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Briefing Note: El Rubio' Lives: The Challenge Of Arabic Language Extremist Content On Social Media Platforms

By Moustafa Ayad

Introduction

Born in Aleppo in the late 1950s, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, whose *kunya* is Abu Mus'ab al Suri, is unlike any of the vanguard al-Qaeda of old. His contributions to the transnational Salafi-jihadist strategies of groups like al-Qaeda and its affiliates has set the tactics, techniques, and tone of Islamist extremism for the past two decades. He has been described as the "architect of global jihad," and a "destructive doctrinarian." In May 2019, a Freedom of Information Act request filed eight years previously to the Federal Bureau of investigation produced 457 pages of intelligence on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and specifically noted al Suri centrality to the founding of the al-Qaeda chapter in Yemen, and laying the groundwork for one of its most deadly affiliates.

His 1,604-page tome on jihadist strategy, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call,* published in 2004*,* has been referred to as the "Mein Kampf of the jihadist movement." The so-called "mastermind of jihad," al Suri was allegedly the "ghost prisoner" on a rendition site the US government ran out of the remote Indian Ocean island Diego Garcia. He may be little known outside of terrorism studies circles, but his doctrine is very much alive in strategies such as "individual jihad terrorism" — a precursor to "lone wolf" style attacks that have become part and parcel of the 21st Century jihadist playbook.

But unlike bin Laden, Zarqawi, and al Baghdadi, who have been all but removed from mainstream social media platforms, al Suri continues to lead online sessions *on the Global Islamic Resistance Call* in videos on YouTube, and most recently, Facebook. Al Suri's presence on two of the world's largest social media platforms highlights the continued challenges that companies are facing in enforcing their own policies particularly it seems in the case of Arabic content.

On the sidelines of the Aqaba Process, a multinational series of meetings on countering terrorism and violent extremism called for by the King of Jordan Abdallah II, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) will meet this week in Amman bringing together representatives from the social media companies, governments and civil society to identify ways to prevent terrorist and extremist groups from using social media to their benefit.

Established in 2017 as a company-led mechanism for fostering collaboration on the removal of terrorist content, the GIFCT has come under renewed pressure from policymakers following in the wake of the Christchurch attacks and the deadly Easter Day bombings across Sri Lanka. The announcement of the Christchurch Call in May by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden and French President Emmanuel Macron provides the impetus for this week's meeting, where the GIFCT will review its function and structure, provide more transparency around its processes, and debate its track record to date. With ISIS having dominated the headlines and indeed pressure from governments to date, attention has more recently focused on the failure of the companies to address extreme right and white supremacist content in a serious and comprehensive way.

While the need to deal with extreme right content must be a top priority for the companies, ISD research presented in this briefing shows that the challenge of dealing with Islamist content is not a problem solved. In particular, the pressing question about gaps in current Arabic detection of extremist content should be

a primary focus for the social media company representatives and governments meeting in Amman this week.
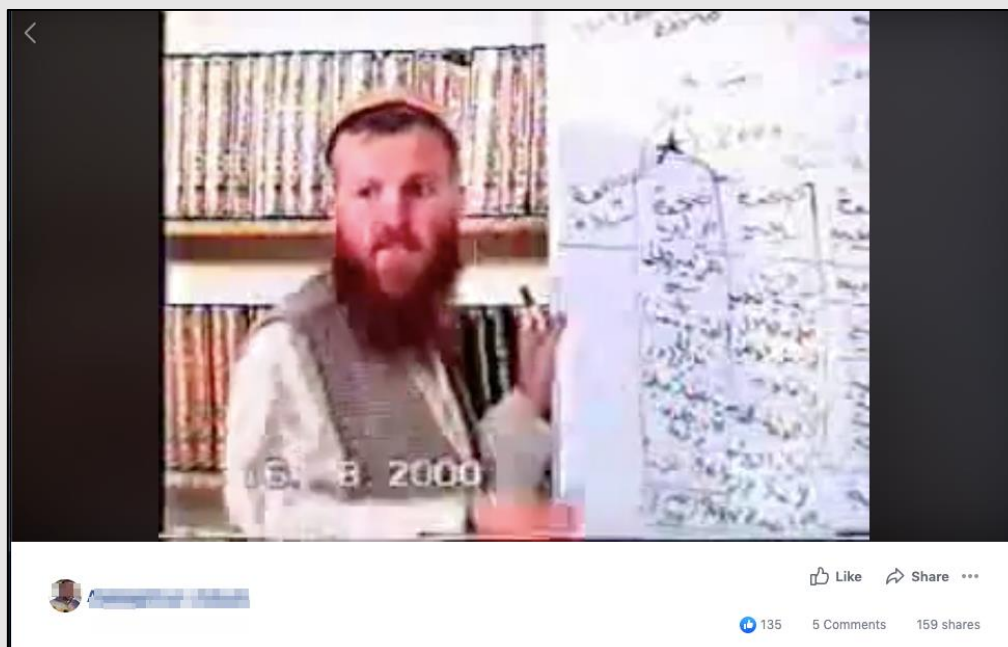
*Abu Mus'ab al Suri in a video on a Facebook page dedicated to his teachings.*

A Battle Not Yet Won

The ability to find videos by well-known and influential leaders in Salafi-jihadist circles has been substantially limited on the major platforms over the past few years, spurred on by the public outcry around ISIS's unprecedented online mobilization and recruitment. In 2018, Facebook announced that it had removed over 14 million pieces of al-Qaeda and ISIS content from its platform. According to the GIFCT website, results achieved include the removal of 99% of ISIS and al-Qaeda content on Facebook before it is flagged by a user, while YouTube claims that 98% of videos removed for violent extremism are flagged by machine learning algorithms. The companies have also dramatically increased their content moderation efforts, with Facebook now reportedly employing over 15,000 content reviewers globally.

However, despite these efforts, ISD researchers utilizing simple Arabic search were able to discover more than **77 pieces of Arabic content venerating influential, vanguard Islamist extremists from al-Qaeda and ISIS, affiliates for both organizations, and precursors to both groups, currently available on both YouTube and Facebook.**

In addition to the al Suri content discussed below, other lapses in Arabic content moderation include the sermons by the blind Egyptian cleric **Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman** referred to as the "spiritual guide" behind the 1993 World Trade Center Attacks, and **Abu Mohammad al Adnani**, the former spokesperson for ISIS.

Al Suri's YouTube videos make up the lion's share of these videos, and have a collective watch history of 158,800, and 295 comments primarily in support of his ideas. The videos are passed on between both platforms and shared on individual public posts and groups on Facebook and linked playlists on YouTube.
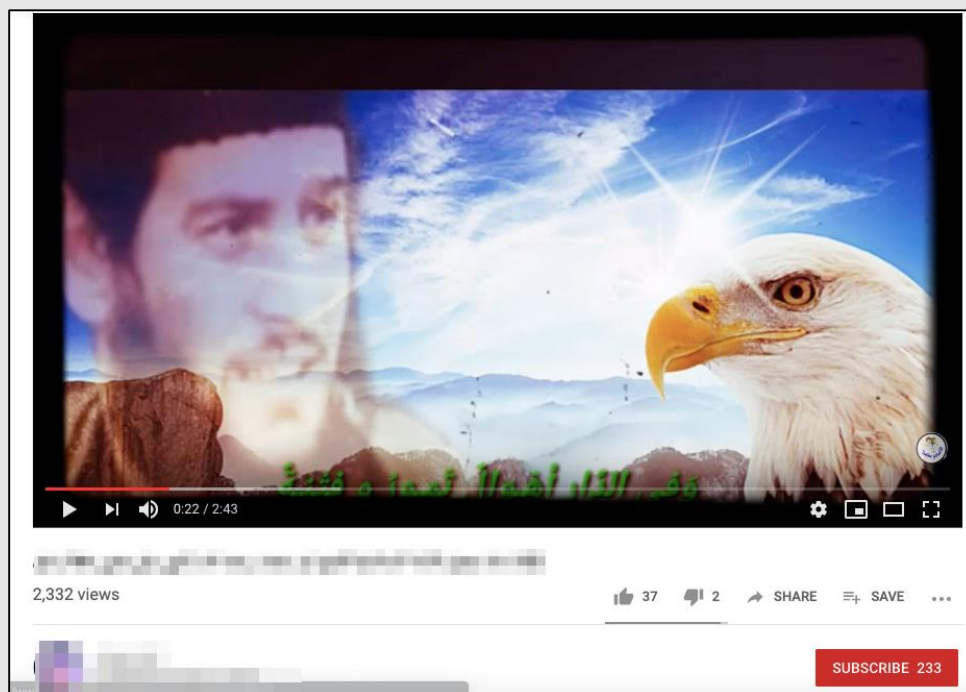
Adnani video on YouTube

Al Suri YouTube videos were posted on Facebook 138 times, with 49 comments, and 331 reactions, likely spreading even further through networks on the platform, based on an analysis using SharedCount, an API that tracks links on Facebook. On Facebook, a public group has been devoted to posting 46 al Suri videos for the past year.

A significant number of al Suri videos were uploaded to YouTube in the year of the founding of the ISIS "caliphate." 47% of the videos were posted to the site after the July 2014 announcement by al Baghdadi in Mosul's Grand Mosque. More than 84% of al Suri videos were posted from 2014-2018, when ISIS controlled a vast amount of territory across Syria and Iraq. As the global war raged against the "caliphate," users uploading al Suri began posting what seems to be dovetailing narratives of the real-world loss of ISIS territory and power, and his lessons on "alienation," "entrenchment," and "bad ulama'," which were similar narratives espoused by the "caliphate" in retreat.

Al Suri's top grossing video on YouTube, entitled "*A wonderful lesson by Aby Musab al Suri*," has garnered more than 32,200 views, and has been on the platform for almost four years. Generating more comments and replies than any other al Suri videos on YouTube, the video extols the fraternity of jihad and allows him to tell the tale the of a Yemeni mujahid who cleans, cooks and supports his brothers, choosing to not eat before guests and to parcel out blankets for others while sleeping on his jacket. The ultimate lesson in his

story is that "martyrs" are granted "100 mattresses in heaven," and hence no matter the conditions of jihad, the real nature of Muslims is exhibited during the jihad, e.g. a strong bond with God and other Muslims. It's a familiar recruitment trope. It is also a pitch that has been used by today's Salafi-jihadists.

The video is effective, and may have avoided being identified as transgressive of the social media companies' policies, in that it never mentions violence, though it does by default glorify war, and death. Comments, emojis, and reactions to al Suri's 'wonderful lesson' video are varied but are predominately supportive. Only four of 104 comments are negative. The most prominent style of support is a veneration of the legacy of great Salafi-jihadists of which al Suri is a vanguard member.

"May God break you out of prison Oh al-Qaeda Shyakh of the 90's, you strategic thinker, smart student of Marwan Hadid (rest his soul), Sheikh of the original fighters of the 80's, and may god rest the soul of your friend Abu Khaled the Syrian, Osama bin Laden, and the others. The list doesn't end."

This user above references both an internationally recognized terrorist organization, a number of Salafi-jihadist leaders, such as bin Laden, and has found a receptive audience through the video comments section on the al Suri video. Out of five replies to the user, two actually disagreed with the poster. One user retorted dismissively "Screw God and screw al-Qaeda," and another specifically pointed out that al Suri was a "takfiri" and not comparable to "Shyakh bin Laden."

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Comments on an al Suri video on YouTube titled "*A wonderful lesson by Aby Musab al Suri.*"

Al Suri's videos on Facebook are concentrated on the lessons from the *Global Islamic Resistance Call*. More than 46 videos – totaling some five hours and 45 minutes of footage — are available on a public page dedicated to his teachings, titled "*Excerpts and Lessons of Sheik Abu Musab al Suri.*" The most watched video is a 31-minute history lesson on the invasions and subsequent injustices that the Muslim World has faced, and seems to be recorded in Europe, as he references the "Christian World here in Europe." al Suri had Spanish citizenship, sometimes going by the moniker "El Rubio," *the blond one*, and lived for two years

in the London suburb of Neasden, from 1994 to 1996. At the time he was editing Abu Qatada's print publication "Al Ansar," a newsletter in the name of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of Algeria.
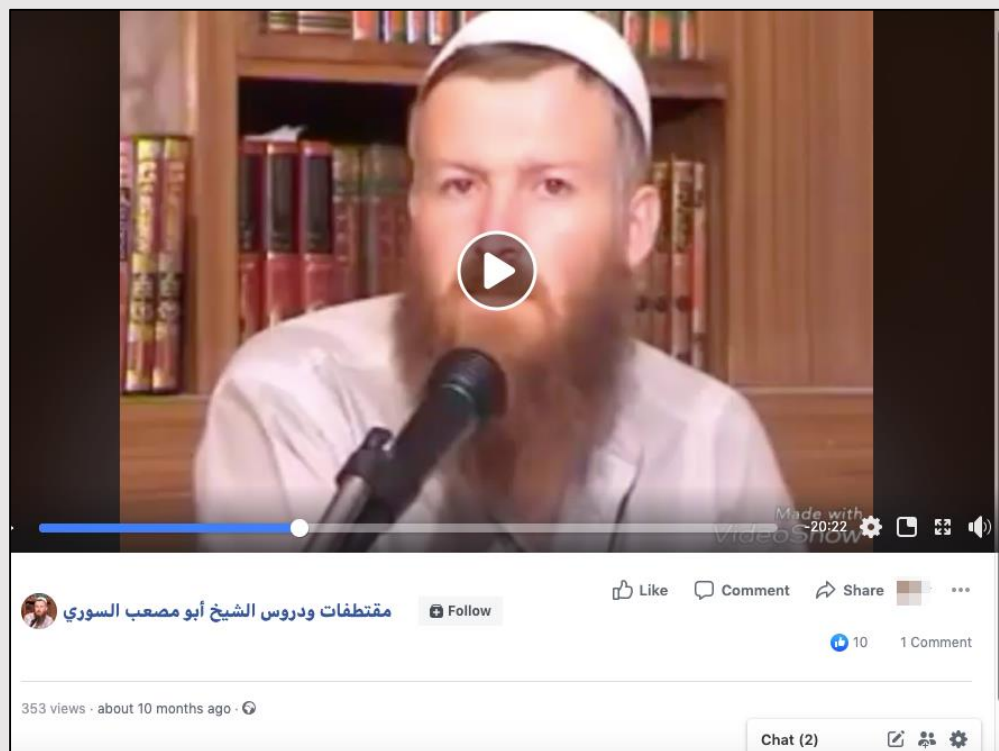
A 30-minute lesson by Abu Mus'ab al Suri on Facebook.

While the videos may only represent a minuscule amount of the video content on both platforms — more than 300 hours of footage is uploaded to YouTube every minute — they do represent a clear gap in the enforcement of both platforms' community guidelines for appropriate content. YouTube has a policy specifically for "violent criminal organizations," while Facebook under its community standards notes "dangerous individuals and organizations." YouTube's policy clearly states prohibited content includes "raw and unmodified reuploads of content created by terrorist or criminal organizations," or "content directing users to sites that espouse terrorist ideology, are used to disseminate prohibited content or are used for recruitment." Facebook bars "terrorist organizations," as well as "Individuals that are engaged" in "terrorist activity." [12]

So why is the man who wrote the Salafi-jihadist playbook allowed on YouTube and Facebook?

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[1] Suri is recorded as having engaged with terrorist activity; the US Federal Bureau of investigation specifically noted al Suri's centrality to the founding of the al-Qaeda chapter in Yemen https://twitter.com/JasonLeopold/status/1141065096258412544.

[2] ISD submitted a list of the problematic content referenced in this briefing to Facebook and Google review on 25/06/19

Firstly, the majority of attention over the past five years has been on violent content and more recently branded ISIS and al-Qaeda content. Al Suri's videos underline the important grievance-based dimension to the recruitment strategies deployed by ISIS, al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. While violent beheading videos and immolations garner the most attention from media, governments and the companies, it is arguably the 'softer' side of their propaganda efforts – the videos emphasizing belonging, brotherhood and sisterhood – that have been most successful in radicalizing adherents to their cause. This presents the companies with a significant challenge: while there is clearer justification and consensus on the removal of violent, terrorist-branded content, it is arguably the non-violent, non-branded content that may have the most impact in the radicalization process. It is also this latter form of content that is less amenable to automation, and requires expert human review.

In order to understand why this mix of non-violent, grievance-based narratives are troubling and acutely harmful, we must move past viewing these videos as separate pieces of content with a singular message. Rather, we should view them a series promoting a prism narratives often used by Salafi-jihadist recruiters. While al Suri's most watched video may focus on goal of uniting a disparate ummah around jihad, and the veneration of a struggle in God's honor, the second most watched video takes on the "corruption" of religious authority in the Middle East. In *"Abu Mu'sab al Suri: The truth about al Saud, their betrayals and their occupation of Mecca and Medina,"* al Suri attacks the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as means to delegitimatize the ultra-conservative religious authority of the House of Saud and the entire Salafi religious establishment. This narrative is directed at the "the caretakers of the two holy sanctuaries" - Mecca and Medina - and the claimants to the religious leadership in the Sunni world outside of Al Azhar in Egypt. It is one that seeks to expose the "near enemy" as the direct threat and obstacle to uniting the Muslim "ummah", while highlighting the need for an awakening, i.e. a militant revolution. In the third most watched al Suri video, *"A catastrophe, you won't believe this happened in Saudi prisons,"* the narrative morphs from a starting point of the glory of jihad, and the delegitimization of Muslim authority, to the injustices faced by those who fight or even speak out against oppressive regimes.

In addition to developing a comprehensive framework for classifying and responding to the full spectrum of terrorist and extremist content (from violent, branded content to non-violent, supportive and unbranded content), more needs to be done to address a legacy of extremist and terrorist content, and specifically, lesser known terrorist leaders that have been able to get past company moderators and the largely automated systems now in place to detect violent extremist content.

Secondly, the companies' enforcement of their policies is inconsistent within certain geographies and languages, consistently falling short of the global standards set in the West. Extremist content is simply easier to find in Arabic than in English these days. In an era where social media companies are acutely aware of how extremist groups and their supporters exploit their platforms, this detection lapse around an al-Qaeda vanguard highlights a gap in Arabic detection of extremist content by two of the largest platforms. Even more troubling is the ease at which a native Arabic speaker can locate, view, and comment on extremist content across both platforms, in many instances algorithmically-pushed to other softer, historical jihadist leaders and mainstream Salafi theologians. This may be partly due to the complexity and diversity of Arabic dialects with moderation and identification technologies needing to be trained to deal with a wide spectrum of linguistic complexity. To date, the companies have not revealed publicly a detailed breakdown of their content moderation process and the challenges they may be facing in scaling up a truly international system of content moderators working on highly sensitive and difficult issues.

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What Can Be Done?
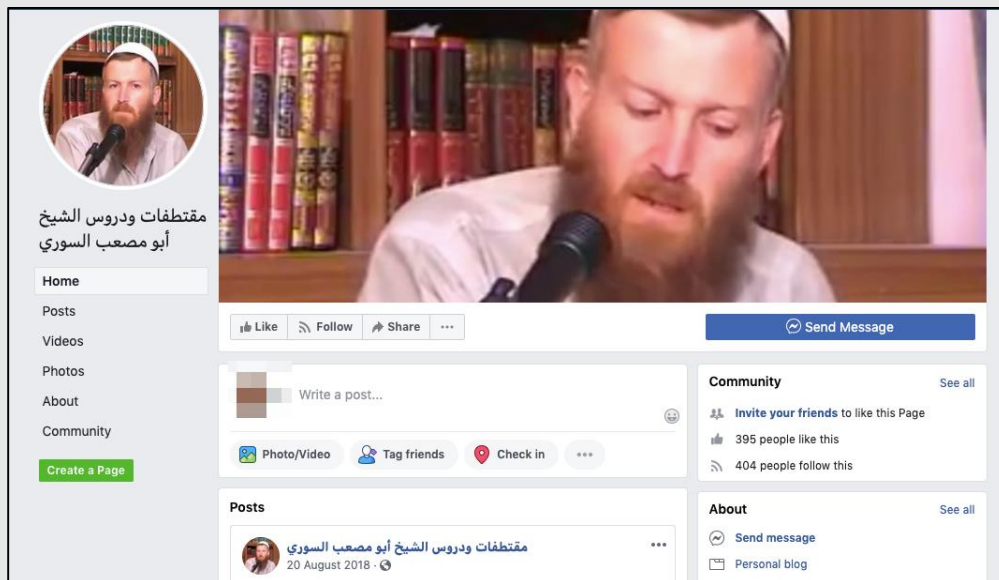
Public Facebook page dedicated to Abu Mus'ab al Suri.

There is a clear need for a dedicated analyst team to support the development of better identification of extremist content in Arabic on both platforms. These teams need to incorporate both nuanced linguistic skills to address the wide-ranging dialects across the region. But they also need to have support in understanding the subject area, including an understanding of the ideological dimensions of extremist movements. Partnerships with experts, researchers and civil society groups that have a locally contextualized understanding of the semantic as well as local dialects of violent extremist content could hold a key to solving the problem. A compendium of extremist ideologues in Arabic would be a solid foundation to build on, since there are notable gaps in the platforms' recognition of older extremist ideologues.

Building on these issues, it is undoubtedly critical to understand hate speech across Arabic social media. While this has been a major focus for the companies in Europe, much less attention has been paid to hate speech across the Arab world. There is a need for more investment in research on the scale and nature of hate speech and in civil society mobilization to respond to and compete with these problems.

Ultimately, a comprehensive approach must also include transparency on the technological architecture of the companies that may amplify hateful content and promote polarization. More research into algorithmic outcomes in relation to hate speech is needed. Likewise, the companies should provide data publicly in order to be able to provide a third party verification. While anecdotal evidence and some studies indicate that users are being inorganically pushed to more extreme content, we have yet to gain access to the data needed from the companies to verify and test this.

The ongoing efforts by companies to address these issues require support from all sectors – private and public, and most importantly civil society – to understand the full extent of the Arabic language detection gaps in identifying extremist content in Arabic on social media platforms.

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