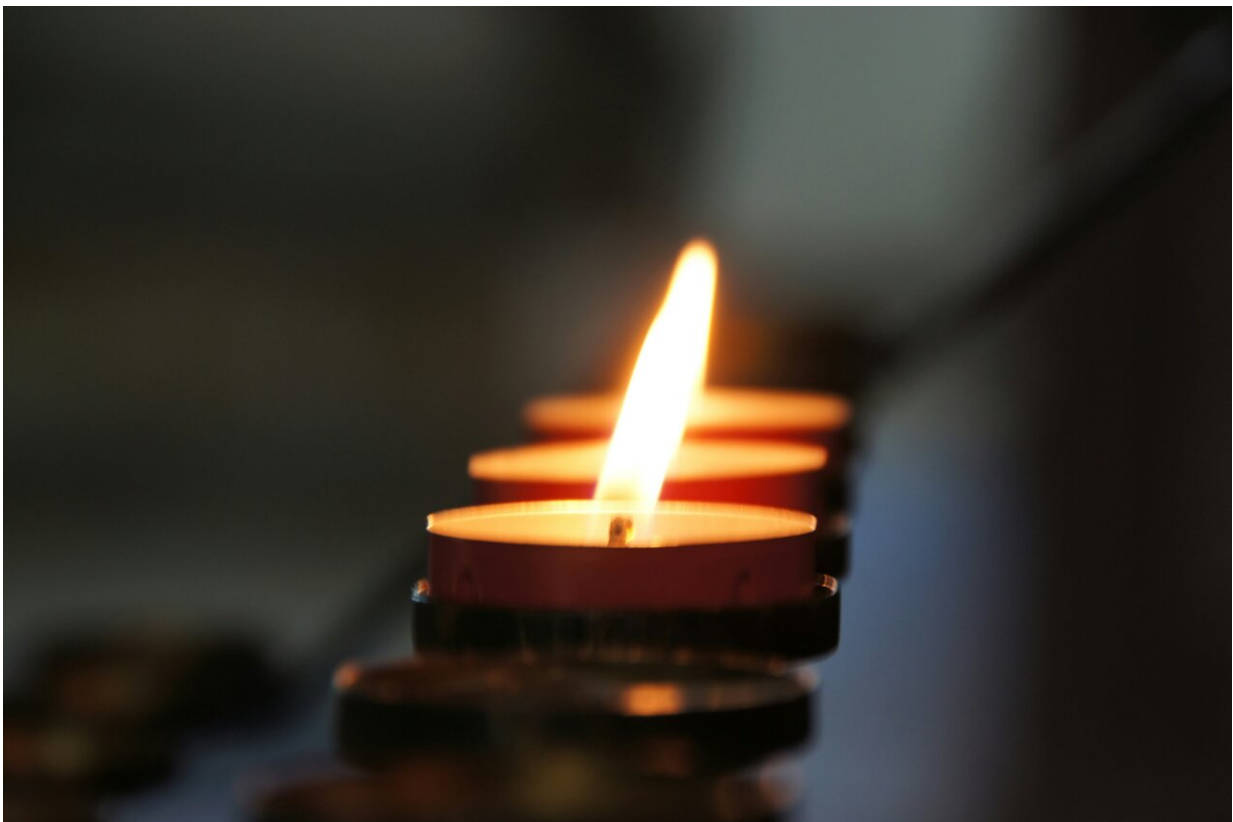


Southport attacks: Why the UK needs a unified approach to all violent attacks on the public

January 29 2025, by Barry Richards



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The conviction of Axel Rudakubana for the murder of three young girls in Southport has prompted many questions about how the UK handles

violence without a clear ideological motive. This case has also shown up the confusion in this area, and made clear the need for a basic reframing of how we understand murderous violence against the public today.

The [home secretary may be right](#) to keep Prevent focused on violent Islamist and extreme right-wing terror. Yet there needs to be a complementary but distinct strategy to protect against another Southport-style attacker.

The [prime minister](#), Keir Starmer, has come rather late to his observation that the nature of terrorism has changed. Over four years ago, it was becoming clear that the "terrorist" threat was increasingly coming from those with no clear and consistent attachment to any specific ideology, let alone any terrorist organization.

This is borne out in the latest [data on referrals](#) to the Prevent counter-terrorism scheme. "Mixed, unstable and unclear" ideologies—when added to school massacre fixations and incel cases—outrank both extreme right-wing and Islamist categories.

Rudakubana had an al-Qaida-linked document in his possession, and had claimed to be a victim of racism. But overall his motive was not at all ideological, but is to be found in his mental ill-health.

All the evidence presents him as a profoundly damaged individual who harbored an overwhelming need to inflict deathly violence, unconnected with any political aim. His choice of young children as victims is probably also of psychological significance.

Thus it may not be quite right to say, as the [home secretary](#) Yvette Cooper and others have, that [Prevent "failed"](#). A cluster of agencies do seem collectively to have failed here. But Prevent was not designed to deal with apolitical and apparently random attacks on people unknown to

the perpetrator.

What has failed is the conceptual frame underlying the UK's counter-terrorism approach, which sees terrorism simply as an ideologically-driven response to the world. This understands it as basically different from attacks which are apparently not ideologically-driven, and so are seen as more idiosyncratic and psychological, like school massacres (though these have come to fall within Prevent's remit).

Internal drivers of violence

However, it is also true that many of those who do have conventional terrorist aims are also driven by forces in their internal worlds.

While often not given a psychiatric diagnosis, many people who have carried out attacks appear to have been emotionally dysfunctional. Evidence for this goes back at least as far as 9/11, to the personality of the ringleader, [Mohamed Atta](#).

It has since been accumulating in what is known of many convicted attackers, including those with lengthy ideological rationales, such as [Anders Breivik](#).

The emergence of ["incel" terror](#) has further blurred the distinction between those with an apparent ideological rationale and those with obvious psychological problems.

At the psychological level, there is [no clear separation](#) between lone actor ideological attackers and those who are supposedly non-ideological. Common to all is some disturbance within the self, one requiring the enactment of lethal violence.

Ironically, the clear presence of psychological factors can also be

seen—at a different level—in some of the people involved in the violent riots which occurred in response to the Southport murders. These were, in considerable part, the creation of online agitators, extreme right-wing activists and their bussed-in followers.

But some who took part were more casual joiners of the riots. These were people of no fixed ideological abode who were [drawn by the excitement](#) of the occasion and the opportunity to [attack the police](#) and other symbols of social order. The same psychological motive may be attributed to the "Maga tourist" element among the January 2021 invaders of the Capitol building in Washington DC.

Protecting the public

Such problems of group-based violence in public spaces may be amenable to primarily political and policy solutions (albeit very difficult ones to achieve). However, individuals who may suddenly erupt into violence, ideological or not, are even more difficult to identify, assess, monitor and contain.

The first step towards better protecting the public should be to recognize the psychological drivers of all such attacks. These include a preoccupation with [grievance](#), often linked to a powerful sense of humiliation and psychological defenses against that. For example, the [hypermasculinity and fantasied omnipotence](#) of the Islamic State.

It is necessary, for various reasons, to retain the legal category of terrorist attacks. But it should be a subcategory of a more inclusive approach that covers all violent attacks on the public.

Where there is little or no consistent ideological element, the term terrorism, which has political connotations, should not be employed. Violence that doesn't aim to promote a political objective would be

better described as the infliction of terror on innocent members of the public, as a form of revenge upon the world or as an expression of hatred. Other political terms such as "radicalization" and "extremism" may also be inappropriate or confusing when applied to such cases.

A conceptual framework which makes that distinction, while also recognizing the common psychological ground of the draw towards [violence](#), would allow for more effective interventions.

Prevent could continue its work (with much-needed improvements) to minimize ideologically rationalized attacks. But it would be coordinated with a complementary national agency that oversees and supports local services in identifying and managing people like Rudakubana. The face-to-face client work of both prongs would be guided and overseen by forensic psychiatrists and psychotherapists.

There will be more people in both sub-categories coming along with very weak control of their violent impulses. They will need skillful management that understands the drivers of profound disturbance.

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