

'Radical Muslims' clothing line aims to shatter stereotypes

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April 14, 2015

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(RNS) Radical Muslims. The phrase elicits images of ISIS militants and terror in the desert, perhaps grainy YouTube videos, Kalashnikovs, and raised fists.

What about a man in an ankle-length garment and cotton headscarf carving the air with his skateboard?

Along with shirts bearing the "Radical Muslims" image and a Nike-like swoosh saying "Just Dua It" (dua being nonobligatory Muslim prayer, or supplications), Boston-based Munir Hassan has created an entire line of stereotype-shattering clothing for American Muslims.

In an explicit attempt to flip the script on popular images of Muslims and Islamic symbols, Hassan's own Sidikii Clothing Co. merges cultures in fashion-forward, Muslim inspired designs.

"I'm Muslim, I'm American; I was born both," Hassan said. "I wanted to design clothing that showcased different pieces of my culture inclusively."

Hassan started screen-printing his own shirts a few years ago. When friends, family, and people on the street started asking questions about his T-shirts, he launched Sidikii Clothing Co.

In aiming to proclaim "a positive message in a negative space"—the company's motto—Hassan and his customers are part of a wider stream of media resistance against popular, too often stereotypical, conceptions of Muslims in America. Increasingly, individuals and communities are using billboards, graffiti, music, dancing, and clothing to express irony, anger, humor, and resistance to the status quo.

Clothing can prove to be a powerful communicator of inner convictions, said David Morgan, chair of the department of religious studies at Duke University.

“That is because it is a kind of second skin, the skin you opt for, display openly and use to fit into a social body, a collective reality, that matters to you,” he said.

In the context of Muslim clothing, the stock images of Muslims are black-clad men inflicting terror and women covered in burqas and hijabs.

A 2014 poll by Zogby Analytics found that Arabs and Muslims have the lowest favorability ratings among religious and ethnic groups. In a similar vein, the Pew Research Center found that, along with atheists, Muslims receive the “coolest” feelings from the American public.

In such an environment, it’s hard to be Muslim and cool at the same time. Sidikii allows Muslim youth to choose clothing that reflects their dual identities.

The company’s clientele are predominantly Muslim, urban, and middle-class Americans. When they wear the bright-colored shirts with “pseudo thuluth”—stylized representations of Islamic calligraphy—the modish Muslim motifs invite attention and dialogue.

“People who are not Muslim ask questions and we are able to start a dialogue,” Hassan said. “These designs give American Muslims a voice and tell others, subtly, we are your friends.”

In fact, Hassan explained, the company’s name—Sidikii—is Arabic for *friends*. In combination with the logo for the company, which is the Arabic letter “o,” the company is a call—“O, my friends.”

Those friends, Hassan asserted, do not have to be Muslim.

“It’s not ‘Muslim clothing,’” Hassan said. “It’s not for people who share the same religion; it’s for people who share the thought process.

“It doesn’t matter what the media, your friends, or family are telling you . . . Explore who you are and share it with others so that other people can appreciate you, whoever you are.”