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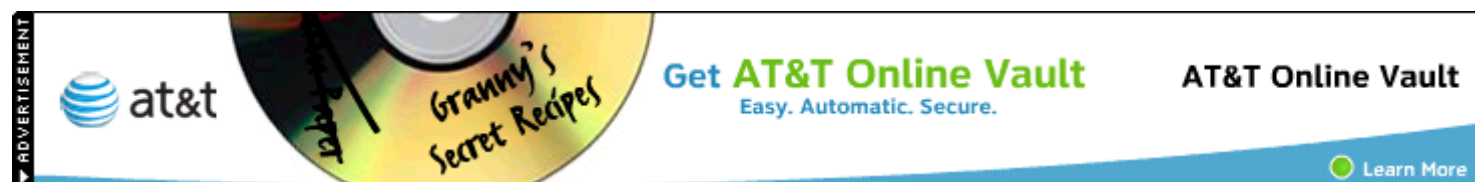


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by **Ed Halter**, 09.05.2006

In 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 **Kuma\War** 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



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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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