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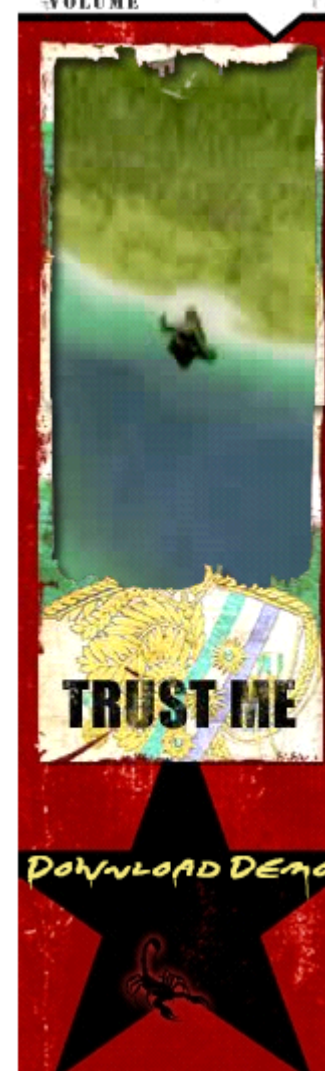


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HEZBOLLAH'S COUNTER-STRIKE

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.

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rank: 2398
release date: 04/22/2003



"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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