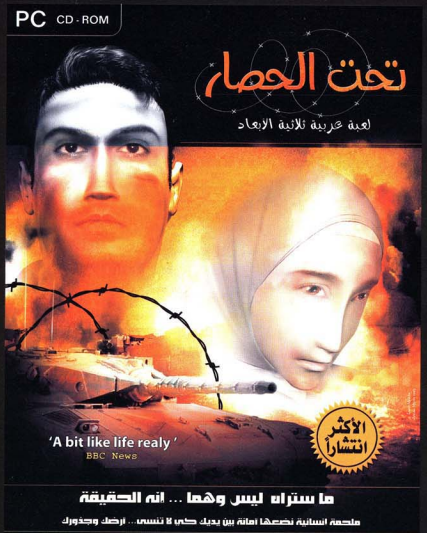

Poster from game *Under Siege: Tahta al-Hisar*, 2005.

the side of the enemies of Islam. The player has a chance to embrace Islam and to join the side of the Prophet, or to refuse and go on in the siege of Medina. In fact in this fight the primary Islamic community stood the test, but if the player doesn't make the expected decision and doesn't join the Muslims, their victory can lead to a halt of the spread of Islam. Radwan Kasmiya claims that they want to show early Islamic history as accurately as possible without legends and superstition. Such an approach doesn't always have to be in accord with the folk Islamic devotion and might face a harsh critique.

In the West Afkar Media has to deal with a totally different perception. The European reaction to Tahta al-Hisar often stated with relief that the game, though dealing with Palestine and being of Arab origin, refuses suicide killings and attacks against civilians, as if it were logical to expect the opposite. A similar approach speaks more about the authors of the text than about the game reviewed. The games arising in the Islamic world are perceived as dubious themselves. A recent text in the New York Times harshly denounced the game Ummah Defender by the company IslamGames for spreading religious hatred. The company IslamGames focuses on the production of Islamic games, mostly graphic quizzes, in which children put together al-Fatiha from letters or learn the Qur'an. The afore-mentioned Ummah Defender is a very simple action game dealing with a fight with robots who attack the Earth. The introductory message, which started an alarming reaction, says that in the distant future all of humankind will embrace Islam. The game has surely an ideological implicit meaning but not much more than the usual Western action games, in which the united Earth of the future is clearly today's Euro-American civilization. Really aggressively manipulative games are created in the Near East, but the West doesn't know about them much (e.g. the already mentioned Fata al-Quds from the Lebanese Hezbollah).

The up to now published works of Afkar Media balance between a legitimate presentation of their own view and a political manipulation and the declared goals sound much more exalted than their games in reality are. In the context of Syria and Arabia it is a unique attempt to grasp an influential medium and to participate thus in creating your own media picture. The construction of the Arab and Islamic heroes in video games is a key part of the ongoing digital emancipation of the Near East, which – although it evokes more concern in the West, it will surely go on and can markedly contribute to the reflection of how our video games depict "the Other and Foreign."

Prophet or not, and attack Medina. But, if he won, he would in fact endanger, or stop, the spreading of Islam. Aren't you afraid of the reaction of orthodox believers?

Of course, not all people would agree with this game, but I there will be few. Our task is to persuade them. I don't want to encourage any fanaticism, but I understand my society and I know the way in which people think. It is true that if you present what have you told me in the very same way to them, you would see very strong and exaggerated reactions. But we deal with them in a different way, if they play our game they will understand what it is about and what is behind it. The game maps real history of Islam, if someone could not accept this history it is just their problem. Through Quarish we want to present the real history of Islam without sensations and myths. In this point we challenge two different things, the negative stereotypes of the West and our own superstitions.

The web page of Afkar Media declares that your aim is to address Arabs and Muslims all over the world in a way that respects their cultural heritage in order to make sure they feel on par with other nations so they could transform from receiving civilization to developer. Isn't that too much of an overestimated aim for a video game company?

There is one English proverb: "If you aim, aim high." You have to have something like that in Czech also. It is not our aim to sell one or ten thousands or million copies of our game... Really not. Our aim is to contribute to the balance of cultures. We respect our cultures and civilisations, but in society, in which we live, there exists certain ignorance. I know that my society doesn't understand the West correctly and I also know that the West doesn't understand us correctly. We are trying to build a bridge, advantageous for both sides. We are trying to break the stereotype models of thinking on both sides, when the West is for Muslims being presented by Britney Spears and our culture is for the West is being presented by Osama Bin Laden. This aim is broad and long-term, it is more about approach and certain philosophy...

In the world there is now a movement in general towards the production of persuasive video games with political aims. In USA or China the governments spend a lot of money to strengthen the national identity in youth population, even through video games. What do you think about it?

Beware, this certainly is not our aim, to strengthen national identity among Arabs or religious identity among Muslims and to determine ourselves in this way against the others. To strengthen identity in such way leads only to increasing tensions among people. The same thing is to describe current conflicts as the war of religions or cultures. Regrettably, that is exactly what the American media is doing. The whole thing started in America in the Cold War, the bad guys in movies were Russians or spoke Russian. Now the Americans are even increasing the doses on these stereotypes.

You have played al-Quwwat al-Khasa, what do you think about this game?

Of course everyone has the right to produce a game according to his own beliefs, but for me it is an error to make a game literal with a clear political message, but we have an open market and we have to share it. We always try to coin the idea of equality. I am well aware of racism and over-exaggerated national self-identification. What I want to add is that in every place there are people who seek understanding, dialog. That is what we are seeking, but the conditions in which we work are really hard. We try to be sincere in our work, we do not work for money, not at all. We are not financed by anyone and we do not want to be, we want to keep our independence. I believe that in every society there are people like us, who try to act in positive way