Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC).

Published online at < http://www.trackingterrorism.org/ > by the Beacham Group LLC. Priced from US $ 350.- upwards, depending on type of user (individual, organization, government)

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

There are a great number of reference resources available to terrorism researchers in the public domain - whether free of cost in academia [like START from the University of Maryland (www.start.umd.edu)] and in government [like the US National Counterterrorism Center (http://www.nctc.gov/)] or, subscription fee-based in the commercial sector [like Jane's Intelligence (www.janes.com)]. Where does the new, subscription fee-based Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC) fit in? On the face of it, TRAC seems to offers much. According to its own advertisement

- it holds one of the world's largest databases with analyses of some 3,850 groups that have been known to aid and abet political violence and terrorist organisations;

- it claims to rely on the input of a team of "nearly 3,000" consortium member experts;

- it claims to provide original, commissioned in-depth analyses of seminal terrorism topics;

- it claims to offer profiles of vulnerable regions and cities most likely to attract terrorist incidents.

In addition, TRAC also promises to offer a "Live intelligence repository" and "Chatter control" news from multiple sources, "under the radar commentary" and Internet links to some 2,900 think tanks, government agencies, universities, police academies and research centers.

TRAC has been in the making for eight years before going public in late February 2012. Is this indeed the comprehensive one-stop shop of choice for the serious terrorism researcher or government analyst? Based on temporary access this reviewer was provided with, there are some doubts in place.

How well does TRAC stand up to its claims? If we look, for instance at a "comprehensive analysis" on Salafists in Germany, written, strangely enough, by a Beirut-based TRAC contributor (now in the USA), we find that much of its structure and even the exact wording and endnotes replicate a publicly accessible article on Salafist Jihadism in Germany, written by F.W. Horst in 2011 and published by the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (www.ict.org.il) which is not even cited in the TRAC bibliography.

As one wanders through TRAC's terrorist group profiles, one experiences more such ´déjà vu' sensations. Much of the materials presented under "Groups" appear to derive from the US State Department, the National Counterterrorism Center or from the now dormant RAND/MIPT

database hosted by START. There is usually some rephrasing and reshuffling done with the original information but relatively little appears to come from TRAC's own consortium members. Many group descriptions are poorly written and/or offer limited information. In terms of depth and quality, therefore, TRAC's profiles can never even come close to those of Jane's or the U.S. Department of State's annual reports on global terrorism.

TRAC admits in a disclaimer that it "….cannot and does not warrant the accuracy of the entries in its database". This points to a quality control problem. It is admittedly very difficult to get the facts right when it comes to clandestine underground organisations. It is here, however, where TRAC's many consortium expert members should come in and act as country- and group-specialists and fact-check each entry before it goes online to safeguard TRAC against the propagation of in-accurate or outdated information. If one goes through the published list of members of the consortium (which appears to be somewhat shorter than the number of experts associated with TRAC originally claimed), one finds, next to reputable scholars, many third rate contributors who have few credible claims to specialist status. While TRAC encourages its own readers to submit contributions, without a solid peer-review system in place, this is a dangerous way of increasing the volume of materials made available to subscribers. That volume, according to TRAC, now consists of over 6,000 webpages. If we take that a webpage is roughly of the same length as a book page, this means that this is about equivalent to the content of thirty books of 200 pages each. That does not really make it, as advertised, **"one of the world's most comprehensive terrorism research centers"**.

If one wants to cover 3,850 terrorist and extremist and related groups (a high number to begin with), that alone would allow for less than two webpages per group. In fact most groups do get far less than that. Take, for instance, the entry on the African National Congress (ANC) which, in addition to the activities of its guerrilla arm and its political activities also engaged for a while in terrorism (more than 600 incidents between 1976 and 1996 according to the Global Terrorism Database of START to which TRAC provides a link). We learn little more than that the ANC was "founded in 1912", (1923 would have been a more accurate date), began "terrorist activity" in 1961 and is currently "inactive" after having "perpetrated terrorist attacks against government facilities." Not a word about the ANC's post-1994 career as ruling party of South Africa. Rather than offering a full group description of its own, TRAC often refers to descriptions of others, providing links to them, including Wikipedia , START and the NCTC. This might be a makeshift solution as long as one does not have in-house capacity - but it raises some questions what the eight years of preparation before TRAC went public were used for.

While the TRAC webpages are often visually attractive and generally user-friendly and interspersed with pictures and video-links, the quality of the texts is very uneven and quite often not up to scholarly standards. Reproducing and reprocessing much information taken freely from open source data providers and then market it as a password-protected, subscription fee -based commercial reference resource, raises some interesting questions about current web business

practices. Who are the people behind the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium? TRAC's Editorial Director is Ms Veryan Khan. In her own words, she is "in control of all of TRAC's content including new TRAC article titles, TRAC's Publishing Center, TRAC Terrorist Group Profiles and TRAC's Chatter Control" (< www.linkedin.com/in/veryankhan >). The TRAC website further lists as Chief Contributing Editor Dr Arabinda Acharyal, a Research Fellow at Singapore's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University. The third person is Walton Beacham, founder of the Beacham publishing enterprise, a former professor of English Literature. Beyond these figureheads it is not clear what the contribution of the majority of the consortium members is. A few of them have contributed some, usually quite short, entries and articles; many have produced no visible input.

All this would be pardonable if the TRAC product had not been marketed in such exalted terms. A February 28, 2012 press release from the Beacham Group announced that "TRAC combines expertise from nearly 3,000 terrorism specialists with real-time intelligence"' and lauded TRAC, as already mentioned, as "one of the world's most comprehensive terrorism research centers". Clearly it is not. Nevertheless, the basic idea of an expert-run consortium that pools its know-how is a sound one. The problem is how to get more of the real experts involved, assure quality control and combine that with a viable business model. TRAC will have to address these issues if it wants to live up to its ambitions.

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