Tracking a Nuclear al Qaeda

KRISTEN R. HAJDUK

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  “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.”¹

• 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.”²

Methodology & Scope

• Methodology
  ○ Case Studies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>02/26/1993</td>
<td>World Trade Center bombings</td>
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<tr>
<td>08/07/1998</td>
<td>Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania</td>
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<td>09/11/2001</td>
<td>World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks</td>
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<tr>
<td>07/07/2005</td>
<td>London Metro bombings</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/25/2009</td>
<td>Northwest Airlines Flight 253 bombing (failed)</td>
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• 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
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 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