

Violence as an End in Itself: Categorising the Ideologies of Axel Rudakubana as Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU)

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Abstract

This working paper examines the Southport attack committed by Axel Rudakubana and argues that the absence of a single, identifiable extremist ideology should not preclude understanding such violence through a terrorism framework. Drawing on evidence from the Prevent Learning Review, the Southport Public Inquiry, Home Office data, practitioner experience, and emerging scholarship on mixed, unclear, and unstable (MUU) ideologies, the paper critiques the prevailing consensus that Rudakubana's actions were motivated solely by a fascination with violence rather than ideological commitment. It demonstrates that contemporary extremist threats increasingly involve individuals whose beliefs are hybrid, fluid, and difficult to categorise within traditional ideological typologies. The analysis highlights the growing prevalence of MUU cases within Prevent referrals and explores how processes of ideological cross-pollination, selective appropriation of extremist narratives, and admiration for mass violence can contribute to radicalisation. While acknowledging concerns that MUU may function as a residual or conceptually ambiguous category, the paper argues that it provides a useful framework for understanding emerging forms of contemporary extremism. Ultimately, it calls for a reconsideration of how ideology is conceptualised within counter-terrorism policy and practice.

1. Introduction

On 20 January 2025, Axel Rudakubana pleaded guilty to 16 charges related to the attack that took place in Southport on 29 July 2024. These included the murders of three children — Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe, and Alice Da Silva Aguiar — the attempted murders of eight other children and two adults, possession of a bladed article in a public place, production of a biological toxin (namely ricin), contrary to Section 1 of the Biological Weapons Act 1974, and possession of information — namely

a PDF file entitled “Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants: The Al-Qaeda Training Manual” — of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing, or preparing, an act of terrorism, contrary to Section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000. Only the latter charge was specific to terrorism.

The reason for Rudakubana avoiding further terrorism-related charges was explained at various points during and after his trial. In the summing up, Deanna Heer KC for the prosecution stated: “It is not possible for the prosecution to identify any particular terrorist cause...”, before adding, “...rather, the evidence suggests that the defendant’s purpose was the commission of mass murder as an end in itself” (Allen, 2026). After the trial, Ursula Doyle of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) reiterated this view, stating: “It is clear that this was a young man with a sickening and sustained interest in death and violence. He has shown no sign of remorse” (Haslam & Williams, 2025). Shortly after the trial, Chief Constable Serena Kennedy of Merseyside Police said: “The investigation team has worked solidly to build up a strong evidential case to provide to the CPS, and although we will never know why he did it, what we can say is that [Rudakubana] was a man with an unhealthy obsession with extreme violence. We know that he had researched numerous documents online which show that obsession. What we can say is that, from all those documents, no one ideology was uncovered, and that is why this was not treated as terrorism” (Merseyside Police, 2025).

Building on discussions held during the LIAS-funded ‘Reading the Summer 2024 Riots’ interdisciplinary workshop in May 2025, this paper questions the validity of this consensus in order to better understand and explain the ideological motivation for Rudakubana’s attack. In doing so, it also draws on findings from first-hand engagement with counter-terrorism police, arising from my appointment as an expert witness in 15 trials involving the planning, preparation, and/or perpetration of acts of terrorism and other forms of ideologically motivated violence. By exploring the intersection of the scholarly and the practical, this paper seeks to provoke much-needed new thinking about the emergence of new forms of domestic terrorism and the contemporary extremist ideologies that inspire and motivate them.

2. Prevent and the Changing Face of Contemporary Terrorism

Despite the argument made at the time of his trial that Rudakubana’s crimes could not have been ‘treated as terrorism’, it is known that he had been referred to Prevent—the UK government’s strategy to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism—on three separate occasions prior to the Southport attack. According to the Prevent Learning Review published by the Home Office (2025b), referrals occurred in December 2019, February 2021, and April 2021. These referrals were prompted by concerning behaviours, including carrying knives and other weapons, searching online for mass school shootings, posting questionable social media content, and showing interest in topics such as bombings and extremist groups, including the aforementioned Al-Qaeda. On each occasion, Counter Terrorism Case Officers acknowledged Rudakubana’s vulnerability but determined that there

were no counter-terrorism or domestic extremism concerns, concluding that his needs were being met by other support services. Accordingly, each referral was subsequently closed. The Public Inquiry into the attack later described this as a “catastrophic failure” (Southport Inquiry, 2026).

While both the Review and the Inquiry found that Prevent officers largely complied with procedures, timelines, and policies, they also highlighted concerns about subjective decision-making, concluding that Rudakubana should have been referred to Channel, a multi-agency safeguarding initiative that provides early intervention and tailored support to individuals identified as vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism or extremist activity. The Review also identified several key areas for improvement, including strengthening risk assessments and giving greater weight to repeat referrals, alongside recommendations to enhance training, guidance, terminology, and assurance processes. The Inquiry further found that professionals had ‘toned down’ warnings about Rudakubana for fear of being accused of racism, effectively silencing concerns about the risk he posed.

In response, the Review recommended improving the recognition of signs of radicalisation among individuals for whom there is an absence of a clear extremist ideology. Interestingly, six months before Rudakubana was first referred to Prevent in December 2019, a joint letter from Chief Superintendent Nik Adams – National Coordinator for Prevent at Counter Terrorism Policing Headquarters – and Sara Skodbo, Director of Prevent at the Home Office, was sent to all Prevent leads across the country (Home Office, 2025b). The letter explained how the terrorist threat to the UK was changing, highlighting both increasing diversification and a growing likelihood of attacks being perpetrated by smaller numbers of people – particularly individuals – using less sophisticated methods.

More relevant to Rudakubana, the letter also raised awareness of the growing incidence of individuals adhering to mixed, unclear, or unstable (MUU) ideologies (Home Office, 2025b). To evidence this, it noted that referrals involving MUU ideologies had increased from approximately 700 in 2016–17 to almost 2,000 in 2017–18. According to the latest Home Office data (2025a), these numbers are now even higher. For the year ending March 2025, there were 3,009 referrals where no ideology was identified, 1,908 where no ideology was identified but other susceptibility to radicalisation was evident, 469 involving a known fascination with extreme violence or mass casualty attacks, and 424 involving multiple ideologies without any one being dominant. This amounts to a total of 5,810 referrals relating to individuals for whom there is no clear extremist ideology. So rapidly has this category grown that, by 2025, it accounted for more than half of all Prevent referrals and significantly exceeded those relating to Extreme Right-Wing (1,798) and Islamist (870) ideologies.

3. Mixed, Unclear and Unstable Ideologies

From working with counter-terrorism police and the CPS, the rapid growth in MUU referrals represents a complex challenge for practitioners. As a relatively new

descriptor for a relatively new phenomenon, MUU remains difficult to define and fully understand. At its most straightforward, MUU refers to the worldview of individuals who combine elements from multiple ideologies (mixed), shift asymmetrically between them (unstable), and do not present a coherent ideology, yet may still pose a terrorism risk (unclear) (Home Office, 2022). On this basis, practitioners typically apply the MUU descriptor to individuals who do not fit easily into established ideological categories, including – but not limited to – Islamist, Extreme Right-Wing, Extreme Left-Wing, and anarchist forms of extremism. The fact that MUU cases often include elements of one or more of these ideologies can serve to detract and distract while simultaneously complicating any attempt at analysis.

Although the scholarly literature on MUU remains embryonic, similar challenges are evident. For example, Brace, Baele, and Ging (2024) argue that MUU ideologies combine elements from multiple belief systems, lack coherence, and evolve over time, and are therefore best understood as a networked and dynamic process rather than a fixed ideology. Astley (2025) extends this analysis, suggesting that MUU ideologies may encompass incel subcultures, extreme misogyny, conspiracy theories, school shooter influences, and various anti-government or anti-establishment beliefs. Risius et al. (2024) similarly describe MUU extremism as inherently hybrid and best conceived within the context of a constantly shifting continuum. However, Ismail et al. (2025) caution that MUU risks functioning as a ‘catch-all’ label among practitioners and may be deployed in conceptually ambiguous ways within academic analysis.

Building on this, first-hand engagement with counter-terrorism practitioners also highlights recurring trends among individuals categorised as MUU. These include strong influence from previous high-profile cases of mass violence and, consequently, expressions of admiration for mass killers, including terrorists and school shooters. This reflects what has been described as ‘ideological cross-pollination’ (Gill, 2021). Such individuals may also ‘pick and mix’ elements from different ideologies to rationalise and justify violence (Allen, 2019). They often express a morally permissive attitude towards violence and mass murder, frequently alongside generalised or targeted hatred towards particular groups. Violence is therefore framed as necessary, either to correct perceived injustices or as a response to personal or group grievances.

Anecdotal evidence further suggests that individuals associated with MUU ideologies often present with multiple and complex vulnerabilities, including criminality, substance misuse, social isolation, and poor mental or emotional health. In such cases, extremist ideologies or narratives may appear to provide solutions to personal difficulties or serve as outlets for problematic and potentially dangerous behaviours.

4. Points for Reflection

This working paper therefore challenges the prevailing consensus that Axel Rudakubana’s attack could not have been understood within a terrorism framework due to the absence of a clearly identifiable ideology. By critically engaging with both

practitioner insights and emerging academic literature in response to the discussions held during the aforementioned workshop, it has argued that such a conclusion risks overlooking the growing significance of mixed, unclear, and unstable ideological formations within contemporary terrorism.

Drawing on evidence from the recently published Public Inquiry, Prevent Learning Review and wider Home Office data, the analysis has demonstrated that cases lacking a singular, coherent ideology are far from anomalous. Instead, they represent an increasingly dominant feature of the current threat landscape. The rapid rise in referrals to Prevent involving individuals with no fixed ideological position – or those combining multiple and shifting influences – suggests that traditional categorical approaches to both terrorism and extremism alike are becoming less analytically useful. In this context, the designation of MUU provides a more flexible, albeit still imperfect, framework for understanding individuals who may not conform to established ideological typologies yet nonetheless pose a credible risk of serious violence.

At the same time, this working paper has highlighted important conceptual and practical limitations associated with the MUU label. As both scholars and practitioners have noted, there is a danger that MUU becomes a residual or ‘catch-all’ category, obscuring as much as it reveals. However, when applied with care, the concept allows for a more nuanced appreciation of processes such as ideological cross-pollination, the selective appropriation of extremist narratives, and the centrality of violence as both a motivating and legitimising force. In cases such as Rudakubana’s, where violence appears to function as an end in itself, these dynamics are particularly salient.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the absence of a single, stable ideology should not preclude an act from being understood as terrorism. Rather, it necessitates a rethinking of how ideology itself is conceptualised within both policy and practice. If contemporary forms of extremism are increasingly fluid, hybrid, and personalised, then analytical frameworks and preventative mechanisms must evolve accordingly. Recognising and responding to MUU ideologies is therefore not only a matter of definitional precision but a critical component in addressing the changing nature of the terrorist threat.

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