February 8, 2023

Meta's Policy Advisory Opinion Request: "Shaheed" and Designated Dangerous Individuals[1]

1. Introduction

Meta requests the Oversight Board's guidance on how to treat content that uses the word "shaheed" (commonly translated to "martyr") to refer to an individual designated under our [Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI) policy](#).

Meta does not allow "organizations or individuals that proclaim a violent mission or are engaged in violence to have a presence" on our platforms. These include organizations and individuals designated by the United States Government as Foreign Terrorist Organizations or Specially Designated Global Terrorists, including any prominent members of those organizations, as well as hate organizations, criminal organizations, perpetrators of violent events, as defined under our DOI policy.

Meta's DOI policy prohibits praise, substantive support, or representation ("PSR") of designated entities and individuals. Praise includes: "[s]peak[ing] positively about a designated entity or event;" "[g]iv[ing] a designated entity or event a sense of achievement;" "[l]egitimizing the cause of a designated entity by making claims that their hateful, violent, or criminal conduct is legally, morally, or otherwise justified or acceptable;" and [a]ligning oneself ideologically with a designated entity or event."[2]

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[1] Note from the Oversight Board: The main body of Meta's request is published here. The contents page and appendices have been removed. The appendices contain personal information and details of unpublished research and have therefore been omitted. The contents page refers to the appendices.

[2] In October 2022, we held a Policy Forum to consider if we should refine our definition of "praise" under our DOI policy. This process is still ongoing, nevertheless, any changes we make through that process will not change how we treat the word "shaheed" when it is used to refer

Under the status quo, content that uses the word "shaheed" to refer to a designated individual is considered praise and removed. The word "shaheed" is used by many communities around the world and across cultures, religions, and languages. It is used to describe someone that dies unexpectedly or prematurely, and at times as a term of honor, such as when one dies in an accident or in a conflict or war. It is commonly translated in English to mean "martyr." In English, the word "martyr" means a person who suffered or died for a justified cause and typically has positive connotations.[3] It is because of this use that we have categorized the term as constituting praise under our DOI policy.[4]

Treating "shaheed" as praise under our DOI policy has significant consequences. In our estimation, the word "shaheed" accounts for more content removals under our Community Standards than any other single word or phrase on our platforms.[5] Based on an analysis of content reviewed between November 18, 2021 to January 18, 2022, Meta's enforcement of its DOI policy on the word "shaheed" constituted a significant percentage of DOI violations in Arabic-speaking parts of the world, which covers 86 countries, as well as a meaningful portion of DOI violations worldwide, resulting in the word constituting the largest single category of removals under our DOI policy. Because the word "shaheed" has multiple meanings, we may be over-enforcing on significant amounts of speech not intended to praise a designated individual, particularly among Arabic speakers.

Meta now requests the Oversight Board's guidance on whether we should maintain the status quo, adopt one of the options presented here, or whether we should adopt a different approach. The Board's guidance will assist Meta in addressing this topic, which has garnered considerable interest globally and which intersects with our core

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to a designated individual, since our current definition treats the word as glorification of such individuals (i.e., we presume the word means "martyr"). See also Confidential Appendix A *[Note from the Oversight Board: The Annexes to this request contain personal information and details of unpublished research. They have therefore been omitted from the published version of this policy advisory opinion request.]* Instead, any changes to how Meta treats "shaheed" will be guided by the Oversight Board's recommendation in response to this request.

[3] See Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Martyr," available at https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr (defining "martyr" as "a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion" or "a person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle.").

[4] It is important to note that use of the term "shaheed" does not violate our policies outside of a DOI context. Content is allowed when "shaheed" is used to refer to an individual who is not designated by Meta, absent other policy violations.

[5] We have not run a statistical analysis to determine which single word is implicated in the most violations of our content policies, but feedback from our DOI policy experts and content reviewers points to this conclusion.

values of safety and voice. Additionally, the Board's guidance may provide valuable insight on how to address similar content issues that may arise in the future.

2. Meta's Dangerous Organizations and Individuals Policy and Policy Development on the Word "Shaheed"

Meta's [DOI policy](#) prohibits praise, substantive support, or representation ("PSR") of dangerous individuals or organizations.

DOIs include organizations and individuals designated by the United States Government as Foreign Terrorist Organizations ("FTOs") or Specially Designated Global Terrorists ("SDGTs"), including any prominent members of those organizations, as well as hate organizations and criminal organizations as defined by Meta's policies. DOIs also include perpetrators of violent events designated under Meta's policies. Users may share content referring to designated DOIs to report on, condemn, or neutrally discuss them or their activities as long as the content does not include PSR or other policy violations. As we explain in the Community Standards, "[o]ur policies are designed to allow room for these types of discussions while simultaneously limiting risks of potential offline harm," but we "require people to clearly indicate their intent when creating or sharing such content. If a user's intention is ambiguous or unclear, we default to removing content."

In addition, the DOI policy provides definitions of PSR as well as non-exhaustive examples of each. Giving a designated event or entity "a sense of achievement" is one of the definitions of praise. This includes using the English word "martyr" and words in other languages that have the same meaning (e.g., "Timothy McVeigh is a martyr"). To enforce this policy at scale, Meta provides content reviewers with definitions of PSR and non-exhaustive examples of praise, including words such as hero, brave, martyr, or heart/love emojis. See the Community Standards and CONFIDENTIAL Appendix E[6] for the full language of the relevant policy and Meta's internal guidance.

Meta's current policy is based on the belief that "shaheed" in its various forms[7] always constitute praise. We have codified this in our internal guidelines for content reviewers. For this reason, we do not have a dedicated carveout for using the word "shaheed" for use in other contexts or to refer to an individual designated under our DOI policy in the context of news reporting. In turn, we remove at scale presumably benign content like a reporter referring to a place or institution named after a

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[6] Note from the Oversight Board: The appendices to this request contain personal information and details of unpublished research. They have therefore been omitted from the published version of this policy advisory opinion request.

[7] Shaheed (شهيد), Isteshehad (استشهاد), Shahada (شهادة), Istashhad (استشهد).

designated individual with the word "shaheed" or otherwise neutral news reporting when cultural norms require using "shaheed" to refer to a designated individual.

Based on these concerns, we engaged in a significant policy development process in 2020 to reassess our treatment of the word "shaheed." As part of that process, we spoke with over 40 stakeholders across the globe, focusing on how the word is used in Arabic given the high rate of enforcement among Arabic speakers. We ultimately developed two scalable options to address the over-enforcement concerns regarding the word. See Section 3. However, we did not settle on implementing either option, as both had considerable drawbacks as discussed below.

a. Meta's Current Treatment of the Word "Shaheed" When Referring to a Designated Individual (Status Quo)

"Shaheed" is originally an Arabic word that is now used in multiple languages as a loanword.[8] Linguistically, shaheed is an honorific term with several related meanings that are not entirely encompassed by its usual English translation as "martyr."[9] See Confidential Appendix C.[10] In other words, there is no direct equivalent to the term in the English language, and its usage varies in other languages. Our current policy presumes that content uses the term shaheed to mean "martyr." As a result, we remove content that uses the term "shaheed" to refer to individuals designated under our DOI policy.

However, while people often use "shaheed" to mean martyr as a form of praise, support, or agreement, its meaning and usage varies among users. In some contexts, people use "shaheed" to refer to any community member who dies a premature death or any deceased person, and not to praise the violent conduct carried out or espoused by a designated individual.

b. Meta's Policy Development on the Word "Shaheed"

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[8] A "loanword" is a word taken from another language and at least partly naturalized. *See* https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loanword. Computational linguistics research identifies "shahid" among other Arabic to English "loanwords." See Fournier, P. and Latrache, R. "Arabic Loanwords in English: a Lexicographical Approach." in Proceedings of XIX EURALEX Congress - Lexicography for Inclusion. Available at: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03596124/document.
[9] For this request, we are only considering the term "shaheed" (including alternative spellings, translations, other verb tenses, and conjugated forms). The English word "martyr" is included as an example of praise in the DOI policy (E.g., "Timothy McVeigh is a martyr.").
[10] Note from the Oversight Board: The appendices to this request contain personal information and details of unpublished research. They have therefore been omitted from the published version of this policy advisory opinion request.

In the spring of 2020, Meta initiated a policy development process to reconsider its treatment of "shaheed" when used to refer to an individual designated under our DOI policy. As with all Meta policy development, a key practical concern is whether Meta can scale the enforcement of a more nuanced approach to the word. The volume of content on our platforms requires all policies to be enforced at scale, which is why scalability is so crucial. In addition, as discussed below, even if humans could review every use of the word "shaheed" on our platforms, it is often difficult, or impossible, to determine a user's intent even when considering other context contained in a post.

To help inform Meta's policy development, Meta's internal research team reviewed a range of external research on the linguistic and cultural use of the word "shaheed," including its ideological connotations, legal considerations, and real world impact. See CONFIDENTIAL Appendix C[11] for a more detailed account of Meta's research. Meta also conducted external engagement with 44 stakeholders across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Asia Pacific, and North America. We consulted with linguists, scholars of Islamic studies, counterterrorism experts, political scientists, journalism professionals, freedom of expression advocates, digital rights organizations, and local civil society groups directly impacted by the policy in question. See CONFIDENTIAL Appendix D[12] for detailed stakeholder engagement findings.

This research and consultation yielded the following findings:

- The word "shaheed" has been defined in different ways. This contributes to the difficulty of assigning a single and precise meaning to it. For example, we know that news reporters in Pakistan use "shaheed" to refer to individuals who have been designated under our DOI policy, even though the reporters do not subscribe to the subjects' violent ideology. See CONFIDENTIAL Exhibit C at p.16.[13]

- Use of the word "shaheed" to describe an individual, in isolation, often does not provide enough information to determine the nature and subject of praise. Experts we spoke to stated that while people generally have a positive view of someone denoted as "shaheed," they also explained that in some contexts, the

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[12] Note from the Oversight Board: The appendices to this request contain personal information and details of unpublished research. They have therefore been omitted from the published version of this policy advisory opinion request.
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term has become desensitized and disconnected from praise. See CONFIDENTIAL Exhibit D at pp.20, 24[14].

- "Shaheed" is used in a fluid way across the Middle East and Asia, appears in multiple languages, and has a meaning that varies widely depending on the context in which it is used, who is using it, and the individual it is used in connection with. See CONFIDENTIAL Exhibit D at p.29.[15]

- There is no consensus on the real world impact of the term "shaheed" when referring to an individual designated under our DOI policy. While some stakeholders discussed the risk of real world harm that they attributed to the use of "shaheed," Meta does not have concrete data about a connection between speech of this kind and real-world violence.

- There are risks connected with broadly removing content using the word "shaheed," including overenforcement on speech that is not praising DOIs.

3. Proposed Options for Refining Enforcement of "Shaheed"

During the policy development process, Meta identified three options to address use of the word "shaheed." All three options can be operationalized at scale, but with varying tradeoffs.

In CONFIDENTIAL Appendix B[16], we provide content examples illustrating how we would treat content using "shaheed" to refer to a designated individual under each option presented.[17]

- **Option 1 (Status Quo): Remove content that uses "shaheed" to refer to an individual designated under our DOI policy.**

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[16] Note from the Oversight Board: The appendices to this request contain personal information and details of unpublished research. They have therefore been omitted from the published version of this policy advisory opinion request.
[17] Should the Board prefer a different approach, Meta respectfully requests additional follow-up discussion with the Board before it issues the Policy Advisory Opinion to address whether Meta can operationalize the Board's proposed approach at scale.

Alignment with Meta's Values of Voice, Safety, and Dignity: Meta's current treatment of "shaheed" advances our value of promoting safety by removing content that may constitute praise of designated individuals in any context. It does so because this content could contribute to a risk of offline harm. However, this blanket ban may impinge on our value of voice because we may remove content that does not contribute to a risk of harm, such as news reporting (e.g., Example 3, Appendix B[18], Al Jazeera article using the word "shaheed" in reporting on the funeral of a designated individual). Our current policy may also impact voice by not accounting for the multiple uses of the word "shaheed," some of which are not intended or seen by others as praising someone's violent acts (e.g., Confidential Exhibit C[19], discussing the multiple definitions of the word "shaheed").

Equity: The current policy's imposition on voice may prevent important speech in specific communities for whom "shaheed" is a common word and in which discussions of designated individuals are important. By not allowing people to talk about these two topics together when they do not intend to support terrorism or praise violence, we may risk treating our users inequitably and unfairly. This risk is acute because our DOI policy, in the interest of preventing objectionable speech, is enforced through relatively harsh penalties including high-severity strikes (see footnote 9). The status quo may contribute to a perception that Meta is biased against communities that communicate primarily in Arabic.

Operability: This option is already in place and is operable. It does not require any nuance in parsing the meaning or intent of a user employing the word "shaheed" in their content. Of the options,, this option poses the least operational burden to roll out.

Impact on Users' Content and Accounts: Among the options presented here, this option will result in the removal of the most content. Because users accrue severe strikes[20] for using "shaheed" to refer to designated individuals, repeated use of the word may lead to feature limits and account termination faster than the other options. In addition, Pages, which have lower thresholds for enforcement than Facebook or Instagram user accounts, may be affected more than user Profiles and, for this reason,

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[20] Meta could reduce this penalty by instead issuing ordinary strikes. In doing so, it would allow users more opportunities to post similar content before having the feature limits imposed on their account. This would not, however, address the question of whether or not we should remove "shaheed" in this content.

news outlets and highly followed pages may be impaired more often than regular users.

- **Option 2: Allow content using "shaheed" to refer to a designated dangerous individual only when the following conditions are met: (i) it is used in a specific currently permissible context (e.g., condemnation, news reporting, academic debate)[21]; (ii) there is no additional PSR of a DOI (e.g., the post does not also explicitly praise a perpetrator of a terrorist attack or legitimize their violence); and (iii) there is no signal of violence in the content (e.g., a visual depiction of weapons, military language, or references to real world violence).[22]**

Alignment with Meta's Values of Voice, Safety, and Dignity: This option would go further to support our value of voice than the status quo option because it would allow broader use of "shaheed" by news outlets, journalists, critics of a designated individual's activity, and users sharing academic commentary about that individual. However, this option will still restrict users' voice when their intent in using the word "shaheed' is unclear (e.g., Example 1, Appendix B[23], removing a post using "shaheed" to commemorate the death of a designated individual where there is no additional PSR or praise of violence, but the user's intent is unclear). This option may further our value of safety to a lesser extent than the status quo because it will increase the volume of speech linking designated individuals to general use of "shaheed" and any positive reflection it may imply. However, this option would also retain some limits on "shaheed" in the interest of safety (e.g., Example 4, Appendix B[24], post showing a designated individual holding a weapon while commemorating that person's death).

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[21] Specific permissible contexts refer to contexts under our DOI policy where we allow discussion of DOI as long as there is no PSR or other policy violations. These contexts are: condemnation, news reporting, academic debate, informative, educational discourse, factual statements, and disapproval through humor. In addition, we also allow satirical content which would otherwise violate the Letter of the Policy on an escalation basis only, as the board recommended in the "Two Buttons" Meme case (Oversight Board Case 2021-005-FB-UA).

[22] A signal of violence includes: (1) a visual depiction of an armament; (2) a statement of intent or advocacy to use or carry an armament/weapon; (3) a reference to military language; (4) reference to arson, looting, or other destruction of property; (5) a reference to known real-world incidents of violence; or (6) statements of intent, calls to action, representing, supporting or advocating violence against people. (From the Violence & Incitement section in the Implementation Standards).

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This approach aligns with the overarching framework of our DOI policy under which Meta allows non-"shaheed" content that discusses designated individuals in specific permissible contexts like news reporting, academic discussion, and condemnation. Users will be allowed to share more speech about designated individuals but Meta will continue to prohibit the use of "shaheed" to explicitly or implicitly praise designated individuals. This will reduce the risk that dangerous actors can spread their narratives on our platforms, remove references to DOI violence and will protect users from being exposed to threatening or traumatizing content and ensure that the severe strike is more proportionately applied to user violations. This is particularly important for users who are the victims of terrorism and could be re-traumatized by content that praises designated individuals or celebrates their violence.

Equity: This option would reduce the negative impact on communities in which "shaheed" is a common term and who currently feel silenced from discussing designated individuals who play a role in their communities. However, placing the burden on the user to explain that they are condemning a designated individual may be seen as onerous, and some may see the scope of the exception as too narrow. In addition, the use of the word "shaheed" beyond the allowed carveout will continue to be prohibited, even if it did not include an explicit praise of violence, which will continue to generate criticism and perception of bias. On the other hand, the targets of terrorism and violence and their advocates may object to any loosening of our restrictions on "shaheed" as they view it as an appropriate and proportionate measure to address content normalizing violence.

Operability: This option will increase the operational cost and complexity of enforcement beyond what is required for our current policy. Reviewers and classifiers will require additional training to distinguish between the use of the word in permissible context vs non-permissible one. Enforcement in carve-outs is already an existing challenge and this option could increase the risk of inaccurate enforcement.

Impact on Users' Content and Accounts: By removing the blanket ban on using "shaheed" to refer to a designated individual, this option gives users more freedom to discuss those people and their place in the community. It reflects Meta's recognition that "shaheed" has many meanings and uses beyond "martyr," and that these uses are not always meant to praise terrorism and violence. It may better enable news outlets and journalists to provide objective news coverage without facing the risk of feature limits or deplatforming due to the impact of the severe penalty. However, users will still be required to avoid including a signal of violence (weapons, military uniform, military language) when they purposefully refer to the designated

individuals as "shaheed" which could lead to removal of some news reporting and political commentary if the content included armed personnel or weapons.[25]

- **Option 3: Remove content that uses "shaheed" to refer to an individual designated under our DOI policy _only_ when there is additional PSR or signal of violence.**

Alignment with Meta's Values of Voice, Safety, and Dignity: This option would allow much more speech and would better align with Meta's value of voice and principles of international law. It would allow the use of "shaheed" to refer to a designated individual unless the content also included explicit praise, support, or representation of the individual or another in violation of our Community Standards. This option, however, could be perceived as promoting voice over the value of safety. Although there is no concrete evidence linking online use of "shaheed" to a direct increase in violence, this policy could nevertheless result in allowing content that intends to legitimize violence and terrorist attacks.

Equity: This option maximizes the ways "shaheed" can be used to refer to a designated individual and, as such, could be seen by targets of terrorism and violence as prioritizing free expression to a fault. Those communities might view this treatment of "shaheed" as sacrificing safety in order to assuage cultures in which praise of designated individuals is, in the eyes of critics, too widespread. While no country has outlawed the use of "shaheed," there are some jurisdictions in which, on rare occasions, courts have linked using "shaheed" to acts of violence.[26] On the other hand,

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[25] To be clear, even under our status quo policy (as well as under option 2), we would not remove news reporting that quotes a person calling a designated person a "shaheed." Instead, we would only remove and apply a strike if the news organization referred to the individual as a "shaheed" in its own editorial voice.

[26] During its research, Meta noted three court decisions in which "shaheed" was found to have been linked to committing a terrorist offense. In Denmark, Moyed el-Zoebi el-Zoebi was convicted of plotting a terrorist attack on a political target in Copenhagen. As part of the evidence at his trial, a chat between e-Zoebi and a close family member was introduced, during which Zoebi declared that he wanted to "die as a Shaheed." Hamming, Tore, "The 2016 Copenhagen 'Matchstick' Terror Plot and the Evolving Transnational Character of Terrorism in the West," Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2019, Volume 12, Issue 11 (available at https://ctc.usma.edu/2016-copenhagen-matchstick-terror-plot-evolving-transnational-character-terrorism-west/) (last retrieved Dec. 9, 2021). In Israel, a court convicted an Arab poet, Dareen Tatour, of online incitement to terrorism for using a poem as the soundtrack to images of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Tatour used the phrase, "And follow the caravan of martyrs [Shaheeds]" in her poem. Tatour stated this was not a call for violence, but the court disagreed. Lubell, Maayan. "Israeli court convicts Arab poet of incitement," Reuters, May 3, 2018 (available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-poet/israeli-court-convicts-arab-poet-of-incitement-idUSKBN1I41PU) (last retrieved Dec. 9, 2021). In the United States, Asher Abid Khan pleaded guilty to providing material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a designated foreign terrorist

this option would significantly reduce the risk of penalizing speech in which a user links "shaheed" with violence without intending to praise it.

Operability: We expect that this option would be easier to operationalize than option 2 because reviewers and automation will not be expected to include "shaheed" in their content assessment. Implementing this option will require an update to our operational guidelines, which help reviewers interpret our praise, support and representation definitions, and an adjustment to our classifier without a need for significant training or engineering efforts.

Impact on Users Content and Accounts: Among the options presented, this will result in the removal of the least amount of content and, in instances where content is removed, the severe strike will be proportionately applied in line with the rest of the DOI policy in which users accrue severe strikes for any content that praises, substantively supports, or represents a DOI. Users, from all backgrounds, will be able to use the word according to their respective culture or vernacular. However, users who perceive "shaheed" as a praising term for a DOI will continue to report that content and interpret this decision as normalizing perpetrators of violence.

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organization. In the sworn complaint that served as the basis for Khan's arrest, the government noted that, in Facebook messages with another unidentified individual, Khan stated his desire to travel to Iraq to die "a shaheed." "Texas Resident Pleads Guilty to Providing Material Support to ISIS," Department of Justice, December 4, 2017, (available at https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/texas-resident-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis) (last retrieved Dec. 9, 2021); Complaint, United States v. Asher Abid Khan, para. 6, available here https://www.justice.gov/file/441346/download.