

**Case 72: Chattanooga**

John Mueller

November 2, 2016

The killing of five Marines at a Reserve Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 2015 seems to be a case in which the perpetrator came to embrace terrorism as an act of redemption.

He was a devout Muslim and a well-liked and well-educated young man with no connections to terrorism and with an apparent antipathy to terrorist groups. However, his life was on a downward spiral. Diagnosed to be bipolar, he failed to take his medication and had turned instead to alcohol, drugs, and excessive spending—all severely prohibited by the word of Allah. With his life spinning out of control, notes Nikolaus Pittore, he looked for ways to absolve himself of the sins he had committed and came across terrorist propaganda suggesting martyrdom as the solution. A year earlier, he had expressed discontent with American military action in the Middle East, and shortly before the shootings he blogged “Whosoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, then I have declared war against him” and “Don’t be fooled by your desires, this life is short and bitter and the opportunity to submit to allah may pass you by.” He also described the world as a prison.<sup>1</sup>

He was killed in a shootout with police, and there seems to be little or no information about how he picked his targets or about how or when he planned his attack.

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<sup>1</sup> Manny Fernandez, Alan Blinder, Eric Schmitt, and Richard Pérez-Peña, “In Chattanooga, a Young Man on a Downward Spiral,” *nytimes.com*, July 20, 2015.

## 72: Chattanooga

Nikolaus Pittore

November 1, 2016

### 1. Overview

On July 16, 2015, a twenty-four-year-old, Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez, opened fire on two military installations in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He first pulled up to the armed forces recruiting center on Lee Highway just before 11am in a rented silver Mustang convertible, and opened fire. The shots smashed through windows and sent members of the military running for cover. After pounding the building with rounds, he sped on to Highway 153 and made for the U.S. Naval and Marine Reserve Center, about seven miles away on Amnicola Highway. Police officers followed him on this high speed chase. Abdulazeez crashed his Mustang through a gate and jumped out in front of the U.S. Reserve Center's main building. After killing five Marines, Abdulazeez tried to run back into the building and was stopped by Chattanooga police officers. Abdulazeez was killed.<sup>1</sup>

The Special Agent in charge of the investigation, Ed Reinhold, said Abdulazeez had purchased firearms in the months leading up to the shooting and had also visited gun ranges. This is a very important detail to note although no evidence was given to complement that to give more credibility to the theory that Abdulazeez had planned the shootings that far in advance. Reinhold insisted this was methodically planned, but declined to say when he began to make the initial plans of the shooting. He specifically said:

“I know he wanted to commit jihad and commit jihad here in the United States, but I don't think the specific target was necessarily picked out too far in advance,” he said. “There was some planning involved, but not years-worth.”<sup>2</sup>

The obscurity with regard to his goals makes it very difficult to pin down exactly what he wanted to accomplish. He was definitely influenced by terrorist propaganda, specifically teachings he owned by Anwar al-Awlaki, and was also committed to Islamic militant guidance. However, he only specifically mentioned that he wanted to use militant tactics to absolve himself of the sins he had committed in his life which including abusing alcohol, drugs, being arrested, and being thousands of dollars in debt.

This case could be diagnosed as one in which a disturbed young man had essentially hit rock bottom in his life and as a Muslim in that he had gotten attracted to a life of drinking, drugs, and excessive spending—actions severely prohibited by the word of Allah. With his life spinning out of control, he looked for ways to absolve himself of the sins he had committed and came across terrorist propaganda, became radicalized, and it turned into a storm which ended in the horrific Chattanooga shooting.

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<sup>1</sup>Shelly Bradbury, “Minute by Minute: A Timeline of the Chattanooga Attack Revealed,” timesfreepress.com, July 23, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Shelly Bradbury, “FBI: Abdulazeez was radicalized online more than a year before Chattanooga attack,” timesfreepress.com, July 1, 2016

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Researching Abdulazeez's background gives no indication of future terrorist or terrorist-inspired actions. Federal law enforcement officials say he was born in Kuwait of Jordanian origin. His father is from Nablus in the West Bank and his mother is from Kuwait.<sup>3</sup> He emigrated with his family to the United States from Kuwait in 1996.<sup>4</sup> He became a naturalized U.S. citizen.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the shootings, he lived in Hixson, Tennessee, a small community in the Chattanooga area, where the rampage took place.<sup>6</sup> His family was very devout to the Muslim faith and in the middle class socio-economic status.<sup>7</sup> He had recently graduated from college and was actually trained as a Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter. In 2012, he graduated from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga according to his mother's Facebook page as well as to his resume posted on the job searching site, "indeed.com."<sup>8</sup> He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from UTC and had multiple positions within his field. He worked for a year, from April 2009 to April 2010 with the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federally owned corporation which works to provide power and electricity to over nine million Americans in the southeastern quadrant of the United States.<sup>9</sup> He also had internship at Mohawk Industries and Global Trade Express.<sup>10</sup>

A couple days after the rampage, the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* reported that his father was employed by the city of Chattanooga in the public works department as a soil engineering specialist. A co-worker who asked to remain anonymous said he was a nice man, hardworking, never caused anyone any trouble. Interestingly enough, Abdulazeez's father was on an FBI terror watch list in 2002.<sup>11</sup> He was one of many people investigated for their funding of overseas charities, especially after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Like most of the people who were investigated for their overseas connections, his father was not charged with a crime.<sup>12</sup> According to one official, the FBI opened and rather quickly closed an inquiry into the father who allegedly sent money overseas in the 1990s. He became the subject of a full FBI investigation in 2002, when he told authorities the money was meant for charities, not to support a terrorist organization, a source said. That investigation was then closed.<sup>13</sup>

The people around Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez him had nothing but generous things to say about him. High school classmate Ryan Smith, told the

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<sup>3</sup> Jeff Pegues, "What we know about the gunman in Chattanooga attack," cbsnews.com, July 16, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know," heavy.com, July 17, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Pegues, "What we know about the gunman in Chattanooga attack."

<sup>6</sup> Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know."

<sup>7</sup> Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know."

<sup>8</sup> Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know."

<sup>9</sup> Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know."

<sup>10</sup> Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know."

<sup>11</sup> CNN Wire, "Chattanooga shooting: Gunman's father cleared in terror funding investigation," wtkr.com, July 17, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> CNN Wire, "Chattanooga shooting."

<sup>13</sup> Cleary, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know."

*Times Free Press* that Abdulazeez “was an unbelievable nice person. He was honestly one of the funniest guys I’ve ever met.”<sup>14</sup> Another one of his high school classmates, Kagan Wagner, said: “I never thought in a million years that it would be this guy. He was friendly, funny, kind.”<sup>15</sup> “They’re nice people, you know?” said Elijah Wilkerson, a neighbor whose wife went on walks with Abdulazeez. “He must have just snapped.”<sup>16</sup> When a big snowstorm hit Chattanooga in January 2014, Wilkerson couldn’t get home in his car, so he parked at a gas station on Hixson Pike and started to walk back to the Colonial Shores neighborhood where he and Abdulazeez lived. As he was walking, Abdulazeez pulled up in a pickup truck and gave him a ride home. When he heard about the shooting, he couldn’t stop thinking about that night. “I just keep seeing his face,” he said.<sup>17</sup> Smith had also said Abdulazeez was very religious. In fact, he made two blog posts about Islam just days before the attack.<sup>18</sup> The first was called “A Prison called Dunya.” This post essentially claimed life was just a test of faith and patience.

Brothers and sisters don’t be fooled by your desires, this life is short and bitter and the opportunity to submit to allah may pass you by. Take his word as your light and code and do not let other prisoners, whether they are so called “Scholars” or even your family members, divert you from the truth. If you make the intention to follow allahs way 100 % and put your desires to the side, allah will guide you to what is right.

His second post was called “Understanding Islam: The Story of the Three Blind Men.” He wrote about the Prophet’s Sahaba, or companions:

We often talk about the Sahaba (RA) and their Ibada. We talk about their worshiping at night, making thikr, reading quran, fasting, sala. But did you ever notice that in one certain period towards the end of the lives of the Sahaba (RA), almost every one of the Sahaba (RA) was a political leader or an army general? Every one of them fought Jihad for the sake of Allah. We ask Allah to make us follow their path. To give us a complete understanding of the message of Islam, and the strength the live by this knowledge, and to know what role we need to play to establish Islam in the world.<sup>19</sup>

Abdulazeez had only one criminal instance on his record.<sup>20</sup> He was arrested by Chattanooga police on April 20, 2015, for driving under the influence after he was seen swerving while driving on M.L. King Boulevard around 2am. The arresting officer noted the smell of alcohol and marijuana and said Abdulazeez had a white powdery substance around his nose, according to the arrest report. Abdulazeez told police he had been around friends that night who’d

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<sup>14</sup> Clearly, “Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know.”

<sup>15</sup> Shelly Bradbury, “Who was Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez?” *timesfreepress.com*, July 17, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Bradbury, “Who was Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez?”

<sup>17</sup> Bradbury, “Who was Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez?”

<sup>18</sup> Clearly, “Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know.”

<sup>19</sup> Clearly, “Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know.”

<sup>20</sup> Clearly, “Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know.”

been drinking and smoking. But he failed a sobriety test, was arrested and released on a \$2,000 bond.

He was not on any U.S. terror list and the FBI was not aware that he had any terrorist leanings.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Motivation

Abdulazeez's motivation was very hard to pin down. On the one hand, he had very serious mental illness problems. On the other, radicalization had taken place prior to the shooting.

Starting with the mental health, Abdulazeez had drug and alcohol problems, and his family tried to place him in a rehabilitation program. Unfortunately, there were severe limits on his family's health insurance coverage, and this severely impacted their ability to put him into a quality rehabilitation facility. He was clinically diagnosed with depression and bipolar disorder by a psychiatrist and prescribed medicine, which he often did not take. The investigation after the shooting revealed that Abdulazeez "had serious psychological problems."<sup>22</sup>

Instead of taking his prescribed medication to deal with his depression and bipolar disorder, Abdulazeez was abusing sleeping pills, opioids, painkillers, and marijuana along with alcohol, according to a family representative.<sup>23</sup> He was also thousands of dollars in debt and was planning to file for bankruptcy, and he had an appearance looming in criminal court for his arrest. The more conservative schools of Islamic thought have severe restrictions on alcohol, drugs, and gambling, and quote Allah's prohibition:

You who believe, intoxicants and gambling, idolatrous practices, and [divining with] arrows are repugnant acts—Satan's doing: shun them so that you may prosper. With intoxicants and gambling, Satan seeks only to incite enmity and hatred among you, and to stop you remembering God and prayer. Will you not give them up?<sup>24</sup>

With this knowledge, it was not exactly surprising when investigations revealed he had done online research in which he attempted to discover "Islamic militant guidance" which he felt would help him absolve himself of the sins he had committed in his current life, including drinking, drugs, debt, and arrest.<sup>25</sup> This was all discovered through a thorough search of his laptop discovered at his house.

Moving from his mental health issues to the issue of potential radicalization, an old friend of his, James Petty, told an ABC news reporter in an interview that Abdulazeez actually despised the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for its severe and inhumane brutality. In addition, he believed ISIS was not a group worth going toward and Petty claimed Abdulazeez said ISIS had no

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<sup>21</sup> Pegues, "What we know about the gunman in Chattanooga attack."

<sup>22</sup> Brian Ross, Doug Lantz, and James Gordon Meek, "Chattanooga Shooter Researched Religious Justification for Violence," abcnews.go.com, July 20, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Ross et al., "Chattanooga Shooter Researched Religious Justification."

<sup>24</sup> James M. Arlandson, "Muhammad, the Quran, and Prohibition: Islam's punishments for drinking and gambling," answering-islam.org.

<sup>25</sup> Ross et al., "Chattanooga Shooter Researched Religious Justification."

resemblance of anything close to being Islamic. His family had also told the FBI that Abdulazeez showed no outward signs of being radicalized but susceptible to outside influence. They specifically recounted him being severely adversely affected when he would watch TV and see innocent children being killed in Syria due to the intense civil war taking place there.<sup>26</sup> If one looks outside the box, the news sources explaining about innocent children dying in Syria, which would affect most people, could be seen as accidental propaganda for radicalization for a man like Abdulazeez.<sup>27</sup>

According to FBI director James Comey there was no doubt Abdulazeez was inspired by “foreign terrorist propaganda,” but it was not clear which terrorist groups specifically had inspired him.<sup>28</sup> President Obama himself weighed in a couple months later:

As we’ve become better at preventing complex, multifaceted attacks like 9/11, terrorists turned to less-complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society. It is this type of attack that we saw at Fort Hood in 2009, in Chattanooga earlier this year and now in San Bernardino.<sup>29</sup>

The Reuters news agency later released a report saying some officials said Abdulazeez had been inspired by “general propaganda” by jihadists and not specifically by ISIS, al Qaeda, or other militant groups. Authorities searching his computer found that he owned CDs and had downloaded videos by al-Qaeda recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-Yemeni cleric who was a recruiter for al Qaeda and immensely popular among Islamic militants.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Goals

As noted earlier, the obscurity with regard to his goals makes it very difficult to pin down exactly what he wanted to accomplish. On the one hand, he was definitely influenced by terrorist propaganda, specifically teachings he owned by Anwar al-Awlaki. On the other hand, he was also committed to Islamic militant guidance, but he only specifically mentioned that he wanted to use militant tactics to absolve himself of the sins he had committed in his current life. No mention was ever made about a terror-related goal. His diary entries only mentioned submission to Allah for the purpose of absolving sin. It appears the militant Islamic tactic he was “inspired” by was essentially an end to the means of absolving himself of sins. With the interview from his old friend, James Petty, it is clear he despised Islamic terror groups, specifically ISIS. Although the message of ISIS did not register with him, he did respond to the notion that suicide in the name of Allah and submission to Allah as a martyr could absolve him of his sins in the afterlife.

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<sup>26</sup> Ross et al., “Chattanooga Shooter Researched Religious Justification.”

<sup>27</sup> United States Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, International Religious Freedom Report 2006, [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

<sup>28</sup> Kristina Sgueglia, “Chattanooga shootings ‘inspired’ by terrorists,” [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), December 15, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Kristina Sgueglia, “Chattanooga shootings ‘inspired’ by terrorists,”

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Dienst and Miguel Almaguer, “Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez Downloaded Recordings from Radical Cleric, Officials Say,” [nbcnews.com](http://nbcnews.com), July 21, 2015.

## 5. Plans for violence

One of the most interesting parts of this story is the fact there was no warning sign or tip-off Abdulazeez would commit this atrocity. The diary entries and the Islamic militant material found on his laptop at his house reveal a troubling combination: terrorist propaganda on top of severe mental issues accelerated by his dependency on illegal drugs, painkillers, and alcohol, as well as his future plans to file for bankruptcy and his looming appearance in court for his earlier arrest. It seems that Abdulazeez wanted to commit an act of Islamic martyrdom to absolve himself of his sins.

But aside from those generalist ideas, nothing specific was found concerning why he had picked his targets or why he performed the shooting in the order he did. In addition, it is extremely unclear as to whether this was a spur of the moment event or one meticulously and methodically planned out over an extended amount of time. The only evidence given about whether this was improvised violence or methodically planned was that Abdulazeez had purchased firearms and went to a shooting range months before the attack. While this is a sign of possible planning for an attack, other evidence to complement this was never given.<sup>31</sup> Special Agent Reinhold insisted this was methodically planned but declined to say when the plans of the shooting were made.<sup>32</sup> He specifically said:

I know he wanted to commit jihad and commit jihad here in the United States, but I don't think the specific target was necessarily picked out too far in advance. There was some planning involved, but not years-worth.<sup>33</sup>

But what is clear is on that day, he first pulled up to the armed forces recruiting center on Lee Highway just before 11am in a rented silver Mustang convertible and opened fire. He then backed up the Mustang, realigned, and fired again. After pounding the building with rounds, he sped on to Highway 153 and made for the U.S. Naval and Marine Reserve Center, about seven miles away on Amnicola Highway. Police officers followed him for a high speed chase.

Abdulazeez crashed his Mustang through a gate and jumped out in front of the U.S. Reserve Center's main building. He was armed with an assault rifle and a handgun, and he had numerous rounds of ammunition, wearing a load-bearing vest so he could carry more. As he approached the building, a service member inside spotted him and fired several rounds at him, Reinhold said. It's unclear whether Abdulazeez was hit. He fired back into the building, stormed the door, and made it inside, then shot and mortally wounded U.S. Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Randall Smith, 26. Marines inside the building ran from door-to-door and rushed people out as Abdulazeez approached. US Marine Corps Major General Paul Brier said the Marines made it to safety, then some "willingly ran back to the fight." Meanwhile, Abdulazeez kept on through the building, firing at anyone he encountered, Reinhold said. He exited out the back of the building into a gated motorpool, where he killed two Marines. Abdulazeez then shot and killed two more Marines who were trying to "provide cover" and help others escape the

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<sup>31</sup> Bradbury, "FBI: Abdulazeez was radicalized online."

<sup>32</sup> Bradbury, "FBI: Abdulazeez was radicalized online."

<sup>33</sup> Bradbury, "FBI: Abdulazeez was radicalized online."

attack over a fence on the edge of the property. After gunning down the final two Marines, Abdulazeez tried to run back into the building and was stopped by Chattanooga police officers. Chattanooga police officer Dennis Pedigo was wounded in the subsequent firefight, and Abdulazeez was killed.<sup>34</sup>

Curiously, The FBI declined to release transcripts or audio from the 911 calls made on July 16, and also refused to release dashcam video from the first police cars to respond. Shortly after the attack, the *Times Free Press* filed an open records request for those and other documents. This was denied. According to Reinhold:

The year-long investigation is still active and ongoing and such information could still be evidentiary if investigators are able to tie other people to the attack. We have to be much more cautious with the information we release, in the event that we're able to show others were involved, we don't want that information released because it could create problems when it comes to potential prosecutions. I'm not saying we're looking at any prosecutions, I'm just saying we have to be careful with any evidence we collect in the event that it does lead to somebody or something else.

Reinhold also said "He had discussed committing jihad; he had not taken any affirmative action toward it." Reinhold declined to say where those discussions took place, or with whom. He said the FBI was not aware of the discussions before the attack, and added that Abdulazeez did not espouse his beliefs or intentions online.<sup>35</sup> Reinhold, seems to suggest there are people out there, most likely in the Chattanooga area, who knew of his intention to commit jihad but did not speak up, possibly because of fear of retribution from Abdulazeez himself, because they did not take him seriously, or, the worst case scenario, because they believed in his cause. However, there is no evidence to prove or disprove any of these hypotheses.<sup>36</sup>

## 6. Role of informants

There were potential signs of radicalization before the event had taken place however, no one ever spoke about it and a year after the attack, there was no indication about informants in this case.

## 7. Connections

No specific connection to terrorist groups such as ISIS or al-Qaeda was ever found. The only general connection found to terrorist groups were the video recordings of the infamous al-Qaeda recruiter, Anwar al-Awlaki. Abdulazeez was essentially self-motivated by the idea of committing martyrdom in the name of Islam in order to absolve himself of his sins. One anonymous official who agreed to speak to reporters on the condition of anonymity said:

In the new ISIS model, it's all about social media and them interacting with people in the United States and quickly trying to get them to launch

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<sup>34</sup> Bradbury, "Minute by minute."

<sup>35</sup> Bradbury, "FBI: Abdulazeez was radicalized online."

<sup>36</sup> Bradbury, "FBI: Abdulazeez was radicalized online."



attacks. This appears to be the old model, where he was interested in radical Islam and sought to learn more about it online by looking at videos and readings.<sup>37</sup>

## **8. Relation to the Muslim community**

In the two or three months previous to the shootings, he began to regularly show up to Friday services at the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga, according to Dr. Azhar S. Sheikh, a founding member. However, continues Dr. Sheikh, he showed absolutely no signs of extremism.<sup>38</sup> After the shootings, the mosque cancelled the celebration of Eid al-Fitr out of respect for the fallen Marines.

In terms of the response of the attack from the Muslim community, there was universal condemnation as well as almost hatred and disgust at this man who attempted to twist Islam to fit his personal needs. Paul Galloway, of the American Muslim Advisory Council, gave a statement on behalf of the leaders and condemned the attack as an effort to incite terror and divide the country along faith lines:

The Tennessee Muslim community unequivocally condemns today's heinous and unjustified attack in Chattanooga, in which four U.S. Marines were murdered and at least three people, including one Chattanooga police officer, were injured. The Tennessee Muslim community wishes to express our deepest condolences to the victims and their families. Terrorists seek to divide our society, and we pray that all Americans will stand together united against their wanton violence and hatred.

In addition, Rashed Fakhruddin, president of the Islamic Center of Nashville, called Abdulazeez a criminal who carried out a despicable act and said that although Abdulazeez may be identified as a Muslim, the faith condemns such crimes in every form and fashion.<sup>39</sup> Speaking at a community get-together, Dr. Mohsin Ali, a member of the Islamic center, solemnly said, "I will say just a few words about the murderer. How cowardly and cruelly he acted. How many victims he struck. He shattered the peace in our city, he frightened our children and destroyed the lives of his whole family." When he was finished, every Muslim in the room stood up. The crowd clapped and cheered.<sup>40</sup>

The Council on American-Islamic Relations also weighed in. The National Executive Director of CAIR Nihad Awad said:

We condemn this horrific attack in the strongest terms possible. Such inexcusable acts of violence must be repudiated by Americans of all faiths and backgrounds. The American Muslim community stands shoulder to shoulder with our fellow citizens in offering condolences to the loved ones

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<sup>37</sup> Michael S. Schmidt and Jodi Rudoren, "Chattanooga Gunman Researched Islamic Martyrdom," *nytimes.com*, July 21, 2015

<sup>38</sup> Richard Fausset, "Chattanooga Gunman Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: "Life is short and bitter," *nytimes.com*, July 16, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Jessica Bliss and Jordan Biue, "Nashville Islamic leaders condemn Chattanooga shooting," *tennessean.com*, July 16, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Council for American-Islamic Relations Facebook Page, #CAIR Condemns Killing of Marines in Tennessee, Offers Condolences, Facebook, July 16, 2015.

of those killed and injured and in rejecting anyone who would harm our nation's safety and security. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families impacted by this tragedy.

CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.<sup>41</sup>

### **9. Depiction by authorities**

As we saw earlier, Abdulazeez was almost universally regarded by the law enforcement authorities as either a "terrorist" or "homegrown violent extremist." FBI Director James Comey<sup>42</sup> and Special Agent in Charge Ed Reinhold<sup>43</sup> did play lip service to the underlying severe mental illnesses he suffered from, but it was never brought into the main fold. Some were more up front: hours after the shooting, U.S. Attorney Bill Killian told reporters that authorities are treating it as an "act of domestic terrorism."<sup>44</sup> When authorities automatically claim any incident which has any hint of Islamic radical militancy as terrorism this reveals a severe flaw in the way they understand radical Islam, terrorism, and mental illness. It is very alarmist and irresponsible to automatically claim "Islamic terrorism!" because there is a tendency to leave very important clues on the table that are not related to radical Islam, whether they are mental health as in this case or the fact that a person lost his/her job and/or family, or other such factors. When they are disregarded, it leaves a gaping hole for which authorities and the public have to understand why terrorism happens.

### **10. Depiction by media**

The media was very factual, accurate, and less alarmist than the authorities. Whether it was *CBS* or the *Times Free Press* or *CNN*, newspapers usually referred to Abdulazeez as a "gunman," staying away such buzzwords as "militant" or terrorist."<sup>45</sup> At first, articles did not mention the mental health issue as it might have been too early for them to be aware of such issues, but the vast majority of the articles later on did mention, either in passing or in substantive detail, about his mental health issue and how it might have played a role in the shootings.

However, two days after the attack, there was a particularly curious exchange on CNN between Michael Smerconish and Tom Ridge, former Secretary of Homeland Security under George W. Bush.<sup>46</sup> Ridge argued that

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<sup>41</sup> Council for American-Islamic Relations Facebook Page.

<sup>42</sup> CNN Wire, "Chattanooga shooting."

<sup>43</sup> CNN Wire, "Chattanooga shooting."

<sup>44</sup> CNN Wire, "Chattanooga shooting."

<sup>45</sup> Richard Fausett, Alan Blinder, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Gunman Kills 4 Marines at Military Site in Chattanooga," *nytimes.com*, July 16, 2015. Meghan Keneally, Josh Margolin, Luis Martinez, and Pierre Thomas, "Chattanooga Shooting: Four Marines Dead in Shooting at Military Offices," *abcnews.go.com*, July 16, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> *BBCnews.com*, Profile: Tom Ridge, *news.bbc.co.uk*, November 9, 2004.

because the Obama administration refuses to call it Islamic terrorism, we are hindered in our attempt to not only fight Islamic terrorism but also to defeat it:

Well, it's pretty clear that ISIL brought the fight to American soldiers to the United States. It's pretty clear that that was their directive. It's pretty clear that this murder carried out in Tennessee. And let me be also very clear, I've had enough friends who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, these brave young men and women, by the way, who understand the nature of the mission. Who probably better understand it than a lot of people in the White House that this is a global scourge? And unless it's defeated militarily, the incidents that we're talking about today will be more frequent.

He seems to believe it was not only ISIS-inspired but that Abdulazeez was sent by ISIS to commit the atrocities in Chattanooga to further its agenda in the United States. But there is no evidence to support that contention.

Smerconish asked Ridge whether it was possibly an overreaction to automatically claim that ISIS was responsible for the attacks:

Do you worry that there's a risk of overreaction? And I don't want to understate the significance of four Marines losing their lives on United States soil. I think it's god awful, but we're having this conversation at a time when I'm looking at my CNN security pass and I'm thinking about taking off my shoes at the airport. I'm thinking about the dogs below me in the building where I'm sitting, in the subway system sniffing for bombs. And on and on and on. Do we have a tendency to over react in the face of this type of a catastrophe?

In response, Ridge essentially went around the question:

Security is pretty heavy just about everywhere you go in this country. To your point, I think it is appropriate, Michael. We lament the loss of the lives as a barbaric and evil act. The fact of the matter is—I don't mean we become immune to it, but we have to remind ourselves that the threat of Islamic terrorism is a global scourge and until we are much more aggressive overseas, not only here but U.S. citizens elsewhere and western interests are going to be under attack. I think the level, obviously, the FBI and local law enforcement are doing everything they can. And it appears to me there's nothing anything else they could have done to identify this person in their midst.

Ridge appears to be heavily in favor of a far more hawkish foreign policy targeted at ISIS when it is was not clear ISIS had any responsibility for coordination and the carrying out of this atrocity. In trying to prove Smerconish's question to be incorrect, Ridge incidentally proved Smerconish's point to be accurate by overreacting at a point when not all the facts were out about the incident and about Abdulazeez's background.<sup>47</sup>

## 11. Policing costs

This was a rather cheap case in terms of money. Abdulazeez was not an any FBI terror watch lists nor was he even considered as some form of threat so

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Ridge and Michael Smerconish, "Chattanooga Attack," [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), July 18, 2015.

there were no surveillance costs. As Abdulazeez was killed during the shootout, there were no court costs or informant costs. It was on December 16, 2015, that Comey said Abdulazeez was motivated by “foreign terrorist propaganda” following their investigation, so it could be said the investigation lasted five months.<sup>48</sup>

## 12. Relevance of the internet

The internet was vital in this case, not in terms of intelligence but in terms of Abdulazeez being able to access radical Islamic militancy material on the internet. In the age of technology, it would have been relatively simple for Abdulazeez to find propaganda just about anywhere, whether it was on TV, internet, acquaintances, etc. However, with the internet, one click on a computer gains access to the whole world; it would only take seconds for someone like him to access whatever kind of propaganda he would like to view.

## 13. Are we safer?

I don't believe we are more or less safe than we were before this attack. It was never proven or concluded that this attack was directly or even indirectly connected to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS. If this attack had been under orders from ISIS and if the FBI and other federal government surveillance programs had missed him, then I would be more willing to say we aren't as safe because of what happened. But this case seems to be one of a mentally disturbed man who used Islamic militancy specifically as a way to justify his actions and to find a way to absolve himself of his sins. Terrorist ideology doesn't seem to be at the forefront. However, I would still say he was radicalized because the downward spiral his life was taking and the guilt he felt for committing unspeakable sins as a Muslim led him to the point where he believed committing martyrdom in the name of Allah would absolve himself of the sins. Accordingly, he took it upon himself to view the kind of terrorist material that would radicalize him. As noted earlier, he confidently said he hated ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups because of their savage brutality, and he even claimed ISIS was not even Islamic.<sup>49</sup>

What we have to take out of this situation is not so much emphasis on discovering terror-related attacks (although it is important to keep this in mind), but being able to properly treat mental illnesses before it connects with Islamist propaganda.

## 14. Conclusion

Several issues emerge from this discussion.

First, mental illness is a serious condition not to be understated. Abdulazeez was a man who suffered from bipolar disorder and depression and used drugs and alcohol to cope with it.<sup>50</sup> If left untreated, it is not uncommon for

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<sup>48</sup> Kristina Sgueglia, “Chattanooga shootings ‘inspired’ by terrorists.”

<sup>49</sup> See Ross et al., “Chattanooga Shooter Researched Religious Justification.”

<sup>50</sup> Colleen Sullivan, “Your Family Member Has Bipolar Disorder and is Refusing Treatment,” bipolarworld.net, 2000.

people with bipolar disorder to experiment with alcohol, drugs, and prescription pills, and to get themselves into massive debt because of gambling or other kinds of excessive spending. However, if continuously and properly treated, one can lead a perfectly normal life. The problem with Abdulazeez was that he often times stopped taking his medication, and medication is almost useless if you don't take it on a consistent basis.<sup>51</sup> Terrorist propaganda, especially from a very popular, influential, and manipulative personality like Anwar al-Awlaki, combined with the fact that Abdulazeez was a young man who was lost in his life and who suffered from bipolar disorder and depression, has the potential to be a dangerous combination as it was in this case. It is important for people with mental illnesses to be able to have a support group of friends and family. His family was very much willing to help him, but it seems they did not realize the extent to which he suffered.<sup>52</sup>

Second, I would diagnose this case as one in which a disturbed young man who had essentially hit rock bottom in his life and as a Muslim in that he had gotten attracted to a life of drinking, drugs, and excessive spending—actions severely prohibited by the word of Allah. With this in mind, he began to search for ways to be able to justify himself in the afterlife and came to the conclusion that, if he committed jihad in the name of Allah as a martyr, he would be able to absolve himself of his sins. With this, he began searching for material related to radical Islamic militancy and found the videos of radical Islamic cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki. These proved to be just what he needed to turn this storm into a full-blown tornado which was then released in Chattanooga with the horrific shootings. This, of course, is not to say terrorism/terror-related ideology had absolutely nothing to do this case. It absolutely did. It is indisputable that he was influenced by the foreign terrorist propaganda Director Comey brought up. However, my conclusion is that Abdulazeez committed jihad as a means to the ultimate goal: absolving himself of the Islamic sins of drinking, using drugs, and excessive spending.

Third, as we saw with Tom Ridge in his interview with Michael Smerconish just days after the attack, we tend to overreact with regards to alleged terrorist attacks. Although there was no evidence ISIS had any direct or indirect connection to Abdulazeez, Ridge insisted that ISIS brought their fight to America and were responsible for the attacks. Subsequent evidence proved this claim to be inaccurate. Other officials tended to have a broader answer and simply said he was inspired by terrorist propaganda. Especially in the age where terrorism tends to be politicized on a mass level, there is a tendency to claim Islamic terrorism without looking further into the facts. One cannot understand the mindset or the motivation of Abdulazeez without examining the issues he had suffered for most of his adult life.

There are elements of Islamism in an event like this, and we should absolutely keep that in mind. However, we must examine all facts of the case. In

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<sup>51</sup> I suffer from bipolar disorder, so I am very knowledgeable about the kind of destruction it can cause if not properly treated and medicated.

<sup>52</sup> "Report: FBI reviews Islamic text Chattanooga gunman sent to friend before attacks," foxnews.com, July 19, 2015

doing so, it became clear to me mental illness and addiction played an integral part. Without his illness and addiction, Abdulazeez probably would not have been sent off onto a path to the bottom where he turned to martyrdom to rescue himself in the afterlife. The more we expand our investigation of such attacks, looking not only at potential radical Islam inspiration, but also at internal factors of the perpetrators, the more we will be able to understand how and why these attacks occur and how to prevent them.