

## **Terrorism Knowledge Base: A Eulogy (2004-2008)**

By Brian K. Houghton

On the night of March 31, 2008, the intensely useful Terrorism Knowledge Base<sup>®</sup> went from an interactive site of tens of thousands of terrorism incidents, group profiles, indictment records, and mapping and graphing tools, to a mere static single page misleading everyone that the site is just down while it is “being refreshed”. For those of us who have relied on the TKB for our research, teaching, journalism, analysis, and general reference on terrorism, this knowledge base will be sorely missed.

The TKB emerged out of the RAND Corporation’s Terrorism Chronology, which Brian Jenkins likes to say was first started in 1970 on 3” x 5” cards, detailing terrorism incidents which began in the modern era in 1968. From these modest beginnings, RAND’s database grew into one of the most comprehensive chronicles of international terrorism, and yet it was solely used within RAND. For decades, critics and scholars longed to peek inside RAND’s proprietary data to gain access to the same knowledge that this “think tank” held. For a brief time the Chronology was jointly held by RAND and the University of St Andrews in Scotland, but this ended in 1997, and the database lay dormant until 2001.

At that time, RAND received a grant from the new Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT), a non-profit organization chartered to be a living legacy to those who lost their lives in the tragic bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. MIPT knew the significance of the database and wanted it not only preserved, but also made available to the public at large. With new funding, RAND resurrected the dataset and also began collecting information on domestic terrorism incidents around the world. Partnering with DFI International and adding court trial data from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the concept for a knowledge base was born.

The new Terrorism Knowledge Base was unique in its form and function, taking full advantage of the growth of internet tools. The TKB was not merely a portal or online database, but rather the fusion of data with related information, making it a true knowledge base. The site allowed users to find a wealth of knowledge with minimal effort. Upon searching for an incident, users could find links to the group responsible or other attacks in that country. TKB’s group profiles showed researchers all incidents committed by the group, quick “baseball card-like” statistics for the attacks, group leader bios and pictures, official terrorist designations by the State Department, and other governments, related organizations, and sources of analysis for further research. Free analytic tools could be used to compare groups, create dynamic graphs, or dig into certain categories of targets and tactics.

The TKB was literally a dream come true for analysts, researchers, academicians, journalists, and the public at large. From its first online presence in 2004, the site literally exploded with users—and those users kept coming back again and again. What I personally found appealing was that from the beginning users were asked to help improve

the knowledge base by offerings corrections or suggestions. No database has perfect data, but this one strived toward perfecting itself through user input. Certainly, there are other databases available to researchers (e.g. ITERATE, Global Terrorism Database and WITS), each with their inherent strengths and weaknesses, but the TKB made research intuitive and far reaching.

So if the Terrorism Knowledge Base was such a good tool for the counter-terrorism community, why did it “die”? There will be no autopsy on the corpse, and those responsible for the death will most likely fade away into their bureaucratic cubicles to inflict neglect on other projects. The original funding of MIPT’s TKB came through Congressional earmarks administered by the Department of Justice. After the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, funding and administrative oversight was shifted to an office in DHS intended to provide equipment to emergency responders. For a time in the short period after 9/11 funding was no issue, but government attention has started to move away from terrorism to a focus on disasters (post-Katrina), war (Iraq and Afghanistan), and other social issues. One might think that there would be a plethora of funding available, but the stark fact is that there is a shrinking in terrorism analysis funding and a concern within government about funding projects, like databases, that are never-ending. With the evaporation of government terrorism research monies it is only a matter of time until more projects terminate. Unfortunately, the contest is not strictly Darwinian; the best ones do not necessarily always survive.

The TKB’s demise was simply brought about by the economic “free rider” principle—everyone loved using it, but nobody wanted to pay. Typically in situations like this, the government steps in and creates a method to fund the public good, but in the case of the TKB, the Department of Homeland Security office who provided previous funding did not see how a counter-terrorism knowledge base impacted their narrow focus, and those who utilized the knowledge base the most did not put enough pressure on DHS to continue the funding. After all the funding and effort to create such a useful tool, which truly was a living legacy for those who perished in past acts of terrorism, the TKB died from bureaucratic neglect. What a waste.

Yes, we will still have other terrorism databases, but none of them are true *knowledge bases*. It is hard to gauge who will fill the vacuum left by TKB, and if they can make the same level of commitment to supporting the next generation of terrorism scholars and counterterrorism practitioners. We must ask ourselves if the disappearance of TKB portends the loss of other terrorism databases in the future. Are we closing our eyes to the threat again?

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