

Reflecting on Terrorism's Temporalities After the Southport Attacks

Written by Lee Jarvis, Michael Lister and Andrew Whiting

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LEE JARVIS, MICHAEL LISTER AND ANDREW WHITING, JAN 29 2025

On 20 January, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer gave a speech reflecting on the case of Axel Rudakubana, who had pleaded guilty to the murders of three children at a party in Southport in July 2024. Rudakubana had, it transpired, been referred to the government's counterextremism programme, Prevent, on three separate occasions. But it appears that Rudakubana was not deemed to meet the threshold for intervention as he didn't display attachment to any specific political, religious or ideological cause. In essence, despite his seeming attachment to, and fascination with violence, he was not deemed a terrorist threat because he did not appear motivated by a clear cause or grievance. This raises, Starmer (2025) argues, a fundamental question of how we define and understand terrorism: "When I look at the details of this case. The extreme nature of the violence. The meticulous plan to attack young children in a place of joy and safety. Violence clearly intended to terrorise. Then I understand why people wonder what the word 'terrorism' means."

Anyone who has ever studied or read anything about terrorism will likely share Starmer's wonder. This question – what does 'terrorism' mean – has divided and confounded academic researchers as well as policymakers and citizens since the term's emergence (Jackson et al 2011). The reasons for this are multiple and include its inherently pejorative connotations (no-one, today, describes their own violence as 'terrorist'), which make objective or universal agreement on its definition near-impossible. The challenges of making sense of Rudakubana's violence as 'terrorism' may also – as Starmer alluded – be due to an outdated, or unhelpfully restrictive, sense of what terrorism 'is' within the UK. Although a seemingly political point, such an explanation would be in keeping with the term's constant evolution from its emergence to characterise state violence in the French revolution, to its contemporary expansion through the constant addition of new prefixes (cyberterrorism, narcoterrorism, etc) and types.

The changing nature of terrorism?

Beyond the definitional questions raised by Starmer was a specific temporal claim in his remarks on which we want to focus here to the effect that the nature of terrorism itself has fundamentally changed. That what some in the police service have been calling instances of MUU (mixed, uncertain or unclear) violence constitutes a radically new form of terrorism. As Keir Starmer (2025) put it:

Britain now faces a new threat. Terrorism has changed. In the past, the predominant threat was highly organised groups with clear political intent. Groups like Al-Qaeda. That threat of course remains. But now, alongside that we also see acts of extreme violence perpetrated by loners, misfits, young men in their bedroom, accessing all manner of material online, desperate for notoriety. Sometimes inspired by traditional terrorist groups. But fixated on that extreme violence, seemingly for its own sake.

It is crucial, here, that we recognise that Starmer's speech is not an outlier in making this argument. Take Tom Tugendhat, the then UK Minister for Security, who in 2023 similarly combined what many previously saw as 'old' terrorists, like the IRA, and 'new' terrorists like Al-Qaeda, contrasting them to what is now being positioned as a new form terrorism:

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There was a time—there really was a time—when we had what used to be known as spectaculars, which were orchestrated by the IRA—for example, in Bishopsgate—and by al-Qaeda, ISIS and so on. Those events were orchestrated to target venues that you thought you knew. They were the sort of incidents that were designed to change Government policy in a very radical way by killing, sometimes, hundreds of people (Home Affairs Select Committee 2023).

For scholars of terrorism – and particularly those who were around for the new terrorism debate in the early 2000s – this represents, in the words of one colleague, “a massive switcheroo”. That debate in the early 2000s, was one organised around a claim that the types of terrorism confronting states like the UK had dramatically changed.

For some scholars, and for many politicians, the terrorism seen in attacks like 9/11, 7/7, Bali and others, was fundamentally different to what had gone before. In that debate, Al-Qaeda – currently held up by Starmer as representing a form of terrorism which is highly organised with clear political intent – was contrasted with older groups like the Provisional IRA, which were seen as organised and with clear political motivations. Al-Qaeda, instead, were seen, in the early 2000s, as a loose-knit collective, lacking political motivations, and more deadly because of this (see Neumann 2009). This characterisation is, of course, the very opposite of the characteristics now attached to such groups by Keir Starmer. So, what is going on here?

On terrorism and time

It's more than simply that which is new becomes old. Had Starmer simply contrasted “new” terrorism to “older” forms of terrorism of twenty years ago, one might quibble about whether twenty years was enough time to pass for something to be designated as “old”. But that would be a subjective call. What is of interest is that the very things which were seen to make Al Qaeda “new” twenty years ago, appear to have been inverted, so that their core characteristics now contrast effectively to a “newer” form of terrorism. Where Al Qaeda were once nebulous, spontaneous and religiously motivated, now – for onlookers such as Keir Starmer – they are organised, professional, and political. Once the antithesis of organisations like the IRA, groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS are now their equivalent – all equally antithetical to lone actors like Rudakubana.

What further thickens the plot, is that whilst there is agreement in other countries that political violence is changing, it does not always lead to ascriptions of novelty or newness of the sort suggested by Starmer, Tugendhat and others. In the US, for example, there has been similar attention to what FBI Director Chris Wray called “salad bar extremism” (US Senate 2022), where individuals who engage in violence cite a range of disparate, and sometimes contradictory, ideas, grievances and ideologies:

[I]ncreasingly, we're seeing people with this kind of weird hodgepodge blend of ideologies. The old-school world of kind of people with some purity of radical ideology then turning to violence is often giving way to people who have kind of a jumble of mixed-up ideas.

But in the US, this distinctive form of terrorism has *not* typically been characterised as new. Instead, politicians have sought to link this to previous forms of extremism, particularly racist and far right violence associated with organisations like the Ku Klux Klan and others. Thus, the *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* (National Security Council 2021, p. 30), for instance, states:

America has seen the face of domestic terrorism before. Our country has struggled against groups and individuals who refused to accept that, as a democracy, we must settle our differences peacefully and according to the rule of law. Victims of the 1921 Tulsa massacre bore the terrible brutality of domestic terrorists of their era. Victims of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing suffered the awful inhumanity of domestic terrorists of their time.

Here, links and connections are made between the terrorism concerns of the present, on the one hand. And, on the other, prior forms of political violence and terrorism, especially those associated with far right, racist violence. Continuity rather than discontinuity, evolution rather than revolution, is the narrative here.

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On terrorism, time, and politics

How might we account for this apparent disjuncture, and what does it tell us about Starmer's (re)positioning of Al Qaeda as 'old' terrorism?

In one sense, we could simply recognise that the UK and the US are very different polities with different political institutions, cultures, histories, and concerns. Variance between them – in terms of how violence is understood and categorised – should, perhaps, not come as a surprise. Yet in many ways, this emphasis on politics and the political might give us another way into these questions concerning the way that terrorism is considered historically.

We argue that framings such as those considered above represent different political attempts to mobilise terrorism's pasts and presents in order to support particular political (in the broadest sense) projects, causes and goals. Linking present political violence to older forms of violence has a political resonance in the US; connecting contemporary violence to things like Klan violence of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries serves to emphasise the seriousness and harms of such violence. In the UK, by contrast, attempts to link present violence to either the recent past (the post 9/11 and post 7/7 periods) or older histories of terrorism ('the Troubles' in Northern Ireland) lack the same kind of resonance because – at least in terms of the UK government – there is limited interest in the complex history of identity and violence of that period.

The Good Friday Agreement is widely seen to have 'ended' the Troubles, and the question of whether and/or how to 'remember' this period is complex (Graham and Whelan 2007; Lundy and McGovern 2008). Thus MI5 Director General Ken McCallum (2020, emphasis added) puts it: "Twenty-two years on from the Good Friday Agreement, great things have been achieved; Northern Ireland today does not suffer in the way that it did. Nearly everyone has moved on". There appears, therefore, little political capital to be made from drawing references to past periods of conflict and violence that many would rather forget. This lies in contrast to the US, where debates about the civil war, how to commemorate (if at all) key figures within the confederacy, and the historical legacy of slavery and racial violence, all burn with a fierce intensity in a deeply divided political moment (Clinton 2019; Ghoshal 2015).

In terms of the more recent past, the UK – perhaps in contrast to the US – has not been shy in legislating to combat terrorism. Since 2000, the UK Parliament has passed seven substantial pieces of counterterrorism legislation – an average of one every 3 and a half years – with a further piece of legislation (the Protect Duty) currently before Parliament. This stands alongside six versions of CONTEST, the UK government's counterterrorism strategy, and repeated additions to the UK's list of proscribed terrorist organisations. In other words, perhaps in contrast to the US – certainly in terms of 'domestic' terrorism – the UK has been very active in terms of introducing measures to combat terrorism. In this context, rhetorical appeals to novelty and distinctiveness become more appealing as a means of forestalling questions around the insufficiency of the many measures introduced since 2000.

In short, the dissonances we have identified – where Al Qaeda move from being seen as 'new' terrorists who lack political motives and organisation, to being seen as 'old' terrorism which exhibits just these qualities; as well as how the US sees such terrorism as continuous with its history of political violence but the UK does not – are essentially political. Whilst the two countries do have different histories of political violence, there is little inherent in such histories which explain the divergence. We argue that temporal designations of contemporary acts of terrorism – acts of violence conducted by individuals like Rudakubana – as 'new' in the UK, and 'not new' in the US, reflect the political strategies of key actors within these respective countries. Just like the 'new terrorism' debate in the late 1990s/early 2000s, much here is to do with the justification of new measures to address the violence, and rather less, if anything, to do with 'accurate' periodisations of political violence.

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