

# Tracking a Nuclear al Qaeda



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# Background



- **Presidential Decision Directive 39 (1995):**

“There is no higher priority than preventing the acquisition of this [nuclear weapon] capability or removing this capability from terrorist groups potentially opposed to the U.S.”<sup>1</sup>

- **1998 *Time* Interview:**

Osama bin Laden declares that pursuing a nuclear weapon will enable al Qaeda to defend the right of every Muslim.

- **2009 National Security Strategy:**

“There is no greater threat to the American people than...the danger posed by the pursuit of nuclear weapons by violent extremists...” [The U.S. should] “prepare for, withstand, and...deter attacks by identifying and interdicting threats” in order to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its affiliates.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “United States Policy on Counterterrorism.” *Presidential Decision Directive 39*. 1995: 10.

<sup>2</sup> US National Security Council. “Build Cooperation with Other 21<sup>st</sup> Century Centers of Influence.” *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. (May 2010): 18-9.

# Methodology & Scope



- Methodology

- Case Studies:

02/26/1993	World Trade Center bombings
08/07/1998	Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania
09/11/2001	World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks
07/07/2005	London Metro bombings
12/25/2009	Northwest Airlines Flight 253 bombing (failed)

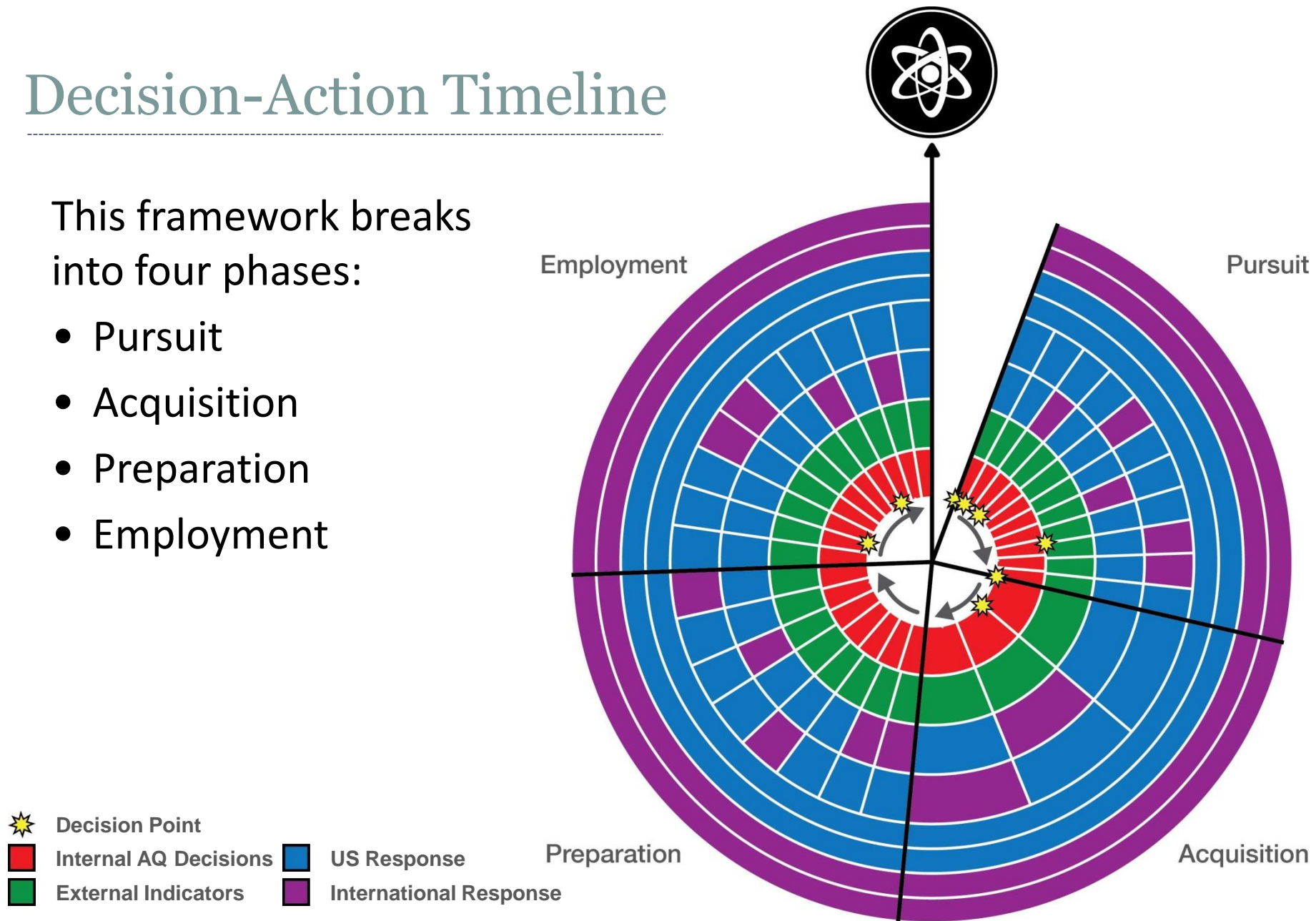
- Scope

- No discussion of specific “blue” counterterrorist units by name or any specific tactics, techniques, and procedures
    - ✦ Majority of this information is classified
  - All interdiction efforts are excluded from this discussion
    - ✦ Interdiction can occur at multiple points on the timeline
    - ✦ This allows for the inclusion of all phases and events which might occur when AQ attempts to acquire and employ a nuclear weapon

# Decision-Action Timeline

This framework breaks into four phases:

- Pursuit
- Acquisition
- Preparation
- Employment



# Phase Highlights



- **Phase I: Pursuit**

- AQ decides that acquiring a nuclear weapon will achieve the organization's goals, and communicates this to its network, potential members, and potential sellers
- AQ identifies, contacts, and meets with the chosen seller
- Seller demonstrates weapon's viability
- AQ prepares a weapon storage facility

- **Phase II: Acquisition**

- AQ pays agreed upon price to weapon seller
- Weapon is transported to the weapon storage facility in an intermediate location

- **Phase III: Preparation**

- Attacker and "muscle attackers" are chosen and transported to various training facilities
- AQ develops target list for weapon employment

- **Phase IV: Employment**

- Funds are transferred to attackers which are then used to reserve and utilize travel arrangements to the target country
- Weapon is transported to a staging location in the target country
- Final instructions are passed to attackers through local AQ cell
- Weapon is transported to target site and detonated

# Internal Actions

*Internal Actions are those steps taken by AQ in an effort to acquire and employ a nuclear weapon.*

- AQ leadership make and approve all major decisions necessary for an attack of high visibility
- AQ decisions are made based upon:
  - How well the decision fulfills the strategic goals of the organization
  - Which decision leads to the lowest probability of being detected or interdicted
- Decisions are almost exclusively passed down via clerics or an AQ member whom the Attacker trusts

# External Indicators



*External indicators are signals that can be observed when actions are taken in response to internal AQ decisions.*

- **Travel:** AQ members can be vulnerable to detection if using false identification and paying in cash
- **Transportation:** moving specialized equipment and materials across borders and through transportation nodes leaves them vulnerable to detection technologies
- **Funding:** currency movement creates trails which can be traced to supporters as well as operators
- **Media and Communications:** use of internet and phones to communicate between AQ nodes creates vulnerabilities

# US & International Response

*US & International Response includes those efforts taken in reaction to observed external indicators of AQ actions.*

- **US State Department** engages in bilateral talks with other governments for intelligence collection and sharing, locating person(s) of interest, and disseminating information abroad
- **National Security Council Intergovernmental Committee** coordinates the efforts of US military, Intelligence Community, and federal law enforcement agencies
- **Counter-threat Finance** interdicts funds transfers and tracks down sources of AQ funding
- **FBI and additional law enforcement** personnel work to deter and disrupt AQ efforts nationally



# What the Timeline Tells Us



- AQ is most vulnerable (i.e., most prone to observation) when transporting the nuclear weapon
- Effective coordination of US and international intelligence capabilities is essential to identifying and responding to external indicators
- As the number of external indicators increase, so do the opportunities to deter and disrupt attack plans and operations
- Timeline highlights the limitations and constraints of US and international response
  - If AQ members have legal documentation, they will not raise flags at transportation nodes or border crossings
  - When AQ members use cash payments, the money trail cannot be followed as easily with financial forensics
  - When tracking phone conversations and emails, it is difficult to decipher coded language and track movement



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