Zachary Chesser:
A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism

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Glossary of Terms

Hizb ut-Tahrir: A political Islamist organization, with chapters throughout the world, that seeks the re-establishment of the global Islamist state – or caliphate – by political and social means.

Homegrown terrorism: Terrorist activities or plots perpetrated within the United States or abroad by American citizens, legal permanent residents, or visitors radicalized largely within the United States.[1]

Jihad: Arabic word commonly translated as "struggle;" used in the Qur'an to mean either a struggle on the battlefield or an inner spiritual struggle. Violent Islamist extremists believe the entire Muslim world is under siege internally and externally. Therefore, a Jihad is justified against anyone who disagrees with their beliefs.

Kafir: Arabic term used in Islamic doctrine and often translated as "non-believer," "disbeliever," or "infidel."

Khilafa: Arabic word for "caliphate," which refers to an Islamic empire governed by a caliph, who wields temporal and spiritual authority. A number of Islamist extremist groups including al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab have called for the restoration of the caliphate by uniting Muslim nations, either through political action or through force.

Masaajid: Arabic word for "mosques," places of worship for followers of Islam.

Mobilization: The transition from radicalization to active support of and participation in violent action.

Mujahedeen: Arabic word that is often translated as "strugglers" or "people doing Jihad." Violent Islamists usually define it as individuals engaged in violent actions in defense of Islam.

Murtadd: Arabic word that is often translated as "apostate" and used to describe a Muslim who has abandoned his or her faith.

Violent Islamist Extremism: The ideology whose core goal is the establishment of a global state – or caliphate – by violent means in which the most radical interpretation of Shari'ah (Islamic religious law) will be enforced by the government. People who oppose the violent establishment of such a state, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, are considered legitimate targets.

Radicalization: The process of acquiring and holding extremist beliefs.[2]

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[1] Jerome P. Bjelopera, Congressional Research Service, *Memo to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on Homegrown Jihadist Plots* (November 2, 2011).

[2] Jerome P. Bjelopera, Mark A. Randol, Congressional Research Service, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat* (November 15, 2011).

al-Shabaab: U.S. Government-designated foreign terrorist organization based in Somalia with close ties to al-Qaeda.

Introduction: Homegrown Islamist Radicalization in the Internet Age

Introduction: Homegrown Islamist Radicalization in the Internet Age

Aside from the intelligence and law enforcement officials who work daily to keep the United States homeland safe from terrorism, the vast majority of Americans have likely never heard of Zachery Chesser, a young American now serving a 25-year sentence on several terrorism-related charges. Yet, Chesser is significant because he is part of a trend which, if not addressed, threatens the security of our homeland. That is why his story is being described in this report. First, some background:

In recent years, the United States has experienced an increase in the number of terrorist plots and attacks within the homeland, including by U.S. citizens.[1] Between September 11, 2001 and February 2012, there were more than 53 cases of homegrown Islamist extremists planning and/or carrying out acts of terrorism against the United States.[2] In the past 12 months alone, there have been 11 homegrown cases including:

- the arrest of two men who planned to attack a military processing center in Seattle in June 2011;[3]
- a plot to attack a restaurant frequented by military personnel near Fort Hood, Texas in July 2011;[4] and
- a plan to attack the U.S. Capitol and Pentagon in September 2011.[5]

A RAND Corporation study published in August 2011 reviewed homegrown terrorism cases in the United States from September 2001 to December 2010 and found that the median age of a homegrown terrorist recruit is 27.[6] These individuals are often very familiar with

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[1] Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, Bipartisan Policy Center, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat* (September 10, 2010).

[2] Jerome P. Bjelopera, Congressional Research Service, *Memo to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on Homegrown Jihadist Plots* (November 2, 2011).

[3] Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Two Men Charged in Plot to Attack Seattle Military Processing Center" http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/June/11-nsd-832.html, (June 23, 2011).

[4] U.S. Attorney's office, Western District of Texas, "Naser Jason Abdo Charged Federally in Bomb Plot" http://www.fbi.gov/sanantonio/press-releases/2011/naser-jason-abdo-charged-federally-in-bomb-plot (July, 29 2011).

[5] Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Ashland Man Charged With Plotting Attack On Pentagon And U.S. Capitol And Attempting To Provide Material Support To Foreign Terrorist Organization" http://www.justice.gov/usao/ma/news/2011/September/PressReleaseSept-28-11.html (September 28, 2011).

[6] Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States since 9/11* (August 31, 2011).

computers and the Internet, and a growing number have elected to broadcast their activities through online social networking websites.[7]

The U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee ("the Committee") has investigated the terrorist threat to the homeland posed by homegrown violent Islamist extremists for several years. To date, the Committee has held 13 hearings and released two reports on the threat of homegrown terrorism.[8] In May 2008, Chairman Joseph Lieberman (ID-Connecticut) and Ranking Member Susan Collins (R-Maine) released a bipartisan staff report reviewing the use of the Internet for radicalization entitled *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat,* and in February 2011 produced an investigative report concerning the terrorist attack at Fort Hood, Texas, entitled *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack*.

As noted in the Committee's reports, in the past, the ideology of violent Islamist extremism was limited to select web forums and pre-approved web videos. Since the issuance of its staff report in 2008, which predicted increased terrorist use of the Internet, the Committee has seen a marked shift in online recruitment and radicalization. Previously, extremist web sites were primarily restricted from the general public. As a result, a potential recruit had to search out and befriend members of radical forums in order to be accepted and subsequently gain access to the full functionality of the sites. Today, however, with the popularization of social networking sites, individuals who are becoming radicalized have the ability to find like-minded individuals more easily. In addition, these social networking sites allow for a level of interaction and information sharing that was not feasible even a few years ago. Incendiary materials – including videos and lectures – are increasingly found not only on obscure web sites but also on some of the most widely accessed sites in the world – including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. The result has been a pronounced increase in the volume of extremist material online, and a corresponding increase in the number of individuals who are viewing this material.

Online videos have played an important role in enticing potential terrorist recruits. In one example, the Somali terrorist organization al-Shabaab released a rap video in March 2009 entitled *Blow by Blow* about the history of the mujahedeen. The video characterized their fight as a struggle between the West and Islam.[9] Abdirahman Mukhtar, a youth counselor at the Brian Coyle Center in Minneapolis where many of the Somali-Americans who have been recruited by al-Shabaab gathered, noted in testimony before the Committee that young men watched violent videos in the Center's computer lab:

> Youth are very tech savvy these days and the Internet is where young people of a wide range of interests come together. Young people are inclined to participate in Internet activities. Hollywood and contemporary American pop culture glorify violence. So when al-Shabaab's video of an execution surfaced, people began

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[7] For examples of recent cases involving individuals who broadcast their activities through social media, *see* Jose Pimentel, Emerson Begolly, and Tarek Mehanna.

[8] For a complete listing of the Committee's hearings and reports, *see*: http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/issues/the-homegrown-terrorist-threat.

[9] *Blow by Blow* (March 2009), http*://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xwo2Jsq4QkQ* (last visited November 9, 2011).

comparing this act to images perpetuated by Hollywood. Young people often refer to outrageous acts of violence as "gangster."[10]

While social networking sites had been used in the recruitment of Somali-Americans in Minneapolis, there still existed a real-life connection and recruitment infrastructure that was used to identify and indoctrinate recruits. The interactive nature of online radicalization and recruitment came into sharp relief in December 2009, when five young men from the Washington, D.C. area left the United States to join the Taliban and were subsequently arrested in Pakistan. According to the Pakistani interrogation report, one of the young men, Ahmed Abdullah Minni, "used to regularly visit the Internet page of YouTube."[11] He used to the [*sic*] praise the videos which showed attacks on the US Army and Installations. This became a regular feature and Minni, a registered user of YouTube, regularly praised such attacks. Soon after, Minni was contacted by a person named 'Saifullah.' Saifullah reportedly encouraged the five men to travel to Pakistan and join the Taliban."[12]

As the Minni case suggests, the interactive online experience can accelerate the radicalization and mobilization process. Garry Reid, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism at the Department of Defense, noted in congressional testimony that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the failed bomber of Northwest Flight 253, became operational in a matter of a few months in large part because of his use of the Internet.[13] In contrast, the 9/11 hijackers' planning process took more than 2 years. As Reid explained in his testimony:

> What was once a lengthy process of establishing contact, exchanging ideas, arranging meetings, providing training, and developing attack plans can now be condensed into a much shorter timeline, across multiple international boundaries, and beyond the reach of any single law enforcement agency or military task force.[14]

This phenomenon is clearly reflected in the rapid radicalization and mobilization of Zachary Chesser, a U.S. citizen who converted to Islam after graduating from high school in the summer of 2008 and just over 2 years later pleaded guilty to three felonies, including attempting to provide material support to al-Shabaab. Chesser's rapid devolution from an average American kid to a hardened supporter of terrorist organizations is disturbing. His prolific online writings and written correspondence with Committee staff provide a window into his thinking, and in turn, may shed light on the thinking of other like-minded individuals who may follow in his destructive path of radicalization toward violent Islamist extremism.

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[10] Abdirahman Mukhtar, Statement before the Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Violent Islamist Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America* (March 11, 2009).

[11] Abbas Majeed Khan Marwat PSP, ASP/UT Sargodha, "Interrogation Report: Profiles of the Foreigners Held" http://a.abcnews.com/images/Blotter/ht_interrogation_report_091211.pdf (December 11, 2009).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Garry Reid, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Special Operations and Combating Terrorism, Department of Defense, Statement, U.S. Senate, Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, *U.S. Government Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism,* http://armed-services.senate.gov/e_witnesslist.cfm?id=4458 (March 10, 2010).

[14] Ibid.

This report traces Chesser's progression from an average American childhood, to his becoming an adherent of violent Islamist extremism, then a propagandist, and finally a strategist for that cause. In doing so, this report emphasizes the growing importance of social media in radicalization and recruitment toward violent Islamist extremism. The information in this report is based on a review of hundreds of pages of Chesser's online writings published prior to his arrest, court documents, and 37 pages of Chesser's written correspondence with Committee staff from August to October 2011.

Zachary Adam Chesser: A Timeline[15]

December 22, 1989: Zachary Adam Chesser is born in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Spring 2008: Chesser graduates from Oakton High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, where he participated in high school sports, joined a break-dancing team, and spent 4 years studying Japanese.

Summer 2008: Chesser converts to Islam while playing on a soccer team organized by a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamist political organization.

Fall 2008: Chesser begins his undergraduate studies at George Mason University in Virginia, where he studied for one semester before dropping out.

November 2008: Chesser's writings appear for the first time on Anwar al-Aulaqi's blog. Al-Aulaqi was a U.S. citizen and U.S. Government designated terrorist who inspired dozens of homegrown terrorists to commit violent acts.

January 2009: Chesser corresponds with Proscovia Nzabanita, the daughter of a Ugandan diplomat, through al-Aulaqi's blog.

March 2009: Chesser marries Proscovia Nzabanita.

November 2009: Nzabanita gives birth to Chesser's son. Chesser unsuccessfully attempts to travel to Somalia with Nzabanita.

December 2009: Chesser creates his own radical web site, *themujahidblog*.com, which is intended to be "a web site dedicated to those who give their lives for this religion."

April 2010: Chesser issues a violent threat through a video on YouTube to Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of the television show "South Park," following the release of a South Park episode in which the Muslim Prophet Muhammad is shown dressed in a bear costume.

July 10, 2010: Chesser is questioned at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City by airport officials after being denied boarding on a flight to Uganda with his infant son.

July 14, 2010: Chesser is interviewed by the FBI after trying to travel to Somalia, and informs an agent that he had decided against joining al-Shabaab after the group took responsibility for bombings in Kampala, Uganda that killed 76 people on July 11, 2010.

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[15] The information contained in this timeline is derived from source documents including court records, Chesser's online writings, and his correspondence with Committee staff. *See also, Internet helped Muslim convert from Northern Virginia Embrace Extremism at Warp Speed* and *An American Jihadist: Zachary Chesser Timeline* Washington Post (November 2, 2010).

July 21, 2010: Chesser is arrested by the FBI on charges of providing material support to al-Shabaab.

October 20, 2010: Chesser pleads guilty to three Federal felony charges: (1) communicating threats to Parker and Stone; (2) soliciting violent Islamist extremists to desensitize law enforcement by placing suspicious-looking but innocent packages in public places; and (3) attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization.

February 24, 2011: Chesser is sentenced to serve 25 years in Federal prison. His current date of release is April 30, 2032.

The Rapid Radicalization

"The period between the winter of 2008 and July of 2010 feels to me like a missing puzzle piece in my life. I know that I will spend many years trying to understand why I followed the path that has led me here."
– Zachary Chesser, Statement of Responsibility, December 10, 2010

Zachary Adam Chesser is a 22-year-old Virginian. He is the son of a U.S. Government contractor. He participated in his school's Gifted and Talented program, was an avid member of a high school break-dancing team and, for a brief period, was a Buddhist. Nevertheless, from mid-2008 to at least the summer of 2010, Chesser became a homegrown violent Islamist extremist.[16]

Chesser converted to Islam in the summer of 2008,[17] and his beliefs quickly led him to make significant changes in his work and personal life. Within a matter of weeks, he had quit his job at a Blockbuster video store because "he objected to working at a place that rented videos featuring naked women."[18] His parents described an increasingly hostile home environment in which Chesser would institute strict rules to enforce what he believed to be proper Islamic traditions.[19] By August 2008, he had moved out of his mother's house in Virginia because, according to his father, "his Mom's relationship with her live-in partner . . . violated his Islamic beliefs."[20]

In September 2008, he volunteered for a presidential election campaign, but – reflecting the speed of his radicalization – by November 2008, Chesser refused to vote in the election.[21] In addition, in November 2008, his girlfriend ended their relationship because he had become too extreme.[22] By the late fall of 2008, Chesser had become a full-fledged believer in the ideology of violent Islamist extremism and was searching for other like-minded individuals. He gravitated towards the Internet to find them because, as Chesser explained later, "It is simply the most dynamic and convenient form of media there is."[23]

In his correspondence with Committee staff, Chesser wrote about what caused him to become interested in the Islamist movement. "A Muslim who sincerely investigates their religion will find that it is an obligatory [*sic*] to implement Islamic law, that voting is a doubtful matter,

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[16] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser*, *Defendant's Position with Regard to Sentencing Factors*, (February 18, 2011).

[17] There are conflicting reports as to when and why Chesser converted to Islam. He states in an online post that he converted in the house of a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, who he met in a football league. Zachary Chesser, *Do Not Be Afraid to Talk About Jihad* (February 6, 2010).

[18] David Chesser, Letter to the Court (February 11, 2011).

[19] Megan Chesser, Letter to the Court (January 7, 2011).

[20] David Chesser, Letter to the Court (February 11, 2011).

[21] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

[22] Megan Chesser, Letter to the Court (January 7, 2011).

[23] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

that jihad becomes obligatory in the event that non-Muslims invade Muslim lands. This is what I found, and this is what essentially everyone finds….One who sets out to learn inevitably sees jihad as viable and preferable at some point."[24]

Chesser represents a growing breed of young Americans who have such comfort and facility with social media that they can adeptly use it to facilitate radicalization and recruitment to violent Islamist extremism that is accelerated as compared to traditional avenues of recruitment. Indeed, before his arrest by Federal authorities in July 2010, Chesser was a member of, and prolific contributor to, at least six terrorist online forums; the creator of three YouTube terrorist propaganda channels; the holder of at least two Twitter accounts; the manager of an active Facebook profile; and the creator and author of two stand-alone online blogs advocating violent Islamist extremism.[25]

Though a producer of online material, Chesser was also, like dozens of other young homegrown Islamist extremists,[26] a devoted follower of Anwar al-Aulaqi, the now-deceased American-born radical cleric.[27]

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Committee staff thanks the numerous outside experts who provided source documents. Chesser's aliases used on these sites included but may not be limited to: Zakariya (Anwar al-Aulaqi blog), Abu Talhah and Al-Malahim (7th Century Generation), Abu Talxah al-Amrikii (Al-Faloja), Abu Talha and Then Take A Notice of War (Islamic Awakening), Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee and Al-Quran Wa Al-Ahadeeth (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Forum), Abu Talhah (Ummah Forum) Abu Talhah and ibnu farxaan alkismaayawi (Al-Qimmah), AlQuranWaAlAhadeeth (YouTube), Abu Talha Al-Amriki (Revolution Muslim), MujahidBlog (Twitter) and AbuTalhah (Twitter), Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee (Facebook), LearnTeachFightDie (YouTube), AQWAHProductions (YouTube) and AlQuranWaAlAhadeeth (YouTube).

[26] For a list of individuals who received inspiration from Anwar al-Aulaqi, see U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee report, *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack* (February 2011).

[27] Chesser uses a number of different spellings for Anwar al-Aulaqi. When quoting directly from Chesser, Committee staff used Chesser's spelling of al-Aulaqi.

The al-Aulaqi Adherent

"My emails to al-Awlaki included the following subjects: Are protests allowed in Islam? Can I put up anti-war graffiti on government property? Some stories I heard about Afghanistan, and an email in 2009 congratulating him if he was killed and saying we will be happier if he was not."
– Zachary Chesser, Letter to Committee Staff, October 4, 2011

Just three months after converting to Islam, Chesser obtained a copy of several lectures by al-Aulaqi. Chesser soon became a devoted adherent to the radical cleric, frequently visiting al-Aulaqi's web site for guidance. Chesser explained, "I did not question al-Awlaki's theological arguments."[28]

The Committee has examined al-Aulaqi's role as a "virtual spiritual sanctioner" in its investigative report on the attack at Fort Hood, Texas.[29] As the report indicates, "virtual spiritual sanctioners" such as al-Aulaqi provide a false sense of religious justification over the Internet for an act of terrorism. Al-Aulaqi was among the most active and influential virtual spiritual sanctioners and his web site attracted thousands of followers – serving as a forum for followers to ask him questions and listen to lectures by a native English-language speaker who presented himself as understanding their problems and offering solutions.[30]

Al-Aulaqi regularly updated his blog with religious discussion, commentary on current events, and book reviews. His blog allowed users to post comments. Those comments covered the spectrum from religious questions concerning marriage to full-fledged support of terrorist organizations overseas. Those commenting became, in a sense, a community. These same individuals would post regularly and interact with each other often.

Chesser began posting online in the fall of 2008. From the beginning, his posts focused primarily on al-Shabaab. He initially was supportive of Chechen terrorists but concluded that their perpetration of the Beslan Massacre violated Islamic law. As Chesser later wrote to Committee staff:

> Somalia popped up on al-Awlaki's web site, and it had all the same pros of Chechnya, but none of its cons. Also, I was already interested in Somalia and was planning to make it the focus of my major in International Relations. It also looked very easy to enter….I rejected essentially all other locations, because they did not have boats or planes going into areas controlled by mujahidin. Al-Shabaab had both. If they did not have them, then perhaps I would have tried somewhere else. Later I became fairly involved with al-Shabaab so this really cemented the matter once that happened.[31]

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[28] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser*, Statement of Responsibility (December 10, 2010).
[29] U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack* (February 2011).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

In a later letter to Committee staff, Chesser reflected, "I looked at numerous sources to determine how things were to be applied generally and I concluded that al-Shabaab fit the mould [*sic*]. Al-Awlaki simply put al-Shabaab on the radar for me."[32]

Salutations to al-Shabab of Somalia

December 21, 2008 - 142924 by Anwar alAwlaki
Filed under Imam Anwar's Blog

184 Comments

We are following your recent news and it fills our hearts with immense joy. We would like to congratulate you for your victories and achievements.

Al-Shabab not only have succeeded in expanding the areas that fall under their rule but they have succeeded in implementing the sharia and giving us a living example of how we as Muslims should proceed to change our situation. The ballot has failed us but the bullet has not.

Chesser freely posted his increasingly radical beliefs online, although at one point in December 2008, he became worried that his online activities might alert the authorities. Chesser sought advice from the al-Aulaqi web site community:

> My sole desire in my heart is to join al-Shabaab in establishing the Khilafa. It is so engraved upon my heart that I began lamenting the time it is going to take to raise the money or means and then travel to Somalia. I don't know how to get there, so that is an issue. Another one is based on things I look up and post on the Internet. I am worried that I will be arrested when I try to leave the country. Does anyone know how to help me?[33]

A day later, he alerted his fellow al-Aulaqi followers that he was organizing a protest against the Egyptian government. He asked those interested to email him at his George Mason University account. The concluding sentence of his post reflects the progression of his radicalization at this point, "The protest is going to be all Muslim. Do not invite the kafir [non-believer] friends that you should not have."[34]

A week after that post, he asked al-Aulaqi and the online community, "If someone is an apostate, and they are so openly, can I just kill them right then and there or are there conditions?"[35] According to court records, he subsequently had a series of email communications with al-Aulaqi in which he expressed his desire to join al-Shabaab.[36] Chesser disputes this account, saying he only asked general questions of al-Aulaqi. In a letter to Committee staff, Chesser stated that al-Aulaqi responded to a question regarding whether protests are allowed in Islam, stating: "If I [Chesser] thought it was beneficial, I should do it, and if not, I should not."[37] Despite this discrepancy, it is clear that Chesser reached out to al-Aulaqi at least for spiritual guidance related to violent Islamist extremism, if not for practical or operational guidance.

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[32] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (October 4, 2011).

[33] Zachary Chesser, Anwar al-Aulaqi web site, comment on post entitled *Lies of the Telegraph* (December 28, 2008).

[34] Zachary Chesser, Anwar al-Aulaqi web site, comment on post entitled *The Meaning of Gaza* (December 29, 2008).

[35] Zachary Chesser, Anwar al-Aulaqi web site, comment on post entitled *A New Year: Reality and Aspirations* (January 9, 2009).

[36] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser*, Affidavit in support of Criminal Complaint (July 21, 2010).

[37] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (October 4, 2011).

Al-Aulaqi's web site also provided additional reinforcement of his extremist views. He met his future wife, Proscovia Nzabanita, the 25-year old daughter of a Ugandan diplomat, through a series of comments that they posted on al-Aulaqi's blog.[38] Nzabanita held similar and arguably even more extreme violent Islamist beliefs than her future husband. In a letter to Committee staff, Chesser explained the transition from online communications with his future wife to a real-world marriage: "I did meet my wife on al-Awlaki's site. I used to send out emails on Islam to all of my contacts, and she had previously emailed me about a protest I was working to organize, so she was on my list. Later she asked me to show her best friend's husband around DC….This guy's wife decided to try and set us up, so that eventually led to us getting married….The transition from online to real-world came only a couple weeks before we were married."[39]

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[38] Zachary Chesser, Comment on post entitled, *44 Ways of Supporting Jihad* (January 10, 2009). In response to Chesser's post about his inability to find a wife that would be supportive of his Islamist views, Nzabanita responded, "I do know of some sister who would love to make hijrah and perform their other obligation but have no mahram to go with them and would love to marry feesabilillah so they may be able to leave completely." There were a series of responses between Chesser and Nzabanita in the preceding weeks.

[39] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (October 4, 2011).

The Propagandist

"There are four basic mediums through which one can transmit information effectively: video, audio, still-images, and writing. In addition to this there are two fields through which one can spread this information: the real world and the virtual world. Every single method needs to be used and used well."
– Zachary Chesser, How To Propagate & Call To Jihad, February 18, 2010

By December 2009, Chesser had committed to using his computer and communication skills to advance the violent Islamist cause online. When asked by Committee staff how he transitioned from a consumer to a prolific producer of Islamist media, Chesser explained: "I have above average artistic, computer graphics, video editing, writing, and programming skills. These, combined with a flair for propaganda, motivational work, recruiting, networking, and marketing led to my quick rise on the Internet."[40]

Chesser used his "above average" skills in a range of online locations, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and other web sites to connect with influential Islamist extremist leaders and contribute to the efforts of global terrorist movements.

Online Forums

Traditionally, al-Qaeda releases its messages through a series of vetted online forums. A vetted online forum is a discussion board that can only be accessed by individuals who have been approved by an administrator of the site. A significant number of homegrown Islamist terrorists have, at some time

How To Propagate & Call To Jihad
Wednesday, 17 February 2010 02:32   Abu Talha Al-Amriki

How To Propagate & Call To Jihad

The first thing that one needs to know is that this is in no way comprehensive, and that the reader should follow whatever he or she feels is the most effective for them. The second thing the reader needs to know is that you cannot be arrested anywhere except in the Muslim countries themselves for discussing and propagating jihad (so long as you do not directly threaten an individual or group of individuals). The United Kingdom is perhaps stricter than other Western countries, so any reader from the United Kingdom should familiarize themselves with the laws in that country. The intention of this paper is to provide a basic format to effectively propagate the message of Jihad and the 'Aqeedah of Ahlus-Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah. In sha'a Allah it will cover where to spread the message, how to do it effectively in different environments, how to target the most people, and some other ways of helping the message to propagate.

There are four basic mediums through which one can transmit information effectively: video, audio, still-images, and writing. In addition to this there are two fields through which one can spread this information: the real world and the virtual world. Every single method needs to be used and used well.
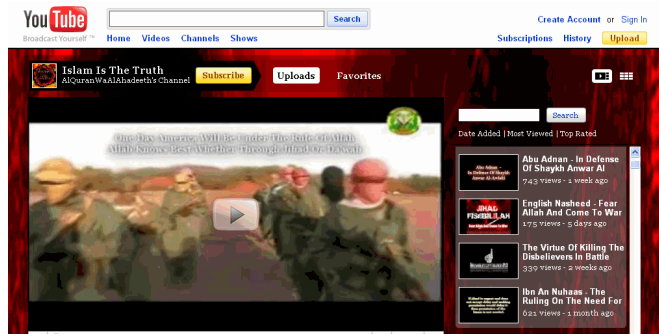
during their radicalization process, been members of and contributors to the discussion boards on a number of terrorist forums. Chesser was a member of at least six different online forums, which represent varying levels of Islamist extremism.

Chesser posted obsessively on each of these forums. His posts were usually videos released by terrorist organizations. He also suggested readers desensitize law enforcement to threats by leaving suspicious but harmless bags throughout the country.[41] He valued the feedback he received from other posters. He noted, "Make sure you comment often, even if it is only a short and semi-useless comment. This will help keep topics of importance on people's minds….Forums are also one of the most effective places to market videos and articles. All you have to do is post it, and it will get between 40 and 100 views pretty easily."[42]

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[40] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

[41] Zachary Chesser, Al Faloja, *Desensitizing Federal Agents - Fake Attacks* (June 15, 2010).

[42] Zachary Chesser, *How to Propagate & Call to Jihad* (February 12, 2010).

YouTube

Chesser eventually branched out to social media sites to create and promote his violent Islamist extremist message. He created and controlled at least three YouTube channels including *LearnTeachFightDie*, *AQWAHProductions*, and *AlQuranWaAlAhadeeth*.[43] By late 2009, he had begun producing his own propaganda videos.[44] He also regularly reposted lectures of al-Aulaqi and took a particular interest in news and videos from al-Shabaab. He wrote in an online post, "Perhaps the most effective platform available for conveying the message of Islam is YouTube….The more members any group has the easier it is for them to absorb people who are less open-minded."[45]

Chesser often boasted that his YouTube channels were some of the most influential on the site. He stated, "In 2010 both my YouTube page and several others have seen more traffic than in all of 2009. In my case 2010 is 80% of my views so far…. The growth of my page and some others I pay attention to is looking to hit a rate that would produce more than 1,000,000 views per year. There are currently no jihadi YouTube pages with even that many total views."[46]

Chesser's YouTube postings received national media attention on April 15, 2010, when he posted a video with an al-Aulaqi lecture which called for the assassination of anyone who has "defamed Mohammad." At the end of the video, Chesser included the addresses of the Comedy Central office and the creators of the adult cartoon, South Park. Referencing the 2004 murder of director Theo Van Gogh by an Islamist extremist he noted, "We have to warn Matt Stone and Trey Parker [South Park creators] that what they are doing is stupid and will probably wind up like Theo Van Gogh for airing this show."[47]

Twitter

Chesser also operated at least two Twitter accounts: *MujahidBlog* and *AbuTalhah*. He used Twitter accounts primarily to promote his YouTube channels and blog posts. He also tweeted his upcoming writings and links to media stories that

Coming soon: Counter Counter Terrorism #7b Communication: Meeting In Person 11:04 AM Apr 21st vi web
- o Reply
- o Retweet

The kuffar are starting to really pick up on the South Park story in sha'a Allah this can be the USA's version of the Rushdie affair in UK 10:06 AM Apr 20th via web
- o Reply
- o Retweet

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[43] YouTube Channel information is derived from source documents and court records including *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser* (October 20, 2010).

[44] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser* (October 20, 2010).

[45] Zachary Chesser, *How to Propagate & Call to Jihad* (February 6, 2010).

[46] Zachary Chesser, Reply to *Quoted in Metro Article about Jihad Jane, Etc.* http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=580 (March 19, 2010).

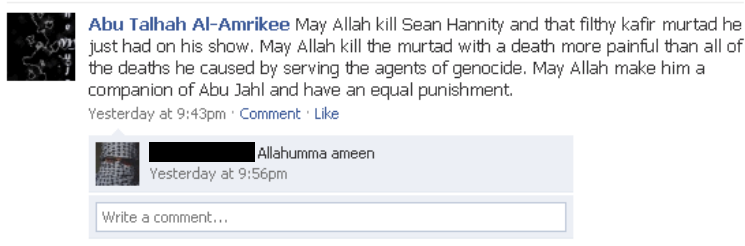[47] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser* (October 20, 2010).

featured him. In April 2010, he noted on his web site, *themujahiblog.com*:

> Twitter is an incredibly easy way to get information out. Imagine a jihadi forum that e-mails you every time a new video is released. You do not even have to actually use Twitter. You just link a web site to your account and it releases the media for you. This would go miles and miles toward influencing the youth who do not know about the jihadi forums or who are not recruited into the forums, but are aware of them…. For a while we should create groups and pages that update a thousand or so people at once, but eventually messages should say, 'Follow us on Twitter here: xxxx.'[48]

Facebook

Chesser actively maintained a Facebook profile and used the site to re-post terrorist content. Chesser, under the name Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee, used his Facebook status updates to vent about shows he saw on cable news. Regarding a Muslim guest on The Sean Hannity Show, he wrote, "May Allah kill the murtad [*sic*] with a death more painful than all the deaths he caused by serving the agents of genocide." Another user responded to his comment in less than 15 minutes and praised his words.[49]

Chesser's status updates encouraged others to communicate with him through Facebook or email about joining the cause. "Anyone in the DC area who wants to get involved I am trying to get things going so send me a message either on here or at *abutalhahalamrikee@yahoo.com*."[50]

> **Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee** May Allah kill Sean Hannity and that filthy kafir murtad he just had on his show. May Allah kill the murtad with a death more painful than all of the deaths he caused by serving the agents of genocide. May Allah make him a companion of Abu Jahl and have an equal punishment.
> Yesterday at 9:43pm · Comment · Like
>
> ░░░░░░░ Allahumma ameen
> Yesterday at 9:56pm
>
> Write a comment…

He also actively posted on others' pages. When Ramy Zamzam[51] was arrested in Pakistan along with four other Washington-area individuals for trying to join the Taliban, Chesser posted on the "Free Washington Five" site that, "I knew Ramy Zamzam a little bit. Maa'shaa Allah he was a very good brother."[52]

Web sites

Chesser moderated the radical web site "Revolution Muslim" which was regularly updated with violent Islamist videos and content. A number of its moderators and followers have since been arrested for various terrorist offenses in the United States and the United Kingdom

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[48] Zachary Chesser, Post on *themujahidblog.com* (April 2010).

[49] Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee (Zachary Chesser) Status Update, Facebook (March 3, 2010).

[50] Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee (Zachary Chesser), Revolution Muslim Facebook page Update (March 3, 2010.

[51] Ramy Zamzam is a member of the so-called Northern Virginia Five which was a group of friends who traveled to Pakistan to join a terrorist organization. They were arrested and sentenced to 10 years by the Pakistani government.

[52] Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee (Zachary Chesser) Facebook post (January 25, 2010).

His web site, *themujahiblog.com*, was publicly available, interactive and permitted users to "like," "share," and "rate" individual posts. At one time, he experimented with creating his own online forum, trying to mirror the dozen or so violent Islamist forums which he frequented. His web site included recommended links and a section recommending certain books which advocated violent Islamist extremism. He used his blog to post al-Qaeda lectures and links to leaked counterterrorism documents such as the Transportation Security Administration's manual entitled *Aviation Security Screening Management Standard Operating Procedures*.[53]

Before it was eventually taken down, *themujahidblog.com* had over 10,000 page views.[54] Chesser noted the importance of sharing blog links throughout the movement, stating, "If you find a good blog or web site you should spread it around the Internet. An article on the mujahideen that links back to *http://revolutionmuslim.com* or another similar site can do a lot to spreading the da'wa [inviting others to Islam]. Someone who has not been exposed to knowledge of jihad and the mujahideen very much might click on a link and then see a site devoted entirely to the subject for the first time in their lives."[55]

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[53] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser* (October 20, 2010).

[54] The exact number of *themujahidblog.com* views could not be assessed, but a March 4, 2010 cache version of the web site notes 12,179 page views.

[55]Zachary Chesser, *How to Propagate & Call to Jihad* (February 12, 2010).

The Strategist

"Occasionally I write something completely with the intention of playing off of the egos of various counter terrorism analysts. I was somewhat successful in building audiences and influencing them."
– Zachary Chesser, Interview with Aaron Y. Zelin, June 29, 2010

By March 2010, Chesser considered himself not only an adherent of violent Islamist extremist but also a strategist for the cause. In a series of posts entitled *Counter Counter Terrorism,*[56] Chesser outlined ways the violent Islamist extremist movement could win an ideological struggle – the so-called "war of ideas" – against the West. In doing so, Chesser underscored the importance of propaganda in the fight based on four points:

> (1) Anytime the kuffar (non-believers) have something which is perceived as success it must be hidden, (2) Successes of the mujahideen must be emphasized, (3) Kill the sympathy factor, (4) Emphasize unpopular actions of the kuffar.[57]

Below each point was a series of bullet points to justify the headline such as "we should not publish their media which is negative on our forums and web sites. Even if it is the only source making a certain claim, and we know it is true, then we should not post it" and "videos of kuffar dying should be spread. Death is an extraordinarily powerful image. There is nothing stronger in killing one's sympathy for the enemy than seeing him die enough times that there is no longer a shock factor."[58]

Chesser posted his *Counter Counter Terrorism* series on nearly every online forum he was a member of, in addition to his web site, *themujahidblog.com*.

In addition to publishing his own writings online, Chesser regularly attempted to engage in online discussions and strategy debates with counterterrorism experts. Commenting on the

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[56] There may be additional *Counter Counter Terrorism* postings, but Committee staff were only able to verify the following and the exact posting dates may vary depending on the online sites Chesser posted to:
  Counter Counter Terrorism #1 - Defeating The Plotting Of The Enemies Of Allah (March 21, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #2 - Using the Enemy Against Himself (April 18, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #3 - The Clear Enemy (April 18, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #4 - Misguided Salafis (April 18, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #5 - Physical Resistance (April 18, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #6 - Recognizing Our Shortfalls: Utilization of Social Media (April 19, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #7a - Communications: Telephones (April 19, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #7b - Communication: Meeting in Person (April, 22 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #7c - Communication: The Messneger, [sic] Letters, And Wireless (April, 26 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #8 - Fomenting Disunity in the Counter Terrorism Movement (May 11, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #9 - Transportation (April 27, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #10 - Jarret Brachman Caduwullah (May 11, 2010).
  Counter Counter Terrorism #12 - Actually Leaving for Jihad (June 12, 2010).
[57] Zachary Chesser, *themujahidblog.com*, *Counter Counter Terrorism #1 - Defeating The Plotting Of The Enemies Of Allah* (March, 21 2010).
[58] Ibid.

website of counterterrorism expert Jarret Brachman on a post about convicted homegrown terrorist Colleen LaRose,[59] Chesser explained his views on the long-term strategy of al-Qaeda:

> [B]oth legal and illegal weapons are much easier to obtain here than they are in Europe. For example, I could walk about a mile from the capitol building in DC and buy M16s and grenades off the street. Also, due to the nature of America's infrastructure it is much easier to come by explosives. All one would have to do is go to a construction site or a farm and take them. Eventually Muslims will figure this out. While there may or may not be a period of going for "spectacular" attacks, the typical attack in America will probably look a lot more like Mumbai than 9-11. The trend in attacks both from Al-Qa'ida and others has been to grow more and more practical. The recent video from Adam Gadahn is a testimony to this. The role of AQC [al-Qaeda Central, meaning al-Qaeda's leadership in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region] is likely to shift into an organization that says, "We congratulate so-and-so on their recent operation," or, "May Allah reward the brother/sister for their intention, but we encourage the Muslims to think things through a bit more before they do anything."[60]

Recognizing that his engagement with counterterrorism experts was boosting his notoriety, Chesser's *Counter Counter Terrorism #8*, entitled *Fomenting Disunity in the Counter Terrorism Movement*, focused on the need to encourage dissent among counterterrorism experts in order to use those disagreements to advance the violent Islamist extremist cause. He wrote:

> Often other CT [counterterrorism] officials express concern over the term "Jihobbyist" which was coined by Brachman. It refers to people who post things on the Internet, but who have not done anything concrete as far as action is concerned…. Many people in the CT field are worried that this term causes people to underestimate the threat of domestic attacks. References to this word in postings when a domestic attack does occur could cause people to blame Jarret Brachman for any shortfalls in attention being payed [*sic*] to domestic threats….We should use this term in our public postings…. It draws a clear distinction between real mujahideen and people like me, which creates a feeling of inadequacy, and feelings of inadequacy drive people to eliminate that feeling through actions.[61]

With his *Counter Counter Terrorism* series, Chesser reveled in his new-found importance. He allowed a researcher from Brandeis University, Aaron Y. Zelin, to interview him a month before his eventual arrest and responded to questions ranging from the personal to theological. For example, Chesser defended his threats to the South Park creators and justified al-Qaeda's killing of Muslims by stating that "collateral damage will naturally occur in any war, and in some scenarios it will be the majority of the deaths. The current wars the Muslims are fighting are within their own territory, so virtually all collateral damage will be of Muslims."[62]
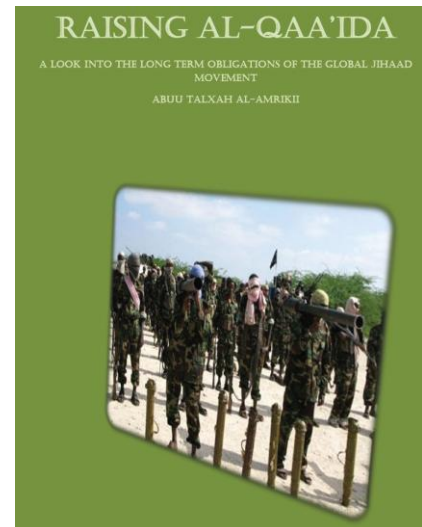
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[59] On February 1, 2011 Colleen LaRose, aka "Jihad Jane," pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists, conspiracy to kill in a foreign country, making false statements, and attempted identity theft. According to court documents, LaRose intended to obtain military-style training in South Asia and then commit terrorist attacks in Europe.

[60] Zachary Chesser, Reply to *Quoted in Metro Article about Jihad Jane, Etc*, *(http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=580)* (March 19, 2010).

[61] Zachary Chesser, *Counter Counter Terrorism #8 - Fomenting Disunity in the Counter Terrorism Movement*, (May 11, 2010). An excerpt of this post is available at *(http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=764)* (July 22, 2010).

[62] Aaron Y. Zelin, Interview with Abu Talhah al-Amriki (Zachary Chesser) (June 29, 2010).

Three weeks before his arrest in July 2010, Chesser authored a 25-page document entitled *Raising Al-Qaa'ida: A Look Into the Long Term Obligations of the Global Jihaad Movement*. The piece gave suggestions and best practices for engaging Muslims who have not joined the violent Islamist extremist movement. Chesser argued that children and women must be a greater part of the fight. He wrote, "[T]he grander picture of jihad is what must be presented as we raise our children…. The fiqh of jihad must be taught in the masaajid, the schools, and the homes…. We have to instill the love of jihad in the hearts of our children in a complete manner."[63]

Indeed, Chesser placed special emphasis on the role of women: "A lot of sisters are very involved in the support of the mujaahidiin, but their efforts go unmentioned, so other sisters do not have anything to look forward to from what they know. Additionally, sisters are the most important to inspire in order to ensure the long term success of the movement. They are the ones responsible for producing a new generation of mujaahidiin *[sic]*, and if we neglect them in our works, then we should not be surprised when they neglect our children as they raise them."[64]

In a letter to Committee staff reflecting on his role as a strategist, Chesser stated, "I also do not know anybody else who attracted as much interest from the online CT [counterterrorism] crowd except people who were actually fighting. All of these things are inter-related more or less, and they fed each other until I would end up in a position of enormous influence."[65]

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[63] Zachary Chesser, *Raising al-Qaa'ida: A Look Into the Long Term Obligations of the Global Jihaad Movement* (July 2010).
[64] Ibid.
[65] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

The Mobilization

"You took just a shocking leap from a high-school athlete to a highly energized traitor to your country. It's startling."
– U.S. District Judge Liam O'Grady, February 24, 2011

In the spring of 2009, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) met with Chesser to discuss his online activities. Chesser has stated to Committee staff that he spoke with the FBI after he learned that they had "been bothering members of the Muslim community about me. I did not want them scaring other people over me."[66] Chesser would be interviewed at least twice more by the FBI but stated in letters to Committee staff that his violent beliefs were solidified by an FBI search of a friend's residence.[67] He told an FBI Special Agent that he "no longer supported jihad propaganda," however, "he said he would still be willing to die in the name of Islam."[68] Chesser stated that the FBI tried unsuccessfully to place informants and develop a sting operation against him "but they made tons of blunders."[69]

According to Chesser's journal writings, which were obtained by the FBI, Chesser attempted to leave the United States with his wife in order to join al-Shabaab in November 2009 but was unsuccessful because his mother-in-law had hidden his wife's passport.

On June 24, 2010, the FBI executed a search warrant of Chesser's residence. Later that day, Chesser and his wife suspected their apartment had been searched by law enforcement. They destroyed items by "pouring water and bleach on them."[70] On July 9, 2010, Chesser and his wife stayed in a hotel in Maryland with their infant son in preparation for his attempted trip to Somalia. The following day, Nzabanita dropped Chesser and their son off at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. According to court documents, Chesser stated he believed that, if he traveled with his son, then he would not come under as much suspicion.

When he was prevented from boarding the aircraft, he called an FBI Special Agent and reiterated that he no longer supported violent Islamist extremism. The FBI arrested Chesser on July 21, 2010 for attempting to provide material support to al-Shabaab. His wife was subsequently charged with making false statements to law enforcement regarding Chesser's travels; she pleaded guilty and was deported back to her home country of Uganda.

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser*, Affidavit in support of Criminal Complaint (July 21, 2010).

[69] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011). For the purposes of this report, Committee staff did not attempt to verify with the FBI the circumstances of its use of undercover operations against Chesser.

[70] *U.S. v. Nzabanita*, Statement of Facts (November 8, 2010).

The Aftermath

"As for deciding to leave the United States then, had I known America loved me so much that it would take legal action to keep me here for the next twenty years, I might have agreed to stay."
– Zachary Chesser, Letter to Committee Staff, September 6, 2011

In the end, Chesser pleaded guilty to the charges against him and received a sentence of 25 years in a Federal prison. In court documents, he claimed that he regretted the decisions in his life, stating, "I want to emerge from prison as a productive citizen who will do his best for society and his family….When I became involved in the jihadi community, I attracted a lot of attention. Now my dream is to help my family without drawing any further attention to myself."[71]

In a letter to Committee staff, he promoted the idea of better understanding between violent Islamists and the government. He advocated for an online discussion board between counterterrorism policymakers and Islamist followers where debate and common ground could be found. He wrote, "every subscriber to jihad is not some boogeyman threatening national security. Treating things like this will result in failures, senseless deaths, and other chaos."[72] When asked if he thought such a forum was destined to fail because Islamists would not trust the source, he stated, "If the forum was not just some CT [counterterrorism] experiment and it was an honest attempt at dialogue, then it would be almost certain to achieve things. If it is not truly honest, then it would almost certainly fail."[73]

He also noted that he did not find a real-world audience for his violent beliefs. In discussing his attempt to receive religious approval of his actions from local imams, Chesser said, "I actually did ask local leaders but I disagreed with their responses."[74]

In a letter to the Committee, Chesser stated that there was a brief moment during the course of his radicalization in which he was nearly steered from the path that led to his incarceration. But ultimately, the influence of online sources of violent Islamist extremism proved stronger. As Chesser wrote simply and without further explanation, "One person briefly pulled me away, but this was supplemented by online material."[75]

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[71] *U.S. v. Zachary Chesser*, Statement of Responsibility (December 10, 2010).

[72] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

[73] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (October 4, 2011).

[74] Ibid.

[75] Zachary Chesser, Letter to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (September 6, 2011).

Findings and Recommendations

"I will explain what you can say with no fear of anything except a[n] annoying knock on the door from two people who cannot actually do anything to you."
– Zachary Chesser, *Be Not Afraid to Talk about Jihad*, February 6, 2010

Finding: Violent Islamist extremists use the Internet to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize individuals – including Americans. Chesser is likely a harbinger, not an outlier, for violent Islamist extremism online, not just in the United States, but globally.

The threat of violent Islamist extremism has become increasingly decentralized, and its messaging has followed that same trajectory. In this sense, Chesser's story is a model for how the violent Islamist extremist movement may be sustained into the future.

The deaths of Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Aulaqi – eliminating key leaders in al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) respectively – will likely accelerate the trend in terrorist operations since 9/11 in which the threat has become more decentralized. In other words, terrorist operations have increasingly been carried out by individuals or cells in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, with little or no direction from senior al-Qaeda leadership.[76]

Likewise, while messages produced by al-Qaeda's media production arm, as-Sabab (not to be confused with the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab), remain significant, the deaths of bin Laden and particularly the notorious propagandist al-Aulaqi mean that terrorist content self-generated by individuals throughout the world will almost certainly play an increasing role in sustaining violent Islamist extremism.

Indeed, violent Islamist extremists are no longer limited to password-protected online forums. The terrorist message is also found on myriad mainstream sites, leading to the concern that individuals who are disaffected or otherwise potentially open to violent Islamist extremism could stumble upon the terrorist narrative or find it easily – and get drawn more quickly into radicalization to violent Islamist extremism.

Along with Chesser, another noteworthy example of this decentralization of propaganda is the now-deceased terrorist, Samir Khan, who prior to joining AQAP, took a similar path as Chesser. He created his own website and YouTube videos and spread the violent Islamist narrative online wherever he could find an audience. Khan went on to become the creator and editor of *Inspire*, an English-language magazine intended to radicalize individuals in the West and facilitate their communication regarding terrorist acts. In one issue, *Inspire* gave step-by-step directions on how to best kill Americans. It also included ideological justification for terrorism.

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[76] Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, Bipartisan Policy Center, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat* (September 10, 2010).

The magazine did so in an easy-to-read and accessible way. Khan used computer skills he sharpened while in North Carolina to become a key propaganda asset for AQAP.

Both Chesser and Khan show that the bar for producing sophisticated terrorist content has been lowered such that essentially anyone with basic computer skills can help keep the ideological fire lit through their own actions without prior approval from al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations.

Recommendation: The United States currently has a haphazard approach to dealing with global Internet radicalization and propaganda. Some in the Intelligence Community have argued that there is intelligence value in leaving the online ideological battlefield uncontested, while others believe we must confront the ideology online head-on.[77] Efforts by the State Department's new Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications to develop messaging and materials for countering online radicalization are encouraging but nascent. The U.S. Government needs a comprehensive Internet strategy to address online radicalization that integrates activities across the State Department, the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the

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[77] Washington Post, *Dismantling of Saudi-CIA Web Site Illustrates Need for Clearer Cyberwar policies*, *(http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/18/AR2010031805464.html?nav=hcmodule),* (March 19, 2010).

Federal Bureau of Investigation, and other agencies into a single, coherent approach – while vigilantly respecting the First Amendment rights of all Americans.

Finding: Law enforcement alone is ill-suited to counter radicalization of individuals such as Chesser and others who will likely follow. The U.S. Government should develop a "whole of society" approach to counter radicalization domestically, with a particular emphasis against online propaganda.

From mid-2008 until his arrest in July 2010, Chesser continued on the path of radicalization to mobilization to action nearly unimpeded. Chesser's propaganda was protected by the First Amendment. Provided he did not take any criminal steps, the FBI could only attempt what it calls a "disruption" by meeting with Chesser to inform him that the FBI had become aware of his activities and that he would be arrested if he engaged in any criminal conduct. However, the sizable number of homegrown terrorism cases in recent years makes it impractical for the FBI to monitor all individuals who may be going through the radicalization process and conduct repeated "disruptions" as needed. Moreover, even if the FBI had the necessary resources to do so, heavy reliance on "disruptions" not only threatens to chill free speech but also does little to ameliorate the problem of radicalization itself.

In sum, the U.S. Government lacked options beyond federal law enforcement "disruptions" for dealing with Chesser once he was radicalized, and Chesser's radicalization – combined with the trend of radicalization of U.S. citizens and permanent residents resulting in terrorist activity since 2009 – shows the need for an effective domestic counter radicalization strategy.

The U.S. Government needs to develop options within Constitutional and statutory constraints for situations in which federal law enforcement such as the FBI comes in contact with an individual who is radicalizing. It is not law enforcement's or the Intelligence Community's role to seek to change an individual's beliefs protected by the First Amendment, as opposed to focusing on criminal conduct. An individual's family, friends, and local community and religious leaders are best suited to dissuading the individual from criminal activity as well as rolling-back the radicalization. The U.S. Government needs to resolve the extent to which federal law enforcement can share information concerning radicalized individuals with family, friends, and local community and religious leaders.

In addition, the U.S. Government needs to ensure a "whole of society" approach to working with Muslim-American communities to prevent radicalization. Through such engagement, the U.S. Government would facilitate local community and religious leaders and parents in identifying and countering radicalization in their communities. For example, the U.S. Government could provide trend data concerning investigations in a community as well as educational material concerning violent Islamist extremism and effective ways to counter it. In addition, federal, State, and local social service agencies can seek to coordinate actions within their respective mandates that may assist this overall strategy; for example, the Department of

Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement can assist immigrant communities who are experiencing challenges in assimilating into American society.

Various components of the U.S. Government are attempting to prevent radicalization generally, but we are concerned not only that these efforts are insufficient but also that the strategic architecture guiding these efforts is inadequate.
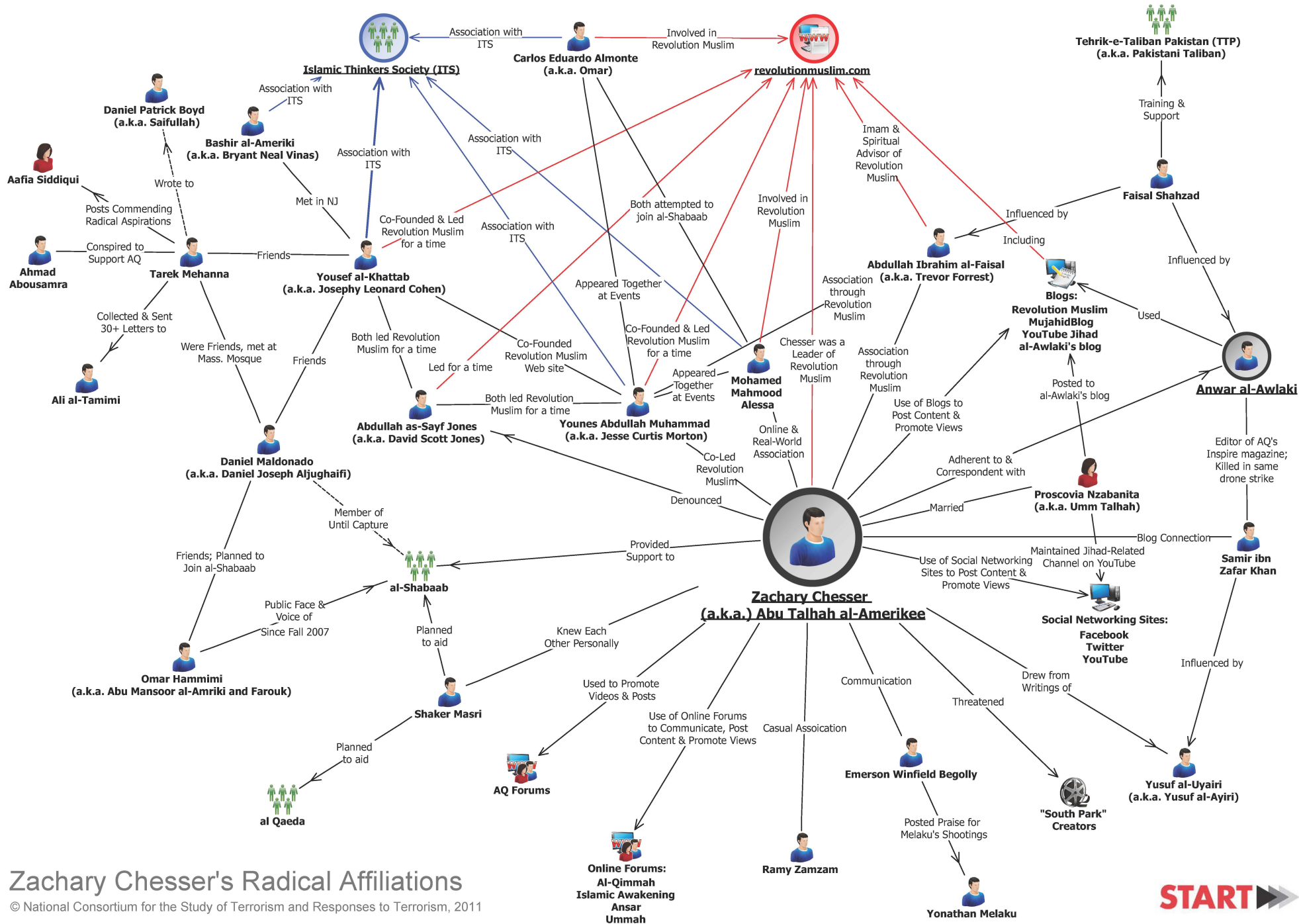
- In August 2011, the Administration released a document describing its counter radicalization approach, entitled *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*. This was the first such document issued, but it was not a real strategy. It lacked specificity such as actions, goals, timelines, resources, and metrics for measuring success. Moreover, it was silent on naming an overall department or agency to be the operational lead for this evolving security challenge – ensuring coordination and accountability will remain elusive. In addition, the document aimed at an undefined "violent extremism" rather than the greatest terrorist threat to our national security – violent Islamist extremism.

- In December 2011, the Administration released its *Strategic Implementation Plan*. This plan was an important step forward in that it contained specific tasks and listed lead and supporting agencies for those tasks. However, the plan lacked a timeline and metrics and did not address the potential need for dedicated funding. Moreover, the plan contained only passing references to agencies aside from DHS, FBI, the Department of Justice, and the National Counterterrorism Center.

The Executive Branch's December 2011 *Strategic Implementation Plan* states that a counter radicalization strategy specifically focused on the Internet will be developed but does not provide a date; the Executive Branch should expedite the development of this strategy so that the United States is best-positioned to deal with individuals who follow in Chesser's footsteps.

Recommendation: The U.S. Government should develop a comprehensive "whole of society" approach to countering violent Islamist radicalization, beyond the documents that the Executive Branch has already released, including but not limited to how to facilitate community intervention by family, friends, and community and religious leaders supported by federal, state, and local government resources. In addition, the U.S. Government should strengthen its ability to assist Muslim American communities seeking to address and counter radicalization online.

Appendix A: START Diagram of Chesser's Terrorist Affiliations [78]

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[78] Mila Johns, McKenzie O'Brien and Gary Ackerman, *Zachary Chesser's Radical Affiliations*, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START): College Park, MD (2011).

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Zachary Chesser's Radical Affiliations
© National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2011

START▶▶

Appendix B: Chesser's Correspondence with Committee Staff

12th Ramadān, 1432
11th August, 2011

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

I am drafting a response to your letter. In shā-Allāh, if you inform me as to whether or not what I say will be made public, then this would help me. Also, if you can inform me whether or not you have clearance to see all of my file, then this will help as well. Furthermore, will members of the committee see my response?

Also, was I really that interesting in 2008? or did you have a worse job?

Lastly, please inform the committee that they must do exactly as I say, or else I will publicly endorse them in their bids for re-election. Also, please additionally inform Senator Akaka that my endorsement will be phrased as such:

"I am endorsing Daniel K. Akaka, because he is secretly a Muslim from Indonesia working with Obama to establish shariah in America. As they did with Obama, the Muslim Brotherhood acquired a forged Hawaian birth certificate prior to his running for federal office."

This is a joke not a threat.

Sincerely,

Zakariyya Chesser

P.S. When do I need things by? and could I
see the report when it is done?

Also, if you would like I could correct any
mistakes on my story if you have some sort of
draft. I am assuming it is not a classified report
The prosecution and even the agents who
apparently listened to everything I said for the
last couple of years had a lot of misunderstandings.
Even my "Statement of Facts" has a lot of factual
errors which I could have disproved rather
easily, but did not have time.

بِسْمِ ٱللَّٰهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

If Allāh wills, I intend to answer your questions in detail. However, before I do, I will provide brief responses at the beginning of this correspondence for the sake of clarity.

What interested me in jihād?

My religion, the state of affairs in the Muslim world, and a desire to alleviate suffering within it led me to desire to fight jihād.

What interested me in the internet?

For my generation this is tantamount to asking the question, "What interested you in the phone?" It is simply the most dynamic and convenient form of media there is. If I had continued with Revolution Muslim, it would now be pulling in a larger audience than many television stations (here I am referring to the ones beyond basic cable). I was on the internet before I became Muslim, so there was no real decision to be made.

Did any real-world interactions play a role?

Yes, they played essentially the same role as the online ones.

What led me to post my own material?

It is a means to an end. Had I been a kid in Afghanistan, I would have chosen a different means. This is the theme of "Open Source Jihād." Certain opportunities do not exist in the West, so people in the West have pursued others. These roles have turned out to be more important than the other ones, so you now see Americans, Canadians, and Europeans shaping the nature of the jihād movement. Essentially you have Hollywood meets al-Qāʿidah, and the result is dramatic.

Have I had any insights into the "why" of my story?

Yes, basically I saw a nasty situation in the world and I turned to my religion for a solution. The one I believed to be most accurate was the one I followed.

Describe my interactions with law enforcement?

My first two interviews seemed to be aimed at convincing me to be an informant, as essentially no specifics were gleaned from either interview. I was briefly a neo-Salafi during this time, and one can see that from my postings on Hizb ut-Tahrir on al-'Awlaqi's website and my early activity on my most ~~well known~~ Youtube channel. However, at some point around the time of these interviews law enforcement raided the house where I became Muslim, which angered me tremendously, destroyed my movement away from jihad, and caused me to refuse further contact.

My interview at JFK airport was filled with irony, and it was rather comedic. I did not lie in the interview, but I was selective with the truth. While the secret service agent interviewed me, a video he asked about began playing on CNN showing Mohamed Alessa marching toward the White House. We were both cordial, and we both knew each other's cordiality to be completely false.

The last two interviews before my arrest were extremely confusing. I was very stressed and confused to begin with, and the nature of the interviews added to that. The two agents would ask me different questions at the same time which led them (I am assuming it was an honest mistake) to write down incorrect answers, and to draw wrong conclusions in the 302s.

For example, I never said I was planning to go to Somalia, that I tried, or anything of the sort. The closest thing I said was that ███ al-Shabaab knew who I was, and that they would expect that I travel to join them, eventually. As far as my discovery is concerned, that is the only thing explicitly saying I was going to Somalia. Everything else is some form of conjecture or it is related to a trip I planned on which would not have been considered "Material support" under the law.

There were more mistakes but they were less important. In my case it wound up making little difference, but I saw how easily an innocent person could be convicted.

If the interest of the FBI is justice, then they should have to use video just like cops in one-horse villages in Podunk, West Dakota do. If not, then it is set up just fine for gaining convictions, and it should remain as is.

Based on this, I would revise my advice to anyone (Muslim or non-Muslim) to refuse any interview, to video tape them while they request the interview, and to immediately file with the Freedom of Information Act regarding any investigations. I have seen other things which make me draw this conclusion, but it is illegal to mention them (specifically). However, they include seeing people investigated for unwittingly knowing the wrong people, ~~xxxxx~~ people being charged due to statements made while they were afraid, and myself essentially being accused of lying (an eight year offense) for not remembering certain things.

In the last interview I was arrested, kicked in the ribs, because one agent supposedly had some great desire to do this, and a number of other things occured such as the mocking of my religion and being made fun of for not

being able to make Hajj ~~[redacted]~~.

The last two were much less enjoyable than the others as you might have gathered.

Why al-Shabaab?

I was interested in Somalia prior even to becoming Muslim. They had not carried out any attacks targeting non-combatants (my ticket to Uganda was very inconveniently one day before the World Cup attacks), as Islām defines the term. Also, I was involved with al-Shabaab much more than simply promoting them as a third party.

Why leave the United States?

I did not quite have al-Qāʿidah's ideology, so leaving the United States was necessary in my mind to fulfill my religious obligations. When I was arrested probably only 1% or less of al-Qāʿidah's supporters truly supported them in their usage of the concept I wrote about called "Open Source Jihad." The government misunderstands this matter terribly, so most of its "successes" are either trivial or they are

actually failures.

What should the committee understand?

Islām is not communism. Al-Qāʿidah and their supporters are not Machiavellian. Every subscriber to jihād is not some boogey man threatening national security. Treating things like this will result in failures, senseless deaths, and other chaos.

What is called "Islāmism" is in no way a threat to American sovereignty unless most Americans adopt it and decide to join a Khilāfah. Treating Islāmic groups and al-Qāʿidah in the same way is ridiculous, and it does not accomplish anything. Most Islamic groups are more liberal in matters such as women's rights than Saudi Arabia, (actually, even al-Qāʿidah is).

As far as my own thinking, it is detailed in what proceeds, if Allāh permits.

Motivation:

While there are exceptions to any rule, I was no exception when it came to my motivations. For nearly everyone who chooses this path it is a combination of two things: religion and the state of the world. One either looks at the world and turns to Islam for a solution, or they look at Islam and apply what they can by looking for occurrences which fit the conditions of what they have learned. They go hand in hand, and one would have difficulty distinguishing between each approach even if they were themselves to be from one category or the other, and they were analyzing themselves.

I was from the latter category. ███████████████ ████████████████████████ I refused to vote in November. I saw that jihād was an obligation, so I started looking for places to fight it. I saw that jihād involves the tongue and wealth, so I began posting aggressively on jihād, and encouraging it locally as well as leading a lifestyle as limited in expenditures as one in my position could. Perhaps this is why more of my posts, videos, and other media tied things back to Islam rather than "revolution," "oppression," and "violations of international law."

I think most people are from this category, and this is why grocery stores, shopping malls, and state fairs are not being shot-up on a daily basis despite al-Qāidah encouraging it. This is also why people choose Somalia over Iraq, or Pakistan, I believe.

As for me, I was first engrossed with Chechnya due to the videos of Khattab. As an American, one is trained from birth to view Russia as evil, so when they more-or-less carry out genocide against a people, then it is easy to want the other side to win. Then as a Muslim who sees a war against his people by such a power, it is very easy to want to go defend them. However, eventually I saw that Khattab was long dead, it was no longer a traditional war, and this changed things for me. Furthermore, the Beslan Massacre was not even Islamically acceptable to Shāmil Basayev, so it is hard to imagine anyone else considering it so.

As I was discovering this Somalia popped up on al-'Awlaqi's website, and it had all of the same pros of Chechnya, but none of its cons. Also, I was already interested in Somalia and was planning to make it the focus of my

major in International Relations. It also looked very easy to enter. For whatever reason most people are convinced it is nearly impossible to get somewhere to fight jihad, but this is really not the case. If somebody keeps their mouth shut, buys a gps device for hiking, and then has the patience to spend a few hours to a few days outside, then everywhere from Afghanistan to Chechnya is fairly accessible. The people who realize this are the ones who make it, and the rest stay at home or get arrested.

I rejected essentially all other locations, because they did not have boats or planes going into areas controlled by mujahidin. Al-Shabaab had both. If they did not have them, then perhaps I would have tried somewhere else.

Later I became fairly involved with al-Shabaab, so this really cemented the matter once that happened.

As for deciding to leave the United States, then had I known America loved me so much that it would take legal action to keep me here for the next twenty years, I might have agreed to stay. ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓
so carrying out an operation for "open source

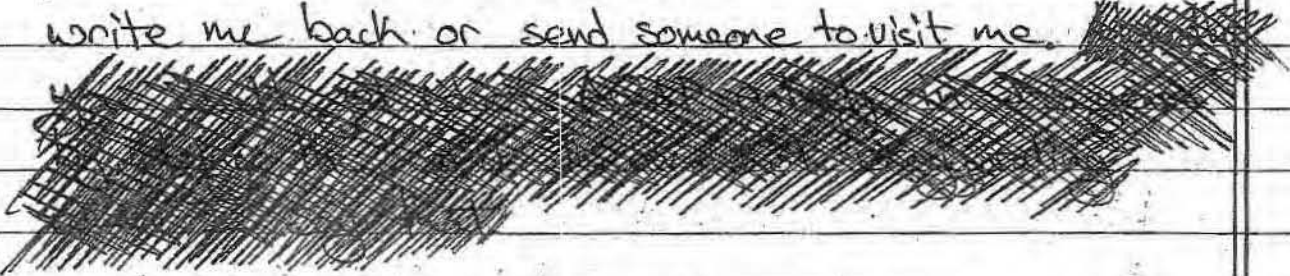jihād" was not really "in my mind. Ironic, huh?

an option

[redacted]

However,

I was spared ~~Inspire~~ except for being related
directly to a number of articles and other things.
I blame this in retrospect on ~~A~~America's CT

partly

strategy. Terrorism, jihād, and the Islamic political
system are ⊗ completely separate issues. However,
America lumps them all together which ⊛ removes
all ⊗ incentive to abandon terrorism except for
~~⊛⊛⊛~~ ethical ones.

Al-Shabāāb has more members and affiliates in
the U.S., Canada, and Europe than Al-Qā'idah has
in any one branch and perhaps period.* If the U.S. keeps
refusing engagement and refusing to provide incentives for not
engaging in terrorism, then what will happen? " Labayka
yā Usāmah " was a proverbial middle finger at
America for not doing this during the days of the
ICU.

America could begin this in Libya, Syria, and
Yemen (distinguishing between jihād and terrorism), and
then perhaps elsewhere in Somalia and Afghanistan
depending on their situations. For example, it is

very dangerous to lump the Tālibān and Al-Qāʿidah together if you lose. Also, you should give al-Shabaab the chance to change. If you would like to know more about what I mean, then write me back or send someone to visit me.

Islām:

Islām has provisions for offensive wars and defensive wars, diplomacy, politics, and government. To fight this is silly, because only clean-shaven imāms in the West will take your side. Just look at how

different the scholars who are supported
by America in the East are from the imams they
support in the West. Al-Madkhalee, al-Hajuri,
and even ~~often~~ occasionally Hamid Karzai (who
screwed that one up?) support the Tālibān in their
own vague ways. Prime Minister Erdogan supports
Hamas.

What the US should focus on is opening
channels which are acceptable to most Muslims who
study their religion. Create avenues for diplomacy.
Make programs for people to help the Tālibān and
America come to an understanding and open it to
jihādīs. Say, "we want to understand you." Why
not create a forum online moderated by the military
or state department where the Tālibān, members
of the Islamic movements in the West, certain soldiers, and
members of the state department can hold discussions?
There is common ground (aslan) between al-Qāʿidah and
Michelle Bachmann on certain issues, so why not
find some of those areas, address them, then see where
things stand. # Go read Leah Feldman(sp?)'s ●
article from about a year ago where a Tālibān
commander is being engaged.

Put people like him and Jarret Brachmann,
Abū Yaḥyā al-Lībī, and John Brennan, Anjem

Chowdhary and Tom Ridge, the spokespeople for the Tālibān and PJ Crowley ~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ and whoever else might be important or insightful together in a forum online and at the very least it would lead to understandings if not, physical results.

Say, "Go fight 'jihād' in Libya, but hand in your passport and give up your citizenship."

Hold town hall meetings with Muslims and make it open to jihādis and other Islāmists.

Remove all of the motivations for terrorism, ~~[illegible]~~ distinguish between jihād and terrorism, + create dialogue.

Right now your average Muslim who is investigating their religion has two choices: do nothing and pray or fight jihād somewhere. Increasingly "somewhere" is here. One does not typically run across the fiqh of diplomacy and negotiations unless to go into great depth. Just look at today's Tālibān ~~[illegible]~~ as compared to yesterday's. The Tālibān today is very modern, sophisticated, and open-minded compared to before. Rather than throwing one's hands up in the air and

saying, "Aaah! They are more open-minded. How can we win now?" The response should be open-minded as well.

Continuing to demand the Taliban allow girls to go to school only pisses Muslims who know what the Taliban have said off. When they say, "We have no problem with it. We were wrong," Muslims hear that, so they lose trust in the US when it fails to respond.

Send these letters in the mail before you decide to arrest somebody. It is not like you told me anything I did not know in early 2010. I used to walk around my apartment addressing jokes to the FBI, which I suppose you might know. I attracted an entire fleet of police, FBI, DHS, and who knows what when my car broke down in Philadelphia. I was doing interviews with CNN and Fox. The FBI interviewed me in 2009. They knew that I knew certain people were working for them. One of the top names in the CT field challenged me to a debate (actually that ties into the forum concept). Why not add a stage in your investigations called "outreach?" Especially with people who are high profile and make no effort to hide their name.

All of these things are clearly acceptable in Islam, but there is no opportunity for them. There is no ~~stage~~ stage ~~ ~~ between someone saying, "I like the Taliban," for the first time and a sting operation. Read Orwell's 1984 and you will see how it feels to be Muslim in America. "Big Brother" even used a sting operation to entrap Winston, the story's protagonist. Do you know what it is like to live thinking every word you say is being listened to? This is how essentially every Muslim with a beard goes about life, not just jihadis.

There is no voice from the government seeking understanding. The last time that happened was immediately after 9-11, but the politics of the moment forced it out of the public discourse. This is no longer an option, because of the growing support for jihadi groups in America. If you read into the history of the "we do not negotiate with terrorists" approach, then you will find it has only the most marginal success rate. If you make this even broader to include their sympathizers, those who disagree with them, but have similar goals, and then to those who are simply unsure of where they stand, then you wipe out your chances of success as well as your credibility.

A Muslim who sincerely investigates their religion will find that it is obligatory to implement Islamic law, that voting is a doubtful matter, that jihad becomes obligatory in the event that non-Muslims invade Muslim lands. This is what I found, and this is what essentially everybody finds. You then have nuances to each of these principles, and this is where you find the differences in each group. Some conclude that working through politics is the best way, but Islamically the way they go about this is very flimsy. Some say that there has to be a Khalifah to fight jihad, but this is a new opinion which stems from misunderstanding certain specifications. If you read the classic books, you will not find it.

The one who sets out to learn inevitably sees jihad as viable and preferable at some point. I ~~met~~ know no one from my generation who did not experience this. It takes additional learning to find other avenues, but most of these are closed because of stubborn politicians and overbearing anti-terror laws. To prove a point, Tom Ridge, Rudolph Giuliani, Frances Townsend, and others just violated 18 USC § 2339A Providing Material Support to a Designated Terrorist Organization by arguing that Mujahidin Khalq should be removed from this list. Theoretically Obama even violated this law if Timothy Geithner did not give him permission to aid rebels in Libya, because any group which uses violence for political reasons and is illegal in the country it is in is also

considered a DTO under the law. Prior to
the rebels being recognized, it was illegal to help
them under US law.

So, as for my motivation, then I simply plugged
the global situation into my religion and I saw no
other path forward. Recent events combined with ~~XXX~~
further reflection and learning has shown me other
ways forward, but the United States's policies do
not make this easy. When you have people like
Peter King making policy, then you lose your
credibility that you are not at war with Islam.
There are groups and individuals in the government
and outside of it who very clearly view it as a war
on Islam, so they undermine the message of those
who ~~do~~ not. That, combined with the Iraq sanctions then
war and the Afghan War were the sources of my
anti-American slant.

Internet:

The internet is simply an extremely dynamic tool
with which to put out a message. Additionally, I have
above average artistic, computer graphics, video editing,
writing, and programming skills. These, combined with
a flair for propaganda, ~~XX~~ motivational work, ~~XXXXX~~
recruiting, networking, and marketing led to my quick
rise on the internet beginning in ~~XX~~ December 2008.
Prior to that, I was not trying to position myself
in any particular way, so I simply remained a

semi-active spectator.

The only areas where I was perhaps the most talented
were in strategic thinking regarding the policies of
certain jihadi groups, getting people to actually do things, marketing,
and persuasion. The other more technical skills were
simply the things which polished my works a bit more
than those of others. This is how I rose to prominence on
the two largest English language jihad forums and the
largest English language jihadi website in a period of
about four months.

I cannot explain exactly what lead people to trust me
so quickly. Al-Shabaab trusted me because of contacts
I had. AQAP used my material before my arrest,
so I suppose something about ~~the~~ the strategic nature
of my writing lead to ~~that~~. Some, maybe most, of
it is an art rather than a science. I was on track
to eventually getting perhaps a million hits per month if I stuck
with BM (between all of my sites).

I also do not know anybody else who attracted as much
interest from the online CT crowd except people who
were actually fighting. All of these things are interrelated
more or less, and they fed each other until I wound up in
a position of enormous influence.

<u>Real-World:</u>

My daily life mirrored my online one, even though

I kept them separate. For every one person active online there might be thirty or forty with the same opinions in the community. ● Personal support was important for me. It might be more important than the online community. However, people speaking against various groups in the community typically affected me and others in the opposite manner of what was intended.

One person briefly pulled me away, but this was supplemented by online material. This was when I kept posting about HT on al-'Awlaqi's website.

First three interactions with law enforcement:

My first interview came in 2009 after I learned the FBI had been bothering members of the Muslim community about me. I did not want them scaring other people over me, so I told one of the people they approached (at the person's school of all places) to tell them to just talk to me face to face. They showed up the next day and took me to a Hardee's for an interview. They asked me a few questions about my views on various situations as well as questions like "Where did I become Muslim?"

████████████████████████ but this one was at the FBI building in Manassas, VA, and this time all of the questions were about people I knew. I did not really know anybody they seemed to care about except for members of some non-violent movements. They even indicated suspicion of Jama'at at-Tabligh which

I found to be very strange. At the end of the interview I agreed to give them my computer if they agreed to leave me alone. However, the raid on my friend's house occured, so I refused to do this or even to answer their calls.

I suppose I had a lot more interactions with law enforcement, but these were ~~scribbled~~ undercover agents. There were two whom I suspected, but preferred to make excuses for who mostly just acted to try to get me out of the house so far as I can tell, as well as to provide me with the apartment for whatever reason the government deemed necessary. There were another two whom I suppose were trying to involve me in a sting operation, but they made tons of blunders, so I did not make the same degree of excuses for them. I do not remember bringing a knife to my meeting with them, but that is what my statement of facts alleges. I also had one of them kicked off of the Ansar forum.

I was also detained in March in Philadelphia. The cop actually said, "We got a call about a Muslim-looking guy standing outside of a car," and used that as justification to detain me. My car broke down outside of the courthouse near an empty spa and a big oak tree (prime targets for the suspected bomb, I must say) while I was on the way to Coleen LaRose's arraignment. I got a cab to take me to a gas station where I bought a gallon of gas, but this did not solve my problem. After a while I got a guy to jump my car, but that was when the cop detained me.

He searched me — illegally — and ran my name in his computer. I came back on the "terror watch-list," and he ran my plates incorrectly so he got some hit on them. A few other cops showed up, he hand-cuffed me and took me to his car. I asked if he was arresting me, He said he was not, so we argued over the legal definition of "arrest" versus "detention" for awhile. He was very rude at first. He also told me I was suspected of having a car bomb.

However, as more and more cops and DHS people showed up they kept looking in the windows, patting the hood, and standing within about ten feet of my "bomb." Also, a big crowd gathered outside of the empty spa. If it actually was a bomb, then the brilliant cops of Philadelphia would have turned a 3-5 casualty attack into a guaranteed 50-100 people dead attack. Knowing that I had no bomb it was really quite comical to see how they handled it. Perhaps Philly needs a drill or two on that situation.

It was all a really big scene, but it ended with the cop apologizing and paying for my car to be towed. I imagine I could make Philadelphia pay for my commissary until my release, but so far I have elected not to do this.

I was detained for about an hour.

I would write a conclusion, but I have been waiting on a response to a previous letter I sent and I do not wish to delay this any longer without knowing your deadline.

If you respond to my questions in the previous letter, then there is a chance I can be far more useful and give you a much better picture than I have in here.

Thank you,

Zakariyya Chesser

I sent you a write-up of what I had to say on the matters you inquired about. However, please understand that my case has certain things which are ongoing and this prevents me from being able to say certain things which might seem important or even beneficial for myself.

[REDACTED] our case manager, refused to give me the extra paper, so I am writing on what we have access to in here.

The name ibnu farxaan alkismaayawi seems to have come about after my arrest. Also, if you are unable to see things from the Ansar forum, then you are missing a huge part of the picture. Furthermore, prior to my arrest I made a website called Insurgent (or Insurgency) Blog at insurgentblog.wordpress.com. I only made two posts, but I received a complement from David Meeth via Twitter (I forget the username), and he is a well known person in that field of research. I also made a website with all of al'Awlagi's material on wordpress.

I am just now seeing the document you sent me for the first time, and I am shocked at the things my lawyers said. They had some theory that they could say I was just some guy with no

influence and no connections trying to just march into Somalia. I told them this would not work, but now I know they did not listen.

At one point in time I was considering walking if I could not find a boat ~~and~~ and if I could not get the World Food Program to allow me on one of their trips, by plane.

I also never tried to force my girlfriend to marry me. I broke up with her because Islam does not allow paramours and we could not get married. I did not demand it. Rather, I think she initially brought it up, maybe even before I became Muslim.

I only ever bought one ticket to Uganda, not two. I bought two for Kenya, and secured a doctor's permission for my wife to fly, but she went into a false kind of labor, so I stayed behind. At that point in time I had no clue you could be arrested for joining al-Shabaab, so I was technically not in violation of the law.

~~Also, the interview~~

As for my statement of facts, there are many errors, some major and some minor. There are also some things which I have no clue regarding their veracity, so I am waiting on my lawyers

to send me my discovery to find out about them. However, some things are classified and I am not allowed to see them to know if they are true or not. Actually, I was originally asked to sign a deal with three classified facts which I could not see.

Certain things I will not correct, because I do not have any interest in angering the prosecution, but maybe law enforcement can correct some of them now. However, I will say that taking my son had nothing to do with cover, and it was entirely to make my wifes life easier. I would never have put him near any danger. The camera which was supposedly to make HD videos for al-Shabaab was about as good as a phone camera, and it was really for making home videos of my son. It even had these videos on it when they arrested me. The prosecutor probably misunderstood one of my interviews with the FBI prior to my arrest.

I did mention my son being good for "cover," but this was to comfort my wife regarding me and her son being in Africa without her.

I do not have a copy of my statement of facts to correct, so that is all I am willing to say off of the top of my head.

I do not recall using "Abu Talha" on Islamic Awakening. "Islamic Emirate" did not have any mention of Afghanistan when I was arrested. "AlShabaabNasheeds" or something like it was mine as well as a bunch which I have forgotten. The rest look like mine.

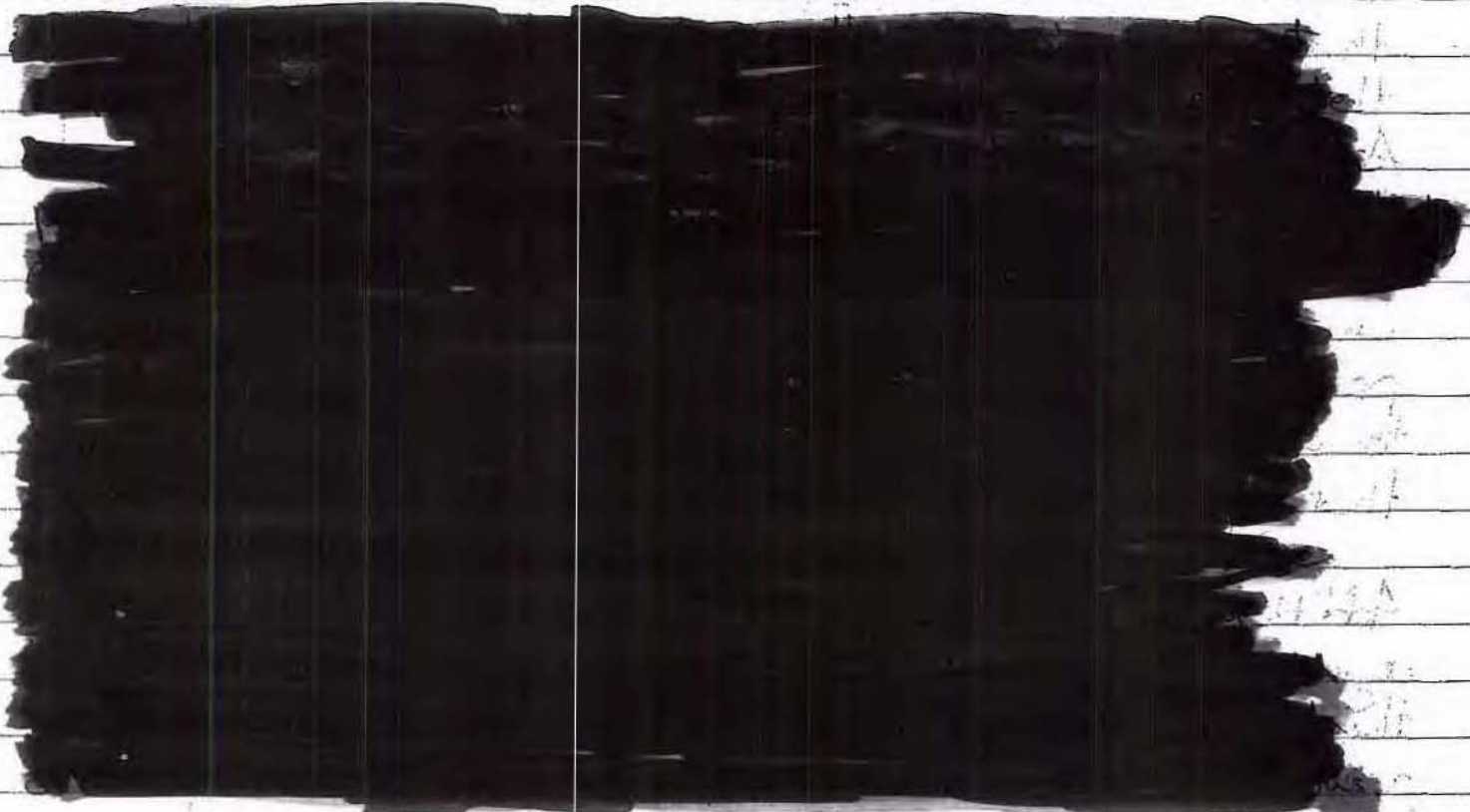If I communicate with you after the report or in relation to things other than it do you have to disclose them?

Thank you,

Zakariyya Chesser

09/13/2011

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Brief non-Jihādi Period:

I was being recruited by the organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, so I began to research them. This led me to a bunch of Neo-Salafi websites, and I became a bit influenced by them. At the same time a friend of mine was showing me the same kinds of things himself. I had also just gotten married and learned the FBI was investigating me.

There were many conversations, so it is hard to pinpoint just one, but basically I concluded that all scholars were against jihād. Also, other things I read here and there seemed to fit this notion.

1

The most effective thing was also the least effective thing, and that was the creation of the notion that there were no scholars who supported jihād anywhere. At first this was convincing, but eventually I learned that almost all scholars supported jihād in most locations including the ones like al-Albānī, Ibn Bāz, and Ibn ul-'Uthaymīn who are often quoted to prove the opposite. The first perception drove me to accept it, but learning it was false was very thorough in cementing my views.

Additionally, the Neo-Salafis have very weak arguments for anyone who wishes to study them in the context of Islāmic jurisprudence. Their opinions are largely taken from specific rulings which they have applied too generally. A lot of my posts pointed this out. Even a lot of Neo-Salafis understand this and distance themselves from it. They are the ones who will say: "There is jihād in such-and-such location, but do not go fight, because it is better to do this or that."

However, these things only served to cement my views. What made me go back was the FBI raiding my friend's house. I ███████ was very upset over that. I decided the FBI was more or less evil, that they had abused what I told them, and I resolved to basically just tick them off as much as I could from that day forward.

2

Religious Approval:

I ~~[scribbled out]~~ actually did ask local leaders, but I disagreed with their responses usually. I did not look to al-Awlaki for approval very much either. He certainly influenced me in other matters but in terms of approval I looked more to bigger scholars like Hamud al-'Uqla, Ibn Jibrin, and others with and separate from the various groups. I found all of this online.

The word "blessed" in this context sounds very strange to a Muslim, because we do not believe that people can bless things unless what you mean is "approve." Similarly it is very strange to us when people portray Bin Ladin like he was waltzing around the globe looking for a "fatwah" to attack America.

I looked at numerous sources to determine how things were to be applied generally and I concluded that al-Shabaab fit the mould. Al-Awlaki simply put al-Shabaab on the radar for me.

Al-Awlaki:

My emails to al-Awlaki included the following subjects:

Are protests allowed in Islam?, Can I put up anti-war graffiti on government property?, Some stories I heard about Afghanistan, and an e-mail in 2009 congratulating him if he was killed and saying we will be happier if he was not.

He only responded to the first one, and his conclusion was that if I thought it was beneficial, I should do it, and if not I should not.

There really is not much more to it than that.

Outreach:

~~████████████████████████~~ A Secret Service agent asked me some benign questions in the airport, but that does not really count.

Any outreach has to provide an avenue for a person to do something they think is beneficial. You are dealing with people who view their lives as trivial. There is a guy here who was pretty sure that he was in the midst of a sting operation, but he decided Allāh would only look at his heart, not whether or not he was successful, so he went through with it. Find something for them to do, and suggest it to them. Even things like charity work in some undeveloped country might work.

A letter is not going to dissuade anyone from being generally supportive of anything, but it is a lot cheaper than a sting operation. Also, it is good for PR and it does not alienate the Muslim community.

To address general support you are going to have to completely reverse your thinking ("you" referring to the United States). I really do not see a single policy

which does not help al-Qāʿidah as an idea. Maybe some of them are effective at stopping explosions in the United States, but even the non-lethal CT strategies tend to seem extremely ineffective to me.

In terms of the idea war America is basically just riding on the coattails of 9/11. Without 9/11 the Taliban would be in power, an Islamic state would exist in Somalia, Chechnya would be a much more conventional conflict, HAMAS would likely control all of Palestine, ~~Ikhwan~~ Ikhwān al-Muslimīn would be running the favored candidate for the Egyptian presidency, and the LIFG would be the public face of the rebels in Libya. Are these all guarantees? No, but they are very easy to picture in a world without a 9/11.

9/11 essentially dealt a knockout push to AQ as an idea, but it has gotten up and continued to grow since it was dealt that big blow. It took AQ a while after 9/11 to hit its bottom, but there is a certain indescribable point after Zarqawi's death after which AQ as a concept has not suffered a single real setback. Despite this, I do not think AQ is damaged by future operational success. Its current image and America's current image prevent this.

To create ideological deterrence the US needs to be much more creative and rethink its entire approach. ~~████████~~ This is a big part of

what I am getting at with my first paragraph.

My wife:

I did meet my wife on al-Awlaki's site. I used to send out e-mails on Islam to all of my contacts, and she had previously e-mailed me about a protest I was working to organize, so she was on my list. Later she asked me to show her best friend's husband around DC, and it turned out that I had already met him by pure chance and we had exchanged numbers. This guy's wife decided to try and set us up, so that eventually lead to us getting married. In Islam (all Islam, not just jihadis) marriage is a much shorter process than in typical American society. It is much more like the system of courting which was predominant until the 1920s when dating came about.

The transition from online to real-world came only a couple of weeks before we were married. This is not uncommon among Muslims. Muslim "dating" sites are actually marriage sites. I even had a friend who ran one.

Forum:

If the forum was not just some CT experiment and it was an honest attempt at dialogue, then it would be almost certain to achieve things. If it is not truly honest, then it would almost certainly fail.

If you look for my posts on Islamic Awakening you will find a thread debating al-'Awlaki. It was done by someone in the CT field and I identified it as such essentially immediately. Maybe you do not have access to ~~the~~ intel on the poster, but I am 100% sure it is some undercover individual. You are dealing with the most paranoid community in the world, so any efforts at deception are very likely to rapidly alienate your audience. The al-Mosul forum was abandoned very quickly over issues of trust. The more hardcore jihadis did not trust BM until I joined it (see my Ansar posts).
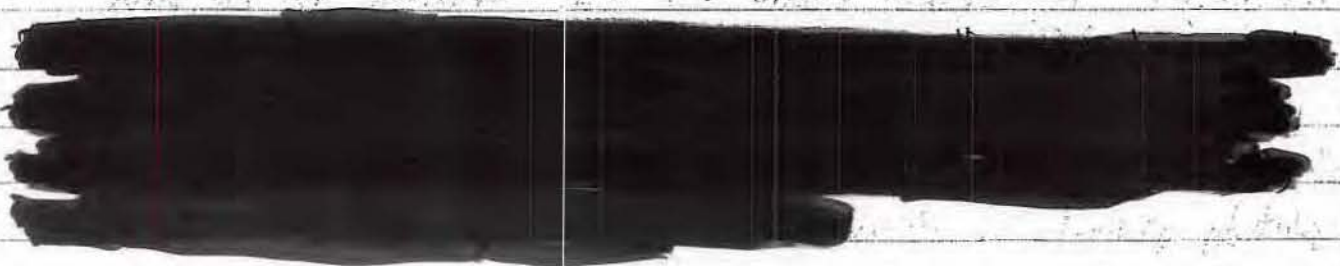
Additionally, it would have to be limited to certain individuals. You would want to limit both sides to people of influence. Such people would carry progress back to those who listen to them. The forum could be completely private if it had to be.

I do not know who would join, but a lot of people would. Members of the Taliban have long expressed interest in dialogue. Members of other groups like LIFG, EIJ, and others would also likely be interested. From the West you would probably only have random success in getting people to join. However there are very few groups in the West which are organized, so random success is not really a problem. Of all the overseas organizations, the various branches of al-Qaidah strike me as the least likely to participate.

You could even try to involve prisoners and detainees in the process. There are only a few people here whom I have doubts as to whether or not they would think of it as a good idea.

Regret:

I regret to say that this is one area which I cannot comment on. Both a concrete "yes" and a concrete "no" stand ▨ to harm me due to my case's current status. That might sound odd, but I cannot elaborate on it.

Sincerely,

Zachary Adam Chesser
10/04/11

P.S. They do not let me use the paper you send for some strange reason.