



## Online “Suicide Challenge” Draws Attention in Egypt and Beyond

**OE Watch Commentary:** The “Blue Whale Challenge” is a social media game where contestants progress by completing a series of 50 challenges, the final of which is committing suicide. The game originated in Russia and first came to light in a May 2016 investigative report by the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, mentioned in the accompanying article published on the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* website in February 2017. The game is targeted toward young teenagers, who are set up with a “curator” or “administrator” who guides them through the game, confirming that each challenge is completed and providing them with the next one. The challenge first emerged on the Russian social media site VKontakte but has since proliferated to a variety of platforms, making it difficult to monitor.

In early April, the game drew extensive attention in Egypt and beyond after the 18-year old son of former Egyptian parliamentarian Hamdy al-Fakhrany committed suicide, purportedly as a result of playing the challenge. In response, Egypt’s top religious body declared the game to be un-Islamic, as noted in the accompanying excerpt from *Egypt Today*. Islam’s prohibition on suicide makes the game particularly baffling and troubling in Muslim societies. The accompanying excerpt from *Arab News* cites a social media post from the sister of Khalid al-Fakhrany, the Egyptian teen who committed suicide, which states: “I beg you, don’t challenge yourselves and try the game. No one was as strong and as religious as Khalid, yet he challenged it, and it defeated him.” Similar teen suicides have been reported in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Syria, in addition to a handful of other countries throughout the world. The game has been forbidden in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Algeria, although government options are limited given that at its basic it entails communication between two individuals that can easily be encrypted.

The number of young men and women who were drawn to joining ISIS in Syria based purely on online interactions is testament to the power of online social interactions. Like ISIS recruiters encouraging “lone wolf attacks,” Blue Whale “curators” are able to incite individuals to commit acts of violence without ever meeting them in person. Yet in contrast to ISIS and other radical groups, the Blue Whale Challenge has no political-ideological underpinnings. Instead, the game’s “curators” target vulnerable youth through a combination of scare tactics and brainwashing, effectively gaining control over their actions without resorting to ideological appeals. There is no way to verify whether a Blue Whale Challenge “curator” is legitimate; given the attention the game has received, it should come as no surprise that there are many “false curators,” as the *RFE/RL* article describes. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

**Source:** Sergei Khazov-Cassia. “Teen ‘Suicide Games’ Send Shudders Through Russian-Speaking World,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 February 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-teen-suicide-blue-whale-internet-social-media-game/28322884.html>

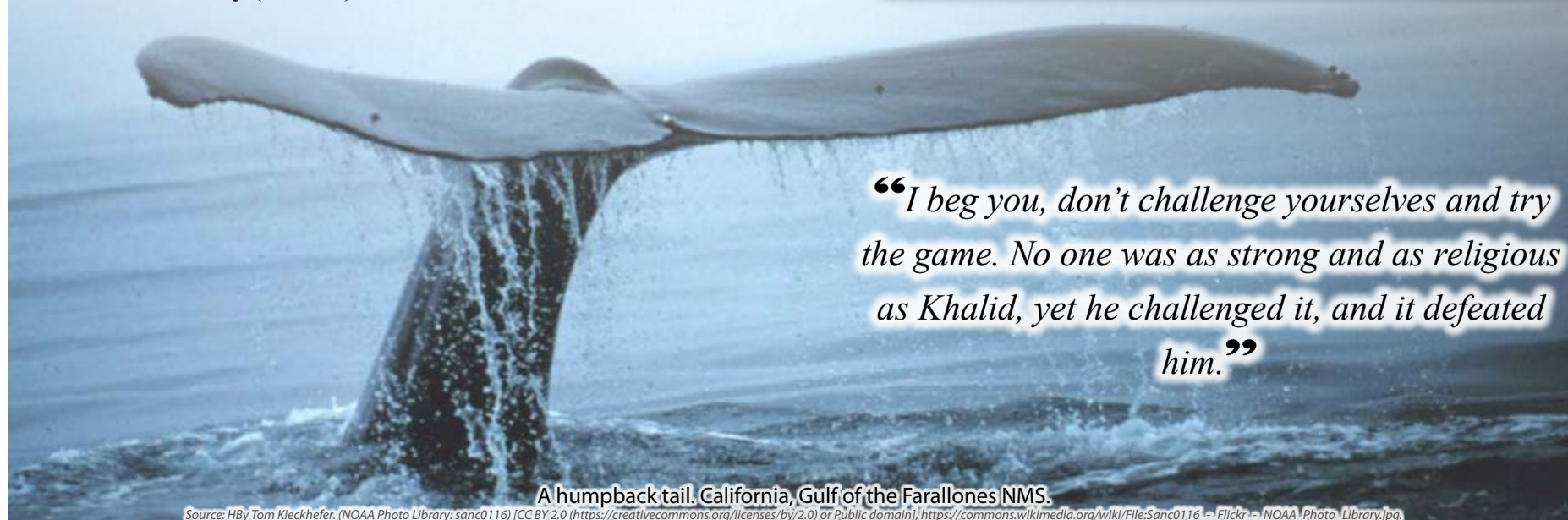
*Concern about the game was piqued by a much-criticized article in Novaya Gazeta in May that claimed, among other things and seemingly without justification, that the “vast majority” of the roughly 130 youth suicides in Russia between November 2015 and April 2016 were tied to the Blue Whale phenomenon. The paper published an equally alarming follow-up article on February 16... Many participants in the Blue Whale game say they are threatened by curators when they try to leave the game... [though] there are no reported incidents of any Blue Whale incidents occurring in the nonvirtual world... Several of the players complained of “false” curators. Stefan, a 15-year-old from Solikamsk, in Russia, says three different curators gave him as his second task the assignment of sending them 200 rubles (\$3.50). He didn’t have any money, so he blocked them. The majority of players told RFE/RL they got involved either to “mess with the curators” or just because “it seemed interesting.”*

**Source:** “Dar al-Ifta prohibits ‘Blue Whale’ game,” *Egypt Today*, 6 April 2018. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/47120/Dar-al-Ifta-prohibits-%E2%80%99Blue-Whale%E2%80%99-game>

*Egypt’s Dar al-Ifta, the Sunni Islamic institute concerned with Fatwa (Islamic Law) issuance, has religiously forbidden playing the “Blue Whale” game, which pushes children to commit suicide... “The users are asked to cut themselves with a sharp weapon such as a needle or a knife, and this act is religiously forbidden. The preservation of a person’s life is one of the most important purposes in Islam,” the fatwa read.*

**Source:** “Death of Egyptian MP’s son linked to ‘Blue Whale’ suicide trend,” *Arab News*, 4 April 2018. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1278906/offbeat>

*“I beg you, don’t challenge yourselves and try the game. No one was as strong and as religious as Khalid, yet he challenged it, and it defeated him,” the sister wrote.*



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A humpback tail, California, Gulf of the Farallones NMS.

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