

Society

Blue Whale Challenge claims lives of more teens in Maghreb

Roua Khelifi

Tunis

Tunisian authorities are raising the alarm about an online self-harm game that continues to claim victims in the Maghreb.

Known as the Blue Whale Challenge, the game consists of a series of tasks that players must complete during a 50-day period, with the final challenge being the player's suicide. The game has been linked to more than 100 suicides around the world since 2016.

In Algeria, at least four teens have killed themselves while playing the game and experts warn the effect could be far-reaching.

"The mind of a teenager can become totally under the control of his online tutor," said Algerian clinical psychologist Hamid Mabrouk. "He follows orders until the ultimate challenge: his suicide."

In December, two schoolboys, 15 and 16, from the small town of Sidi Aiche, Algeria, committed suicide while following the game's instructions, health and security officials said. In February, a 14-year-old girl was found dead by her younger brother.

Hospitals reportedly treated others who injured themselves playing the game, including a 9-year-old boy who drank petrol.

"Unfortunately, another boy aged 8 died before he was brought to the hospital," said Dr Taoufik el-Hadi, director of the main hospital in Setif, Algeria. "He hanged himself using his mother's scarf."

In Tunisia, a 12-year-old boy from Zaghuan committed suicide on February 11. Since then, more than ten cases of suicide among children and teenagers were reported, the latest February 26.

While many suicide reports have not been conclusively linked to the Blue Whale Challenge, parents



A challenge to parents. A little boy plays a game on his phone.

(Reuters)

have called on authorities to ban the game, which psychologists say manipulates vulnerable children and teens.

"These games target children and early teens as (those in) these age categories are emotionally and psychologically fragile, making them easy prey," said psychologist Salma Ben Abdallah. "These games clearly target children with certain psychological tenuousness, teens who are vulnerable and especially those who have troubles or who have depressive tendencies."

When the game started to make headlines in Algeria, Tunisian authorities asked parents to be more vigilant in monitoring their children's online activity, warning that some games could "destroy the psyche of children."

Such was the case with Maissa, a Tunisian girl who was a casualty

of the game. Her father, Hatem Samoud, told Tunisian media his daughter went along with the challenge for fear that her parents would be hurt.

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"I wanted my children to learn about the world around and use technology but I didn't know the game was in the phone," said Samoud, referring to the Blue Whale Challenge. "I didn't think this game would make her kill herself. She was a bright child."

"My son later told me she was

scared that they would kill me and her mother if she didn't do the tasks they asked. I call on every parent to protect their children from all this and for the government to restrict these dangers so I can protect my other children. I won't allow my children to use the internet or any phone," he added.

In Kairouan, in central Tunisia, two girls were admitted to hospital after attempting suicide. One of the girls' mother told Tunisian media that her daughter tried to kill herself after completing 25 of the game's 50 steps.

Sabri Bhibah, delegate for the protection of children in Kairouan, said an awareness campaign on the dangers of internet use was under way in schools across the country.

"As an immediate response, regional committees of psychologists, doctors, and educators were

formed to assess and deal with the issue," Bhibah said. "The ministry has also launched an awareness campaign, sending text messages to parents to (raise awareness on) the danger of online games and the importance of supervising their children."

Bhibah added: "We are trying to provide support for the children and trying to get them to speak about this app and not to be afraid of it. We will be visiting the schools and all educational institutions with the guidance of specialists who can advise on the right discourse to address the issue with children and teenagers."

While there are growing calls to ban the online challenge, Ben Abdallah said that was not necessarily the solution, as adolescents can be even more drawn to activities that are taboo or restricted.

Instead, she called for a national project in schools that involves parents, teachers and psychologists.

"This actually sheds light on the role of the parents and the issues of our educational system as well," Ben Abdallah said. "The educational system is supposed to provide guidance, education and support but of course all these have been undermined lately."

"There should be a project on the national level to help fight the dangers of the cyber-world. Pre-teens and teenagers, who often show psychological fragility, are easily manipulated. In our time, they have a predisposition. There is a fertile ground for manipulation and it doesn't have to be the Blue Whale game. It could be anything and they would still be driven to commit suicide. We must address the reasons behind the existence of such a predisposition."

Roua Khelifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor to The Arab Weekly. Lamine Ghanmi contributed to this report.

Witchcraft peddlers thrive in today's Iraq

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

From outside, it looks like any other tailor's shop straddling the popular al-Shaab market in northern Baghdad. Once inside, however, there are no sewing machines or tailoring materials to be found. The sign at the entrance reading "Al Qumma Tailoring" is a front for the sorcery and witchery practices of the shop owner.

Ziad al-Saby is among hundreds of sorcerers and witchcraft practitioners offering their services to Iraqis. He is known in the area for his trade and speaks confidently about his supernatural abilities, which he says are meant "to help people who experience exceptional and difficult conditions."

● Superstition, magic and sorcery are no longer limited to the modest and poor in Iraq but have permeated to other social circles as well.

"I can do anything... bring back the missing, exorcise bad spirits from the possessed, read one's future and dispel bad fortune, etc. Most visitors to the souq have heard about my abilities, which I inherited from my father and forefathers," said Saby, who belongs to the Sabian religion in southern Iraq, which is known for its witchcraft practices.

One client sought Saby's services to preserve her faltering marriage, which she said had been cursed by her in-laws. "I turned to Ziad on the advice of a colleague of mine. I don't care what people think. For me, the end justifies the means," said the 30-year-old woman, who asked to remain anonymous.

To remove the spell, the sorcerer gave her a purse that she was asked to burn, as well as talismans and candles that she was to light for seven days to fulfil a certain ritual.

The phenomena of magic, superstition and belief in supernatural creatures – jinns – have become widespread and popular amid the lawlessness of post-2003 Iraq. The practitioners of the dark arts prey on people who have family, social or financial troubles with the promise of quick solutions.

"Oum Aya" claims to be a certified astrologist from a specialised Egyptian institute. She does not hide her activities, practising them at her luxurious home in Baghdad's posh al-Waziriya neighbourhood. Her clients are from all different socio-economic backgrounds and include politicians and government officials.

"They (politicians) are mostly interested in preserving their posts and seek (magic) assistance to stay in their (lucrative) functions as much as possible," she said, noting that she was most solicited during election time with candidates visiting her to increase their chances to win parliamentary seats.

The cost of Oum Aya's services ranges from \$20 for reading the lines of the hand to \$20,000 depending on the complexity of the



False comfort. A so-called spiritual healing centre in Baghdad where sorcery and witchcraft are practised.

(Oumayma Omar)

case and the effort it entails. Responding to accusations of unethical doings, she said: "I don't force anyone to come to me. Everyone is free to do what he wants and I offer my services to whoever can afford them and believe in them."

Superstition, magic and sorcery are no longer limited to the modest and poor in Iraq but have permeated other social circles as well.

"Ignorance and backwardness are spreading in Iraqi society due to unstable conditions, especially on the economic and social levels," said Ibtisam Musawi, who holds a doctorate in psychology. "Violence and poverty, the collapse of educational institutions and the failure of consecutive governments have pushed people to embrace old superstitions and resort to witchcraft and sorcery to resolve their problems."

Musawi said charlatans have opened "spiritual healing" centres where they practise magic and sorcery. "They are causing big prob-

lems in the society as they interfere in the privacy of families promising to bring back a spouse or install love in a couple through illogical and irrational practices," she said.

"The lack of social awareness and the absence of laws addressing this phenomenon have led to its unprecedented outspread," she added.

The "spiritual healing" centres often claim to treat people with the help of the Quran, which acknowledges the existence of jinns. The Quran states in several verses that jinns worship God just as people do. There is a sura of the Quran called Surat al-Jinn.

"Regardless of what they claim, these are charlatans practising magic and sorcery under the guise of religion," said General Khaled al-Mahna, director of Baghdad's community police. "We have detected some 65 sorcery centres operating openly but there are as many, if not more, operating clandestinely in

the low-income popular areas."

Mahna warned of the growing trend of witchcraft, which he said caused dissent and divorces within families and conflicts among tribes that led to legal cases.

"This growing phenomenon, notably in southern governorates and Baghdad, requires government action in addition to efforts to raise religious and cultural awareness," he said, adding that "charlatans have been abusing Quranic verses about jinns and jealousy to extort money from people, including university educated."

Working in this field can be a lucrative trade. The cost of Saby's services ranges from \$300-\$5,000. The price increases if the case necessitates the intervention of spirits and jinns.

Oumayma Omar, based in Baghdad, is a contributor to the Culture and Society sections of The Arab Weekly.