

Zachary Chesser: an American, Grassroots Jihadist Strategist on Raising the Next Generation of Al-Qaeda Supporters

by Christopher Anzalone

Abstract

Zachary Chesser (alias Abu Talhah al-Amrikee), a prolific 20-year-old online jihadist pundit, was arrested on 21 July 2010 for allegedly attempting to join the Somali jihadist group Al-Shabab. Before his arrest, Chesser produced numerous analytical and strategic writings aimed at ensuring that the transnational jihadist movement represented by Al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership (AQSL) continues to exist beyond the present generation. In his last major essay, Chesser attempted to develop and propose a grassroot-based, inclusive approach toward jihadist recruitment, drawing upon the writings of prominent jihadists such as Yusuf al-Uyairi. It remains unclear as to whether Chesser is representative of a new breed of American jihadist pundit-operatives.

Zachary Chesser, the 20-year-old Virginia man best known for issuing thinly-veiled threats to the creators of the Comedy Central TV show *South Park* earlier this year, was a prolific writer and self-styled grassroots jihadist strategist. He was a regular poster on several major jihadist Internet forums, including *Al-Qimmah al-Islamiyyah* (Islamic Summit), a Somali-English-Arabic forum dedicated to covering the activities of the Somali jihadist group Al-Shabab. It is this group that Chesser was accused by US authorities of attempting to join. He signed his online writings with his *nom de guerre* Abu Talhah al-Amrikee, which combines the name of a prominent historical companion of the Prophet Muhammad with the geographical marker “American.”[1] An advocate of a grassroots approach to recruitment and propaganda, Chesser was remarkably willing to engage with intellectual opponents (such as Al-Qaeda specialist Jarret Brachman) in debates on a variety of issues concerning the present state of the transnational jihadist movement represented by Al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership (AQSL) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its regional affiliates and allies.[2] He was also a voracious reader of counter-terrorism websites and writings by various academic specialists and analysts.

It is clear from Chesser's work that he considers himself a militant intellectual, a grassroots missionary dedicated to propagating the transnational jihadist cause as he interprets it. In his last major strategic essay – a 25-page piece entitled *Raising Al-Qaeda: A Look into the Long Term Obligations of the Global Jihad Movement* – Chesser sought to formulate a long-term plan to ensure that the transnational jihadist ideology he supported survives and is even strengthened in future generations. In the essay, published on jihadist and file-sharing websites during the first week of July this year, Chesser combined past writings by other, more influential jihadist intellectuals with his own original analyses, before making “recommendations” for transnational jihadists to consider.

Given Chesser's prolific writing and widespread militant activism that turned into several – albeit failed – attempts to link up with Al-Shabab, it is well worth considering *Raising Al-Qaeda* in more detail. In addition, his responses in his last (written) interview before his arrest in late July by the FBI and an online conversation with this author shed additional light onto Chesser, one of the most prevalent cyber jihadist writers in English in recent memory.

Legitimacy and Necessity

Chesser begins the essay by writing that the “allure” of jihadist militancy has reached a height greater than any seen before in the “last one hundred years”. This “allure”, he writes, “has become so enamouring that even disbelieving parents of disbelieving children are worried about their offspring going off to die for the sake of God”. Despite this positive development, Chesser argues that a long-term strategy that will ensure the “longevity” of the transnational jihadist movement is still needed. One of the key ways to ensure that AQSL's ideology will last, is to “normalise” in the mind of Muslims the legitimacy and necessity of fighting non-Muslims and their Muslim (apostate) allies. These groups are enemies of Muslims, he says, and are actively engaged in the oppression and the killing of Muslims around the world. Why then, Chesser asks, should Muslims feel hesitant or guilty about fighting them?

Significantly, Chesser does not limit the scope of his argument to the minority of Muslims who support Al-Qaeda senior leadership and like-minded groups. Rather, he seeks to develop an inclusive strategy that will encompass all Muslims, a goal that he develops further in later sections of the essay. Referencing the concept of “true” Muslims as “strangers” (*Al-Ghuraba'*) found in *hadith* literature and classical and medieval Muslim religious writings [3], Chesser writes: “The Prophet (Muhammad) told us that *al-Ghuraba'* are a blessed people, but the implications of this *hadith* was not for us to instil strangeness in the regular acts of worship. Rather, we should seek to create an entire nation of *Ghuraba'*... We must seek to remove the status of the *Ghuraba'* being a group among the Muslims, and shift it to being a group known as the ‘Muslims’ among the entire of humanity.” In short, Chesser seeks to move the vast majority of the world's Muslims from opposition or neutrality toward the transnational jihadist movement to active support.

He argues that a “plurality” of Muslims is “moustache only”. They have “abandoned jihad (struggle) in God's cause” and are Muslim in name only. Chesser is divided over whether or not to target this group of Muslims for recruitment. On the one hand, he writes that “it is not particularly beneficial to target them in trying to recruit mujahideen”. Yet he continues: “However, this group has a plurality among men in this *Ummah* (worldwide Muslim community), so it cannot be outright ignored.” Chesser ultimately hopes to woo this group of Muslims into becoming “mildly supportive” or at least “indifferent” to the transnational jihadist movement. In other words, he seeks to move them away from their current opposition to the

movement, though he is not overly optimistic about the chances of this group becoming energetic supporters.

One of the best ways to win over this group, Chesser suggests, is to convince them of the worldly benefits that they will enjoy from their support of groups such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabab. The reason for this is that “moustache only” Muslims are concerned with this world rather than the afterlife. Thus, they are more likely to be won over by promises of worldly material gain. He identifies Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as a prime example of a transnational jihadist group that has put this strategy into practice, pointing out their relations with Yemen’s discontented tribes. Targeting marginal Muslims is vital in order to smooth the path for the younger generation to actively participate in AQSL’s campaign. This is the case, Chesser argues, because “the most important group to target is the group which is most beneficial to the jihad, and that is young men. However, it is much easier for one to come to terms with leaving for jihad when one’s parents are supportive, or at least not reprehensive regarding the matter”.

Revitalisation

The second section of Chesser’s essay is dedicated to a discussion of how to revitalise jihadist missionary activity, with a particular emphasis on Muslim women. Referring to them as “the forgotten fifty percent”, he writes: “It is very sad to see the lack of material which is directly targeting the sisters of our *Ummah* from the *mujahidin* [sic] and their supporters [because]... the encouraging words of a mother, a sister, or a wife are far more powerful than the encouragement one receives from their brothers.” Citing famous historical supporters of jihad, such as the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period elegiac poetess al-Khansa’, Chesser urges jihadists to “seriously target our sisters in the *da’wa* (missionary work)”.

One of the best ways to increase the number of Muslim women who support the transnational jihadist movement is to ensure that their contributions are recognised publicly. Chesser argues: “A lot of sisters [Muslim women] are very involved in the support of the mujahideen, but their efforts go unmentioned, so other sisters do not have anything to look forward to from what they know.” Chesser’s argument that “pious”, as he defines it, Muslim women are the primary raisers of future jihadists is not particularly revolutionary in the wider field of transnational jihadist literature. In fact, his arguments are largely rehashed from views expressed by exponentially more influential jihadist figures including the late founder of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, Yusuf al-Uyairi. Al-Uyairi, who was killed in 2003 by Saudi security forces, wrote an influential treatise in 2000 on the topic of women in jihad entitled *Women’s Role in Fighting the Enemies*. Similar views about female participation in AQSL’s jihad were also expressed in a December 2009 letter addressed “to the Muslim sisters”, authored by ‘Umaymah al-Zawahiri, the wife of Al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. [4]

Raising Al-Qaeda

The core of Chesser's essay is dedicated to explaining his strategy on how best to "Raise Al-Qaeda"; that is, how to rear future generations of jihadists. At the core of his strategy is instilling a "love" of jihad among Muslim youth and removing their doubts and fears of it. Muslim youth, he argues, must be raised with a clear understanding of the requirement of jihad and should have a sincere and overwhelming desire to participate in it. They must be made to understand that it is through jihad that oppressed Muslims around the world are best defended from "Crusaders, Zionists, and apostate Muslims".

Interestingly, Chesser sees the United States as a model to emulate with regard to how best to run a domestic propaganda campaign. He writes that this is because the US has historically been adept at instilling a sense of blind patriotism in the majority of its citizens, thus ensuring that any form of dissent from the government's line is seen as a kind of "treason". He contradicts himself on this point, however. While he is highly critical of this type of indoctrination, at the same time he argues that it is a practice worthy of emulation by jihadists because it will enable them to train a new generation of Al-Qaeda foot soldiers. He writes: "While we might currently be at war with America, this does not stop us from looking into the success they had in building their ideology and learning from it. America has built a culture which is blindly patriotic and rallies behind empty words and loaded terms with a ferocity that is unrivalled in the modern world." Similarly, jihadists need to work hard to instil a sense of "patriotism" in their children. They can do this by creating an environment that embraces AQSL's definition of jihad, though presumably (and Chesser is not clear on this point) jihadists would not duplicate the "empty" sloganeering that he accuses the US of having used throughout history.

One of the key obstacles to the normalisation of jihad in the minds of future generations of Muslims is its "over-analysis," according to Chesser. What is needed, he argues, is a simplification of the topic so that those Muslims who "hide behind" technicalities and obscure academic debates will no longer be able to "confuse" Muslim youth about the religious obligation to participate in jihad. He writes: "We need to raise our children with the understanding that there is a time for peace and a time for war. We need to raise them knowing that there is a time for mercy and a time to kill. They cannot have hesitation in either matter, and the matters are not complicated. Islam is very clear on the matter, so it should not be hard to make this a foundation of a child's understanding." Chesser's philistine pronouncements are disproven by the sheer volume of Muslim juridical writings on jihad and its many types.

In order to eradicate the problem of "over-analysing" jihad by future generations of Muslims, Chesser argues that Muslim youth need to be taught about the issues related to jihad from an early age, including the differences between defensive and offensive jihad, the appropriate distribution of war spoils, and the jurisprudence of jihad. In order to connect today's youth to their history, they should be educated about the illustrious military career of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, the *Sahaba*, just as many children in the US are taught about

the great military leaders and battles of American own history. Young children should be encouraged to emulate great historical Muslim military leaders and play martial games with toy weapons in order to “normalise” the notion of participating in military activities. Older children and young adults should be trained in the use of real weapons such as hunting rifles and bows. Games such as laser tag and paintball, he writes, will also be useful in beginning to train Muslim youth to be warriors.

Reforming jihadist media

Jihadist media and education, Chesser argues, should not simply be a top-down process. Rather, it should be transformed into a grassroots, bottom-up movement. The fruits of this approach will be an increase in domestic jihadist recruitment in the US, Canada and Europe. He writes: “It is this shift which is occurring in the West and has led to the surge in ‘homegrown’ attacks on American soil.” In order to ensure that this shift continues, it is necessary to target all potential groups of recruits rather than being elitist with regard to media production and targeting. Chesser notes: “One of the things the media outlets of the *mujahidin* [sic] really need to consider is the longevity of their methods... Our media has to demonstrate a platform and the benefits of victory and resistance. Additionally, if we do not begin to target audiences outside of the ones currently targeted, then the current momentum will die with this generation.” Chesser recognises that “preaching to the choir” will not ensure the survival of the transnational jihadist movement beyond the current generation.

Chesser’s plan for reforming and retargeting jihadist media is built upon a broadly inclusive approach toward potential jihadist recruits. He singles out three specific groups of people who are not currently targeted but should be in order to broaden the pool of potential recruits. The first of these groups is the “IQ Sub-100” or those who have “a degree of difficulty in understanding elaborate sentence structures and complicated political concepts”. This group, Chesser argues, often sees overly-complicated arguments as disingenuous trickery so it is best to keep the message of jihadist media targeting them simple and direct. A simplified approach will be more successful in convincing the “IQ Sub-100” group to support and participate in Al-Qaeda-style jihad.

The second group is “sinful Muslims”. Although they may not at first seem to be the ideal pool of recruits, this was the group that, according to Chesser, “virtually every single emigrant [jihadist] from the West was [a member of] at one time”. Because every single Western jihadist was at one time either a “*fasiq* [violator of Islamic law] or a *kafir* [unbeliever],” Chesser writes, adding, “we cannot think highly of ourselves”.

The third group is composed of those Muslims who blindly follow the schools of Muslim jurisprudential thought with regard to the application of Islamic law.

Creating an inclusive movement

The driving goal of Chesser's strategy, as expressed in *Raising Al-Qaeda*, is the construction of as inclusive a jihadist movement as possible. Exactly how inclusive a movement can truly be is open to debate. He points to the Yemen-based AQAP-affiliated preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi as one of the most successful examples of a jihadist scholar who has actively reached out to "sinful" Muslims. By winning over these lapsed Muslims, he argues, "we will be doing a great thing toward the spiritual revitalisation of this *Ummah*." The third group, which he calls "*madhhabist*" Muslims or those who blindly follow a legal school of thought, can, in his view, be won over if jihadists ground their recruitment campaigns in the juridical traditions and schools of thought (*madhhab*) that members of this group adhere to.

In the essay's conclusion, Chesser argues that it is vital for jihadists to be specific in their discussions about what the creation of an Al-Qaeda-style Islamic state will mean for the world's Muslims. He writes: "The credibility of the mujahideen currently rests on their *jihad* and on their uncompromising nature when it comes to the truth... However, it is necessary to expand the areas in which the mujahideen have credibility with their audiences.... There is no harm in letting the movement develop unofficial policies on economics, education, leadership, power structure, transportation, science, technology, taxes, health, and other key areas that the Islamic state will have to address. Such works will encourage the movers and shakers of society to re-evaluate the jihad and the mujahideen. Additionally, it will provide the intellectual resources required for combating systems of unbelief and oppression." Chesser seeks to avoid the pitfalls and mistakes committed by "some" jihadist groups that he references but not by name. These groups are likely to include the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), of which Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is the largest member group, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whose violent insurgent campaigns have backfired on their efforts to win mass support.[5]

An uncertain vision?

When questioned about his vision of an Islamic state in his last interview before his arrest by the FBI in late July, Chesser was non-specific as to the precise characteristics of such a state. He stated: "I hope to take part in the creation of an Islamic state where the *Sharia* [Islamic law] is applied with no exceptions of general matters of which there is a consensus... That is a bare minimum. After that I would hope that it [the Islamic state] is a just society where the law is applied and where the people are treated fairly. The leader [of the state] should not place himself above his subjects, and he should not abuse their property." [6] The steps to achieving such a state and ensuring that it is "just" are not discussed by Chesser.

Chesser was also less than forthcoming about a claim he made in his online conversation with this author when he was questioned about the lack of a large number of actual religious jurists and scholars among transnational jihadists. Chesser claimed that jihadist intellectuals such as

Anwar al-Awlaqi often have certificates of their juridical education (*ijaza*) from “lesser known” religious scholars. Asked to name who these scholars were by this author, he dodged the question and simply responded with a general definition of an *ijaza*. [7]

When asked by this author what he hoped to achieve through his frequent online writings, Chesser responded: “I hope to help the Muslims in one way or another... Sometimes my target audience is the Muslims, sometimes it is the non-Muslims, and sometimes it is both. My objective depends on the audience. Sometimes I might try to dispel some misconception about Islam. I might try to provide a better picture of the situation on the ground in a particular region. Occasionally I write something completely with the I was somewhat successful in building audiences and influencing them for a while, so I mostly share my experience and my thoughts regarding that.” He continues that his efforts had shown some positive results: “I might be mistaken, but my impression is that I was at one point operating the #1 jihadist YouTube [sic] channel in terms of daily views, as well as RM [Revolution Muslim website] and my blog, which were both fairly successful.”[8]

When asked in the interview why, if he viewed Al-Qaeda’s military jihad as an individual religious requirement (*fard‘ayn*), he had not taken up arms himself, Chesser was defensive: “Simply leaving this country has been difficult enough for me so far.”[9] This claim was born out after his arrest when it was reported that he had tried and failed to travel to Somalia twice. [10] Earlier, in his online conversation with this author, Chesser wrote: “I have not decided not to make *hijrah* [to emigrate]. When I am able to make it, then I will, but until then I am stuck here [in the US].” Perhaps referencing the restrictions he faced as a result of inclusion on the US no-fly list, Chesser noted: “I have had quite a bit of difficulty with various legal documents needed for travel.” However, he affirmed his dedication to ultimately leaving the US to take up arms: “The obligation of [emigration for jihad] was about 99 percent of my decision to drop out of GMU [George Mason University].”[11]

Although this author noted and asked Chesser about his use of Somali transliterations of Arabic words and names, the significance of this did not become fully clear until his July arrest. News of his arrest also put into perspective his praise and unabashed admiration for US national Omar Hammami (alias Abu Mansur Al-Amrikee) who has been portrayed by Al-Shabab as a field militia commander and military instructor in numerous Al-Shabab propaganda videos.[12] In his online conversation with this author, Chesser wrote: “If you want to see an American *mujahid* [warrior of faith] who is actually on track to becoming a *sheikh* [religious scholar], then keep your eyes on Abu Mansur... He memorised the Quran in just 8 months. Also, he REALLY [Emphasis in the original] memorised it. In Somalia, a *hafiz* of Quran [one who has memorised it] is someone who knows it without any mistakes.”

Conclusion

On 19 October 2010 in the federal court of the Eastern District of Virginia Chesser pleaded guilty to charges of threatening writers of the television show *South Park*, soliciting violence, and attempting to provide material support to Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen in Somalia. He faces a maximum prison sentence of 30 years and is scheduled to be sentenced on February 25, 2011.[13]

While difficult to accurately gauge, the influence of Chesser's strategic and analytical writings should not be inflated, but they should also not be ignored. His numerous writings are a window, and often a detailed one at that, into the radicalisation process. Chesser's trajectory from his days as an online jihadist pundit to his attempt to join Al-Shabab is a telling instance of how such a process can move remarkably quickly from online activism to operational mobilisation. From his conversion to Islam in 2008, Chesser moved rapidly into the realm of cyber jihadist activism. As Jarret Brachman has noted, it remains an important open question as to whether Chesser will prove to be representative of a new generation of American jihadist pundit-operatives.[14]

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Notes

[1] Talhah ibn 'Ubayd Allah (d. 656 C.E.) was one of the most prominent of the Prophet Muhammad's companions; he fought alongside him in a number of battles. He was killed in a failed revolt against the fourth successor (caliph) to Muhammad, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. In a written interview in which this author participated, Chesser discussed the reasons he chose to use the name of this companion: "[Talhah] was the fifth person in a narration [by Muhammad] when the Prophet listed the best of the companions. He was right after 'Ali ibn Abi Talib on this list. Very few people know his name, so I figured it would be good to remind them of this great companion." Chesser goes on to discuss Talhah's history as a warrior wounded fighting alongside the Prophet. Author Interview with Abu Talhah al-Amriki (13 July 2010). Accessed at: <http://jihadology.net/2010/07/13/exclusive-interview-with-abu-tal%E1%B8%A5ah-al-amriki-of-revolution-muslim/>

[2] Jarret Brachman, "My Pen Pal, the Jihadist", *Foreign Policy*, 29 July 2010. Accessed at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/29/my_pen_pal_the_jihadist?page=0.0

[3] Islaam.com, "Strangeness and the Strangers." Accessed at: <http://www.islaam.com/article.aspx?id=218>

[4] Umaymah Al-Zawahiri. "*Risala ila al-Akhawat al-Muslimat* (Letter to the Muslim Sisters)", As-Sahab Media Foundation, 16 December 2009. See also: Nelly Lahoud. "Umayma al-Zawahiri on Women's Role in Jihad", *Jihadica*, 26 February 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.jihadica.com/umayma-al-zawahiri-on-women%E2%80%99s-role-in-jihad/>

[5] Brian Fishman. "Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qaeda in Iraq", *Combating Terrorism Center*, West Point, 16 March 2009. Accessed at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/DD_FINAL_FINAL.pdf

[6] Author's interview with Abu Talhah al-Amriki (13 July 2010).

[7] Comments section of *Al-Maktabah* blog. Accessed at: <http://jihadology.net/2010/06/22/an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-mujahidin-english-forum-an-essay-by-dr-akram-%E1%B8%A5ijazi-ibn-taymiyyah-reviews/#comments>

[8] Author's interview with Abu Talhah al-Amriki (13 July 2010).

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Spencer S. Hsu and Michael Alison Chandler, "Graduate of VA's Oakton High Charged with Trying to Join Terrorist Group," *The Washington Post*, 22 July 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/21/AR2010072104577.html>

[11] Comments section of *Al-Maktabah* blog; comment made on 22 June 2010.

[12] For detailed profiles of Hammami, see Andrea Elliott. "The Jihadist Next Door," *The New York Times*, 27 January 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Jihadist-t.html>. See also Christof Putzel's documentary for Current TV's *Vanguard* series, "American Jihadist," first aired 24 June 2010.

[13] U.S. Department of Justice. "Virginia Man Pleads Guilty to Providing Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization and Encouraging Violent Jihadists to Kill U.S. Citizens"; Press release, 19 October 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.justice.gov/usao/vae/Pressreleases/10-OctoberPDFArchive/10/20101020chessernr.html>

[14] J. Brachman, *op. cit.*