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Amr Khaled: Islam's Billy Graham

More popular than Oprah Winfrey, the world's first Islamic television evangelist commands an army of millions of followers

David Hardaker reports from Cairo

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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 two thousand laps. Why? Because Amr said so. He called on young Muslims to get fit, and the woman could find no other safe place to run.

In the choking grime of Cairo, another young woman is tending to a small tomato vine, struggling into life atop a 10-storey city block. Why? Because Amr wants his young followers to see something grow. It will provide hope - and maybe a small income - in a part of the world where both are in short supply. The greening of rooftops in the filth and decay of this Arab mega city is a story being repeated again and again throughout the Arab world.

It is a powerful metaphor for the work of a religious and marketing phenomenon called Amr Khaled, who is trying to pump oxygen into the arid lives of Muslim youth. Amr (rhymes with "charmer") Khaled is the Arab world's first Islamic tele-evangelist, a digital age Billy Graham who has fashioned himself into the anti-Bin Laden, using the barrier-breaking power of satellite TV and the internet to turn around a generation of lost Muslim youth.

"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 Khaled is having," says the American Rick Little, an adviser on youth issues to the UN who has worked with Khaled on job creation schemes in the Middle East.

Khaled, 38, defies the stereotype of the Islamic preacher. In his Cairo office it would be easy to mistake him for a City banker. No flowing robes for him. He wears a hand-tailored cream suit, an open-necked sky-blue shirt, brown loafers and a Bulgari watch. The accountant-turned-preacher shifts easily between the worlds of religion and business.

To demonstrate the success of Khaled Inc, the CEO has at the ready a series of graphs and pie-charts in a tastefully designed Annual Report. Inside he points to the proof of his proudest boast: that Amr Khaled is more popular than the US talk show juggernaut Oprah Winfrey.

Certainly, it seems to be the case. A corporate graph shows the number of hits on the AmrKhaled.net website soaring far and beyond the Winfrey line. It is a strange point of reference for an Islamic preacher. He explains, though, that he is neither a preacher nor an Oprah. "I am in my own box," he laughs. And perhaps he is.

Unlike other Middle Eastern preachers, Khaled has had a taste of life on the other side of the religious and cultural divide. Three years ago he was banned from speaking in Egypt because of his popularity. In self-imposed exile, he set up shop in London, where he says he lived "a wonderful life, in freedom".

Khaled has returned to his home country in the past few weeks, but his experience of the West sharpened his perspective on the problems facing young Muslims, in England and in the Arab world. He has come back with a dream: "I am going now to build a bridge between the East and the West," he declares.

There is more than a touch of the thespian in Khaled, and he is well aware of the power of his words to motivate. His prime target is the youth of the Arab world, who feel that they are second-class citizens in a world dominated by the United States and its values. To these young people he has a tough message about the destructive force of self-pity. "We Muslims are living as parasites on the world. Our problem is that we have got used to taking without ever giving," he says. "Don't tell us it is a Western conspiracy against us, it is not."

Khaled's words capture what official reports into the Middle East have been pointing to with increasing alarm: that rising poverty, unemployment and illiteracy have made a toxic cocktail. Combined with authoritarian governments and hostility to the United States, the cocktail has turned deadly and made its young people easy prey for the likes of Osama bin Laden.

Khaled'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, but they are shaped to the 21st century. Muslims are told why it is contrary to Islam to smoke, to litter the streets or to be lazy, and why it is good to collect clothes for the poor or to vote in elections.

One devotee is the Egyptian business graduate Iman Salama, 24. She listens to Khaled through a Walkman tucked under her veil 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, Iman 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," she says.

In the eyes of Arab elders, though, the TV preacher is little more than a showman, a judgement which is reinforced every time another high-profile celebrity signs up to the Khaled cause. Around Cairo's establishment dinner tables there is much tut-tutting about the lay preacher's lack of formal religious training. Muslim scholars scorn his "air-conditioned" brand of Islam.

However, in the best traditions of United States tele-evangelists, the Khaled style on stage is a big seller. With eyes shut tight the preacher will summon a message as though from the depths of his soul. His face contorts. There's a rush of emotion. His voice rises to an excited squeal. In a trice he brings his audience back down again, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

Khaled's connections range far and wide across the spectrum of politics and business. Little, who is also CEO of an international philanthropic organisation, ImagineNations, first heard of the preacher's influence when he was interviewing young Muslims for a book he is writing with Queen Rania of Jordan.

"I was shocked by the number of young people from a diverse number of countries and backgrounds and socio-economic levels who kept on talking about Amr and the influence he was having in their lives," he said from his Maryland office in the US. "I thought whoever this guy is, he is someone I would like to get to know and learn more about."

Khaled is a favourite of Queen Rania. His brochures are littered with happy snaps of him with the influential: with the President of Yemen, being presented with a UN award, signing a deal with the chief of Dubai police.

It makes the preacher a powerful political lever for the West in its quest to neutralise the anger of young Muslims. The British Government has already seen the potential. In mid-2004, leaked Cabinet papers named Khaled as a figure worth promoting as a counterweight to the imams preaching jihad in England.

In the face of evidence of hostile intent from within England's own Muslim communities, Tony Blair asked the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Andrew Turnbull, to come up with strategies. Sir Andrew reported: "We need to find ways of strengthening the hand of moderate Muslim leaders, including the young Muslims with future leadership potential, through the status which contact with the Government can confer, and through practical capacity building measures."

The British Government has been happy to back Khaled's efforts. Last August, the Foreign Office minister Kim Howells sent a message of support for a conference organised by the preacher, praising him for his "courage and strength" in attempting to bring cultures together.

A month before, Khaled was in London when the terror attacks killed 52 people. "This," he hisses, "is nowhere in Islam. If anyone kills children or women, this is not acceptable not only in Islam, in the Jewish faith, in Christianity, in all the religions."

Khaled's words are music to the ears of Western interests. But while the preacher might be hip, he is deeply conservative.

The Khaled phenomenon is being fed by a range of forces, not only companies such as the Nike Corporation, but by billionaire Saudi businessmen as well. Of the latter, Khaled says: "I chose the moderate people, not just anyone from Saudi Arabia."

It certainly makes the man with the simple message a more complex proposition. One of Khaled's toughest hometown critics believes the West has been tricked by Khaled. "His appearance is calculated to deceive," says Hala Mustafa, who is one of Cairo's prominent liberals and the editor of a government-funded academic journal, Democracy. "He is just like the other Islamic theocrats, but he says it with a smiling face."

Mustafa has written widely on the growth of Islamic fundamentalist groups, and exhibit No 1 in her prosecution of Khaled is the headscarf, the emblem of conservative Islam. He is commonly held to be the single major force behind young women taking the veil. Removing it, he has told his followers, is "the biggest sin, the biggest sin, the biggest sin".

In one of his lectures he directed a tirade towards any Muslim girl who wished to mimic the West and not wear the veil: "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?"

Khaled has saved some of his fiercest rhetoric for the ethics of the West. In his addresses to his Arabic-speaking audience he has alleged that Western people are "fatigued by depression, suicide, addiction, broken families. We pray they will go back to the right path, Allah's system. We don't want to lead lives like the West."

He claims that Muslims are being "oppressed and tortured all over the world". So how does this square with his vow to build a bridge between the East and the West?

"To say we are building a bridge does not mean we are making a copy of life in the West," he says. "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 the [West's] civilisation then no one will listen to me, because no one thinks like that."

Pause.

A confession is on the way: "Yes, I did say these points but I will be very honest to tell you Amr Khaled's vision after he went to stay in the UK is not like Amr Khaled's vision before he went to the UK."

The concession only adds to the riddle of what Khaled really stands for. Mustafa says it all adds up to one conclusion: "He is very close in style to the Muslim Brotherhood," she says, invoking the name of the Middle East's original political Islamic organisation, which is pursuing Islamic government through the ballot box and which recently made massive gains in Egypt's elections.

"Whether they use extreme language or moderate language, they all have the same aim."

It remains to be seen where Khaled is leading his army of young believers and whether or not the plants springing into life on Arab rooftops might ultimately be a bitter harvest for the West.

The Khaled phenomenon is a work in progress, one which might yet see the accountant-turned-preacher take another turn, perhaps into politics.

"Anything at the right time," he says. "Now I have good dialogue with the West and I give them my ideas. I have millions of people who are listening to me. So what is the next step? Let's wait and see."