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Virginia Man Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison for Providing Material Support and Encouraging Violent Jihadists to Kill U.s. Citizens

<http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/February/11-nsd-238.html>

WASHINGTON – Zachary Adam Chesser, 21, of Fairfax County, Va., was sentenced today to 25 years in prison, followed by three years of supervised release, for communicating threats against the writers of the South Park television show, soliciting violent jihadists to desensitize law enforcement, and attempting to provide material support to Al-Shabaab, a designated foreign terrorist organization.

The sentencing was announced by David Kris, Assistant Attorney General for the National Security Division; Neil H. MacBride, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; and James W. McJunkin, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI Washington Field Office.

“Zachary Chesser attempted to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization and used the Internet to incite violence,” said Assistant Attorney General Kris. “Today he is being held accountable for his actions. I applaud the many agents, prosecutors and analysts who worked tirelessly to bring this man to justice.”

“Zachary Chesser will spend 25 years in prison for advocating the murder of U.S. citizens for engaging in free speech about his religion,” said U.S. Attorney MacBride. “His actions caused people throughout the country to fear speaking out – even in jest – to avoid being labeled as enemies who deserved to be killed. The fact that a young man from Northern Virginia could support such violence and terror is a sobering reminder of the serious threat that homegrown jihadists pose to this country.”

“Zachary Chesser encouraged violent jihad,” said James W. McJunkin, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI’s Washington Field Office. “The FBI is concerned about U.S. citizens traveling overseas to join Al-Shabaab, and we are vigilant in working to disrupt potential plots where U.S. citizens become further indoctrinated and return with actual terrorism experience and training.”

According to court documents filed with his plea agreement on Oct. 20, 2010, Chesser maintained several online profiles dedicated to extremist jihad propaganda. Chesser admitted to

taking repeated steps in April 2010 to encourage violent jihadists to attack the writers of South Park for an episode that included Muhammad in a bear suit, including highlighting their residence and urging online readers to “pay them a visit.” Among the steps he took was posting on multiple occasions speeches by Anwar Al-Awlaki, which explained the Islamic justification for killing those who insult or defame Muhammad. Al-Awlaki was designated by the United States as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” on July 12, 2010.

Chesser also admitted that in May 2010, he posted to a jihadist website the personal contact information of individuals who had joined the “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” group on Facebook, with the prompting that this is, “Just a place to start.”

Chesser also pleaded guilty to soliciting others to desensitize law enforcement by placing suspicious-looking but innocent packages in public places. Chesser explained through a posting online that once law enforcement was desensitized, a real explosive could be used. Chesser ended the posting with the words, “Boom! No more kuffar.” According to court documents, “kuffar” means unbeliever, or disbeliever.

According to court records, Chesser also admitted that from at least January 2010 through July 2010, he posted numerous messages online that included calls from Al-Awlaki to join violent jihadists and step-by-step actions individuals needed to take to leave for jihad. Among those postings included a video Chesser made that featured images of mujahedeen in Somalia and a song, sung by Chesser, with the translated title, “America We Are Coming.”

Chesser admitted that he promoted online what he called “Open Source Jihad,” where he would direct jihadists through his online forums to information on the Internet that they could use to elude capture and death while maintaining relevance and striking capability. This included linking to the entire security screening manual used by the Transportation Security Administration and hundreds of books that contained information on the construction of anti-aircraft missiles, and tactics, techniques and weapons for targeting aircraft such as jet airplanes and helicopters.

In addition, Chesser pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support to Al-Shabaab. On Feb. 29, 2008, the U.S. Department of State designated Al-Shabaab as a foreign terrorist organization, describing it as a violent and brutal extremist group based in Somalia with a number of individuals affiliated with Al-Qaeda. This designation prohibits providing material support or resources to Al-Shabaab.

According to court records, Chesser admitted that he twice attempted to leave the United States and travel to Somalia for the purpose of joining Al-Shabaab and engage in violent jihad as a foreign fighter. The first attempt was in November 2009, which was postponed because his wife was unable to obtain her passport. The second attempt was on July 10, 2010, when he sought to board a flight from New York to Uganda with his infant son. He was prevented from boarding the plane, and Chesser admitted that he brought his son with him as part of his “cover” to avoid detection of his intention to join Al-Shabaab in Somalia. He also attempted to board the plane with a video camera, which he admitted in court that he intended to use to make production quality videos for al-Shabaab’s propaganda campaign.

Chesser also admitted in court that he posted several online messages in support of Al-Shabaab, including videos of attacks by Al-Shabaab on a government building in Mogadishu, a video claiming that African Union troops are responsible for killing civilians in Somalia, a video supporting the merger of Al-Shabaab with another organization, and links to what Chesser described as the “Al Qaeda Manual” that included instructions in support of violent jihad.

This case is being investigated by the FBI Washington Field Office. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Gordon Kromberg and Thomas H. McQuillan of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Virginia and Trial Attorney John T. Gibbs of the Counterterrorism Section in the National Security Division are prosecuting the case.

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National Security Division