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Rise of the anti-Osama

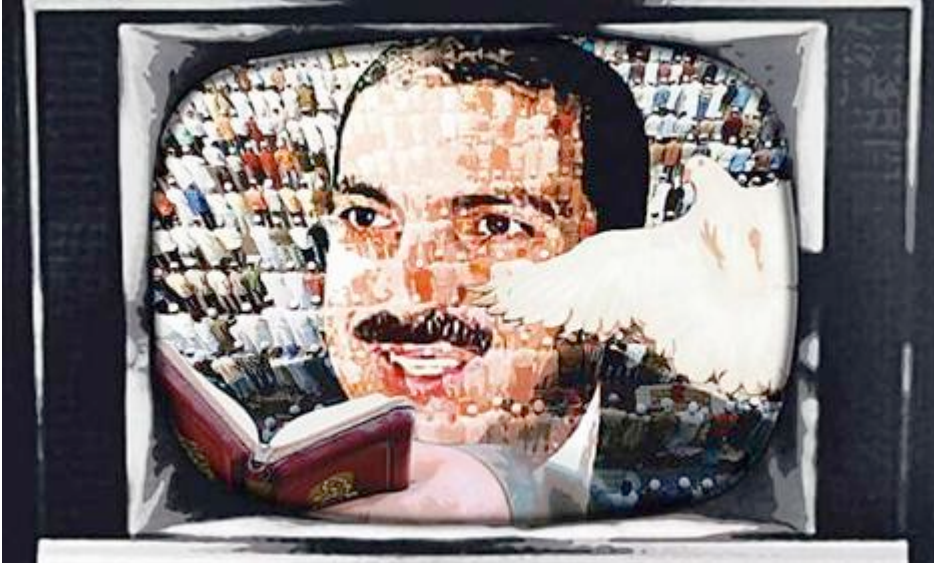


Photo-Illustration: *Harry Afentoglou*

Some dismiss him as a fundamentalist showman, but Amr Khaled has been styled as Islam's antidote to Osama bin Laden. David Hardaker reports.

In a tiny house on the West Bank, a young Palestinian woman is jogging the length of her hallway and back. Again and again. The pain becomes unbearable. But she keeps going. Eventually she completes 2000 laps. Why? Because Amr has said so. He has called on young Muslims to get fit, and she can't find another safe place to run.

In suburban Cairo, a young man rushes from a footpath. Bizarrely, he wants to repair a pothole he has spotted in the road. He beats a nearby work crew to the task. Why? Because Amr has been telling his followers that any act of public service, large or small, is a good thing.

Amr Khaled is a modern phenomenon, altering the daily habits and beliefs of millions of Muslims around the world. While the West focuses on the grim destructive force of al-Qaeda and its turbaned warriors, the parallel power of Amr has gone unnoticed. "When you look at the reach of what he is doing and when you look at the millions he is touching, I don't know another single individual in the region who is having the impact that Amr is having," says Rick Little, a US adviser to the United Nations and an acclaimed international advocate for youth.

Amr (rhymes with "charmer") is a 37-year-old former accountant who has fashioned himself into the anti-bin Laden. His image is more Western banker than Islamic preacher

- no beard and flowing robes; instead, he wears a hand-tailored cream suit, open-necked sky-blue shirt and Bulgari watch.

His message, too, is a stark contrast to the rantings of Islam's headline-grabbing leaders. Amr's dream is one of harmony between civilisations.

"I am going to make a bridge between the West and the youth in the Arab areas," he declares in his Cairo office. There's more than a touch of the thespian in Amr. He betrays not a skerrick of doubt when he states his goal of "peace for mankind".

Amr can play many roles. He can be the severe father rebuking his young followers, who are prone to believe they are the losers in a global game being run and won by the US. For them, he has blunt words.

"We Muslims are living as parasites on the world. Our problem is that we have got used to taking without ever giving," he said last year in one of his weekly satellite broadcasts throughout the Muslim world. "Don't tell us it is a Western conspiracy against us; it is not."

Amr's remedy is a tough personal regime of self-renewal, based on what he says are real Islamic values. His messages are drawn from the Koran and shaped to the 21st century. Muslims are told why it is contrary to Islam to smoke, to litter the streets, to be abusive or to be lazy; and why it is good to collect clothes for the poor or to vote in elections. His plan is delivered in bite-sized chunks. There are 10-step guides, rewards and admonitions.

One devotee is Iman Salama, a 24-year-old Egyptian business graduate. She listens to Amr through her Walkman while she does the housework. "I am a big fan," she says. "I like that he wants to make the beliefs of Islam more something that you can do in your day-to-day life."

Like thousands of others, Salama has grown impatient with the establishment preachers, who are determined not to move with the times. "They are not really up to the standards that are needed to make the Muslim people relate to Islam in a changing world."

To the religious establishment, though, Amr is little more than a showman. They point to his lack of formal training as an imam and scorn his "air-conditioned" brand of Islam. His style fits the template of the US tele-evangelist. His voice rises at times to an excited squeal, then just as quickly drops to a confidential tone. He beseeches and screeches, begs and directs, and in a trice turns his audience's laughter into tears and back again.

His vehicle is satellite TV and it has allowed him to penetrate the borders of not just every Arab country, but every country where Muslims live, including Australia. His television program, *Life Makers*, which is produced by ART satellite-TV network, has spawned the Amr Khaled website, translated into English, French, German, Italian and five other languages.

Rick Little, the American head of the international philanthropic organisation ImagineNations, heard of the preacher's influence when he was interviewing young Muslims for a book he is writing with Jordan's Queen Rania.

"I was shocked by the number of young people from a very diverse number of countries and backgrounds and socio-economic levels who kept on talking about Amr and the influence that Amr was having in their lives," he says from his office in the US. "It was clear to me that, whoever this guy was, he was having a profound, a significant, impact on a wide range of young people."

Little is one of the world's best-known - and best-connected - advocates for young people. He is a Christian and a believer in the power of democracy ("not necessarily the US or Australian version") to change lives for the better. "What I believe is that we need to create open societies in which human values are respected and human rights are promoted and opportunities are provided and young people are provided a voice and are heard.

"I believe Amr Khaled embraces this notion and, by promoting human rights as he does, he is promoting a form of democratisation and he is promoting a form of open society for the Middle East and North Africa."

There is no doubt Amr has become a powerful political lever for the West in its quest to neutralise the anger of young Muslims.

On the question of suicide bombing, he is unambiguous. He was in London this year when terrorist attacks killed 52 people on their way to work "This," the word hisses out, "is nowhere in Islam. If anyone kills children or women, this is not acceptable, not only in Islam - in Jewish faith, in Christianity, in all the religions."

He vows on the spot to have his followers sign a declaration to stop young Palestinian suicide bombers. He confidently predicts he would gather 2 million signatures.

Faith is infectious. The Blair Government has nominated him as a figure worth promoting as a counterweight to the radical imams preaching jihad in England. Little, too, has seen the potential and has quietly told the Bush Administration it should think about harnessing Amr's power as it battles hostility in the Muslim world.

But if the West thinks it is getting an Islamic Uncle Tom it should think again. The preacher might be hip, but he is deeply conservative.

He is a fierce proponent of the headscarf (the hijab), the emblem of conservative Islam, and has called removing it "the biggest sin, the biggest sin, the biggest sin, the biggest sin".

And should a Muslim girl wish to be like a Westerner and not wear the veil, he has this admonition: "Who respects the woman more? Islam or the ones who cannot even sell a

box of matches without painting a half-naked woman on it? Are they the ones who have respected women or ill-treated them? Has not Islam respected women, covered them and liberated them from such exploitation?"

One expert on Islamic groups says there is nothing modern about his message. "You know, if Amr Khaled still focuses on issues like the veil for women, for example - which occupies, I think, the largest space in his rhetoric - how can I consider him as a modernising preacher?" says Hala Mustafa, one of Cairo's liberals and a member of a senior government policy group. "His appearance is calculated to deceive. He is just like the other Islamic theocrats, but he says it with a smiling face."

At times, Amr's addresses to his Arabic audience appear aimed at anything but building a bridge between East and West. Instead, it's a thick line between Us and Them. He charges that Westerners are "fatigued by depression, suicide, addiction, broken families. We pray that they will go back to the right path, Allah's system."

He goes on: "We don't want to lead lives like the West." He claims that Muslims are being "oppressed and tortured all over the world".

Amr, though, denies he's promoting division. "Let me tell you something - to say we are building a bridge does not mean we are making a copy of life in the West. There are some things we don't accept in your vision of life. We have many things in our culture [where there is a] big difference between you and us, and if we say we need to take the West and to make a copy of [its] civilisation, then no one will listen to me, because no one thinks like that."

Amr's self-professed goal - to his Arabic-speaking audience - is the revival of the Muslim community, known as the "Umma", that borderless mass of followers of Islam. He stresses the power of "brotherhood" in Islam and he rails against the evil of globalisation for exploiting Arab countries and Muslim youth.

For Mustafa, who has written extensively on the growth of political Islam, it all adds up to one conclusion. "He is very close to the Muslim Brotherhood," she says, invoking the spectre of the Middle East's original political Islamic organisation, which has renounced violence and is pursuing Islamic government via peaceful means. "Whether they use extreme language or moderate language, they all have the same aim."

For Little, a supporter, this is a difficult, grey area of the Amr phenomenon. He draws a long breath: "You know, he is an interesting character because he is an amalgamation of many different personalities and styles and images." He concedes that "in one respect", Amr can be seen as a version of Islamic fundamentalism, but he believes that "at a deeper level, he represents much more".

"You know, I think that if you take what Amr says on the whole, he presents a pretty balanced world view and perspective."

Little is banking more than his own good name on his judgement. He has also enlisted the Nike Corporation as an Amr backer, through its international youth support arm, the Nike Foundation.

If Little's leap of faith is well judged, he is at the start of a significant international movement towards harmony.

Whatever way you read Amr, though, his influence is a force to be reckoned with, not only in the Arab world but among the troubled Muslim youth of the West.