovative Minds, responded to similar protests about their game The Resistance, in which kids become make-believe members of Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Southern Lebanon; players get ammo for shooting at Israeli tanks as rewards for providing correct answers to a faith-based history quiz. "It seems that the media is silent when they, the Zionists, use their tanks to slaughter our children," the company's website retorts, "but when our children play a shoot-em-up game [...] we are accused of training terrorists and instilling hatred towards Jews! On the contrary, the questions in the game educate children not to fall for the Zionist lie that Zionism, Jewishness, and Judaism are synonymous but to understand that Zionism, a racist ideology, has nothing to do with Judaism."

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## HEZBOLLAH'S COUNTER-STRIKE

The conflict that raged between Israel and Lebanon within the latter country's southern regions from the 1980s to 2000 provides the basis for another game that makes no bones about its ideological position. Produced by the Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau—a branch of the militant Iranian-funded organization considered a terrorist operation by much of the international community? Special Force was the first 3D first-person shooter produced for Middle Eastern gamers, and it arrived with an explicit political agenda. Like many Western games at the time, Special Force touted its historical realism: its scenarios are based on the actual battles Hezbollah fought in 2000 that helped convince Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon and end the occupation.

"In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful," the website for the 2003 game reads. "One time I was walking in Beirut, the capital that 'defeated the greatest army of the world.' I stopped by one of the computer game shops dispersed widely in Beirut and most Arab cities. I saw the children playing the game of the invincible American hero, who's never out of ammunition and who continually wins. I asked one of the children, did you like the game? He replied, 'Yes, but I wish I were playing as an Arab Moslem fighting the Jews as the Islamic Resistance did in Lebanon!' [...]. This is where the necessity [for the game] emerged." The goal of the game, its designers state, is to "illustrate battles executed by young men who never played an imaginary game; rather they fought real battles that humiliated the Zionist enemy...."

Created with the open source Genesis 3D game engine, its name perhaps unwittingly parallels the U.S. military's [America's Army: Special Forces](#), released the same year. After viewing an animated title sequence of an exploding Israeli tank, players train at a Lebanese war college, firing guns and lobbing grenades at images of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and other Israeli leaders, and are awarded medals from real-life Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah upon completion. When battling Israeli forces in South Lebanon, players can honor photos of actual "martyrs" at spots of their real-life death. Israeli bad guys shout "You killed me" in Hebrew when felled. Environments in the game are decorated with Hezbollah's martial insignia, or a blue Star of David with a hissing snake at its center.



"The military posts that are attacked in the game by the player are the exact replicas of the posts used by the 'Israelis' during their brutal occupation," the Special Force website reads. "In the game the player has to attack the military post and liberate it as [...] the Lebanese actually did. The player attacks military personal [sic] and not civilians; the attack also takes place on Lebanese soil. [...] In the game you will also find pictures of all the martyrs that died during their struggle to liberate their land so that



our children may live in freedom. Special Force game will render you a partner of the resistance."

A March 2003 Reuters item reported that Hezbollah promoted Special Force with advertisements on Lebanese television. One Internet café operator promoted its release by decorating his business with plastic rifles and sandbags because "guys like that stuff" (a tactic not too far removed from the guns-n-camo militaristic displays decorating American game boutiques around the same time). "The goal is to create an alternative to similar Western games where Arabs and Muslims are portrayed as terrorists," Hezbollah spokesman Bilal az-Zein told the reporter, while an 8-year old interviewee said he liked Special Force "because it kills Israelis.... I can be a resistance fighter, even though in real life I don't want to do that."

#### GAMES FOR AN OCCUPATION

The most ambitious set of Middle Eastern games, however, have been produced by a private Syrian company without political affiliation: the Damascus-based Afkar Media, a subsidiary of publishing company Dar El Fikr. Afkar's official company goals attest to an enlightened entrepreneurial attitude far removed from the war-mongering rhetoric of Hezbollah: "To communicate with Mankind all over the world and let them breathe the peaceful truth and tolerance of our civilization, as a way to face up [to] the negative stereotypes that have been pursuing us throughout the past decades" and "to communicate with Moslems in a way that respects their colorful heritage and spiritual privacy as a way to get them out of the shell they were put in and enrich the civilization of the 21st century with a touch of justice, acceptance, and love." So far, Afkar has released three game titles in the Middle East, the first-person shooter UnderAsh, its sequel UnderSiege, and a fantasy adventure game set in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra called Victory Castle, and is currently developing a Civilization-style strategy game about the history of Islam called Quraish (and, alternately, Al Quraish).

Though Afkar remains the most prominent commercial game publisher in the Islamic world, Afkar's Radwan Kasmiya told Computer Gaming World that it hasn't been easy. "There is no legitimate game market to speak of in the Middle East," says Kasmiya. "Piracy is nearly 90 percent of total sales and many Arab countries have no laws protecting intellectual property or trademark." He likes to quote how one editor of an Arabic-language gaming magazine described Afkar's difficult success: "These guys are racing in a pool full of sharks, yet they are surviving." Since the company's beginnings in 1997, it has grown from a small team of six to a firm of nearly 40 employees, with offices in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and, soon, the United Arab Emirates.

In UnderAsh, the protagonist is Ahmad, a Palestinian teenager growing up under Israeli occupation during the first intifada, which began in late 1987. In the game's opening chapter, Ahmad runs through his village, throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. Later in the game, Ahmad moves from stones to guns, and shoots at Israeli settlers attempting to push out the Palestinian villagers. In a dramatic trailer for UnderAsh, a bulldozer destroys a Palestinian home and Israeli police stomp and kick a Palestinian villager. Ahmad throws a stone into a black void; it transforms into a grenade in midair.

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"We started development for UnderAsh in 1999," Kasmiya says, "and finished it two years later. At that time most gamers around the world, including the Middle East, were playing [Delta Force](#), [Medal of Honor](#), [Counter-Strike](#)?the golden age of FPS games." None of these American games, of course, gave a Middle Eastern perspective. On the original website for UnderAsh, Afkar made its cultural position clear. "The main purpose of the game was to [offer alternatives in an area] previously filled with foreign games distorting the facts and history, and planting the motto of 'Sovereignty is for power and violence according to the American style.'" Kasmiya says that the game allows Arabs to support the Palestinian cause, albeit in a virtual manner. "The Arab street is very charged. They believe they can't do anything to help their brothers in Palestine," he told the BBC in 2002. "So I think they are playing because they feel that they can feel the experience of young Palestinian people living in Jerusalem." ("Like the game," the BBC reporter concludes ruefully, "the nature of Arab support remains largely virtual.")

Kasmiya says he has received some negative response to the game, but the positive response has outweighed it. "Even though I was sure of what I was doing, I was afraid that people would easily misconstrue it, especially as it deals with such a controversial concept, but wow...I didn't expect so much positive response from both the Middle East and Europe. Volunteers from all over the world stormed my mailbox with localization proposals." Beyond sales of UnderAsh on CDROM, the game's website drew more than a million downloads?an incredible number, Kasmiya notes, for a region where the average modem speed is still stuck at 28.8K. In a talk given at the Barcelona game developer conference "Game as Critic as Art" in 2006, Kasmiya told attendees that the Palestinian mother of a teenager who played UnderAsh called him to say how she had burst into tears at its conclusion, so powerfully moved at seeing her experience depicted by a game.

The game's more elaborate sequel, UnderSiege, is set in 2000 during the second intifada. Its narrative draws from true events experienced by Palestinian families during this time; though the release of UnderSiege throughout the Middle East remains stalled, Kasmiya hopes eventually to release it worldwide. "I just can't wait for UnderSiege to be published internationally," Kasmiya told an interviewer for [selectparks.net](#), "so players can tell the difference between a history game based on lives of real people trying to survive [the] ethnic cleansing and [the] political propaganda that is trying to inject morals in [to] future marines to justify their assaults on nations far away from their homeland."

Short teaser videos for UnderSiege have the air of a brutal documentary. In one, after a child is gunned down in the street, an Israeli soldier jumps from his tank, apparently to rescue him. When he arrives by the child's side, the soldier appears to finish him off by pounding him with a cement block. In another teaser, a Palestinian religious service is interrupted by an Orthodox Jewish gunman, who mows down the congregation with a machine gun. The latter scenario appears to depict the 1994 attack on a Hebron mosque by Baruch Goldstein, which killed 29 and wounded 125 and has historical distinction as the bloodiest attack on Palestinians by a lone Jewish extremist.



Kasmiya contrasts the aims of UnderSiege with American games based on real-world conflicts like [Conflict: Desert Storm](#) or [Delta Force: Black Hawk Down](#). "What is the goal of those games?" Kasmiya asks. "Is it that gamers kill all the bad 'different-looking' guys, and thereby bring peace to the world? I don't know. I think such games don't provide the player with more than a couple hours of fun, plus some information about the conflict. And the feeling that he is best?that he belongs to a civilization that depends on arms to solve its conflicts. In UnderSiege, three out of the five main characters die. We simply are telling a history of real people who are trying to live in a world full of violence. No heroes are allowed in?facts only. I believe that, through this type of game, we can reasonably balance out the one-sided views as they're written by the victors."

Producing the strategy game Quraish, Afkar's most ambitious game to date, has presented its own unique problems. The history game takes place during the first century of Islam's existence, and players can take on the role of a Bedouin sheik, an Arab warrior, a Persian, or a Roman. Kasmiya believes the game will impart a deeper respect for the history of Islam beyond the image of "[the] Crusades, oil, and terrorism" that dominates Western media representations. However, the game has also been controversial to radical fundamentalist Muslims, who fear it might not give the version of history they endorse. "They are afraid that we can't view Islam in the right way," Kasmiya says flatly, "or might make fun of spiritual characters. This topic is very sensitive in the Middle East?remember the Danish cartoon crisis [of 2005]." Kasmiya says his company is "fighting on two frontiers," trying to counteract the effects of negative images from the West and attempts by Muslim "extremists" to control the public image of Islam.

Kasmiya also contends that many Western countries would not allow Afkar to purchase rights to gaming engines. "What really bothers me is that they are judging us before even trying," he says. "But on the brighter side, that forced us to develop our own engine and use it for Al Quraish. Looking at how things are now, I think it was better for us. It made us more independent."

#### GAMES AS A DIALOGUE


Eddo Stern, an Israeli artist and designer who lives in California and who's becoming well known in the art world for political, sometimes prankish projects using modified or original games, is sympathetic, but a bit more skeptical, of the value of Afkar's games. One of Stern's own works, *Sheik Attack*, used footage from a variety of games to retell the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; otherwise anonymous images from [Age of Empires](#) or *Counter-Strike* take on a disturbingly emotional, moral weight.

Even games like UnderAsh or UnderSiege, Stern thinks, might merely be "tit for tat"?replacing the typical Arab enemy with an Israeli one. "When consumed by their target audience," Stern says, both Western and Middle Eastern games "serve only to bolster prejudices and preconceptions. What's probably more useful is the moment when gamers are exposed to both sets of games and perhaps feel empathy, or at least start to see how absurdly propagandistic and intolerant these games are. But again, these

moral questions are so slippery since the Palestinians most often see themselves as victims in an asymmetrical political situation?as do many Israelis. And the idea of an end justifying the means extends from political and military choices to some of the game design choices made in UnderAsh?a familiar strategy of overt stereotyping of the game villains, Israeli soldiers, and settlers in this case."

Still, by moving beyond the first-person shooter and into more complex strategy gaming with AI Quraish, Afkar appears to be pushing Middle Eastern games to the next level of sophistication. As the company states on the AI Quraish website, "There must be somebody to do it, and if not us, nobody will care!" ❌

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