

Violence Fixated Individuals: A Conceptual Analysis



PROFESSOR QUASSIM CASSAM
UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

How should Violence Fixated Individuals be defined?



- VFIs are ‘individuals at risk of extreme violence, where ideology is not the primary driver’ (*Terms of reference for phase 2 Southport Inquiry*).
- Is this a definition or a ‘practical steer for the Inquiry’s work’? Either way, a definition is needed if the VFI terminology is to be used.
- Three concerns about *defining* VFIs as individuals at risk of extreme violence etc. (1) It is too broad (2) It is potentially misleading (3) It doesn’t offer an adequate account of violence fixation.
- A better definition of VFIs is needed.

Too broad



- The definition generates **false positives**. There are individuals who are at risk of extreme violence where ideology is not the primary driver, but who aren't VFIs.
- The definition should make it explicit that VFIs are individuals who are at risk of **committing** or **perpetrating** extreme violence. The original intention.
- An amended VFI definition: individuals at risk of committing extreme violence, where ideology is not the primary driver.

Potentially misleading



- There is a distinction between something that **happens** to a person and something that a person **intentionally does**.
- “At risk” is a **safeguarding** term that potentially obscures this distinction.
- ‘VFI’ can be satisfactorily defined without employing the concept of ‘at risk’.

No account of violence fixation



- The definition of 'VFI' doesn't define what it is supposed to define. Being violence fixated is not the same as being 'at risk of extreme violence where ideology is not the primary driver'.
- **A person can be highly likely to commit an act of non-ideologically motivated violence for reasons that have nothing to do with a violence fixation.**
- **Conversely, a person can have a violence fixation without thereby being 'at risk' of committing extreme violence.**

Violence fixation and an improved VFI definition



- **Pathological fixation:** ‘a preoccupation with a particular person or cause that is accompanied by deterioration in social and occupational functioning’ (Meloy & Rahman 2021). A fixation in this sense goes beyond mere fascination or interest.
- An improved VFI definition: **an individual with a pathological fixation on extreme violence.**
- Violence fixation is **compatible** with ideological commitment but does not **require** it. A **non-ideological** VFI is someone with a pathological fixation on extreme violence where ideology is not the primary driver.

Violence fixation and the risk of committing extreme violence



- A possible violence trajectory: initial interest in violence → active search for violent material online → repeated consumption → increasing familiarity and preoccupation → online reinforcement → pathological fixation → extreme violence.
- The arrows signify a *possible* pathway. They *don't* mean that every person with an initial interest in violence *necessarily* progresses to the next stage or that the process is linear or irreversible.
- The precise relationship between violence fixation and extreme violence has not yet been established.

What the VFI construct still misses



- AR had ‘a deep and enduring preoccupation with extreme violence and the brutal death of others’. But this is only part of the story.
- AR’s statement: “It’s a **good thing** those children are dead. Literally such a **good thing** those kids are dead, six years old. I’m so glad the children are dead. So glad. Yeah I’m so happy. Six years old. It’s a **good thing** they are dead, yeah.”
- Talk of 'violence fixation' captures AR’s **preoccupation** with extreme violence, but not his **affirmation** of it – the fact that he valued and endorsed it - or his commitment to its **perpetration**.

Fixation is not affirmation



- A violence-*affirming* individual (**VAI**):
 - (a) **values** and **endorses** extreme violence and the brutal death of others;
 - (b) is **committed to the perpetration** of extreme violence, and
 - (c) regards extreme violence as **an end in itself** rather than as an instrument for achieving some further end.
- **VFI** describes a person's *psychological* orientation. **VAI** describes their *evaluative* orientation.
- Describing AR as a VAI foregrounds his agency: extreme violence was something he positively valued and was committed to perpetrating.

What we don't know



- Whether and to what extent pathological fixation on violence and the affirmation of violence for its own sake are significant **risk factors** for perpetrating extreme violence.
- Whether pathological violence **fixation** is itself a risk factor for violence **affirmation**.
- Why and how a given individual became a VFI or a VAI.

Extremism without ideology



- VAs needn't be ideologically motivated **but this doesn't mean that they aren't extremists**. A person can be an extremist because of **what they value and what they are committed to doing**, even without an ideological cause.
- VAs are **extremists** because of what they value (extreme violence) and what they are committed to perpetrating (the brutal death of others). This is 'extremism without ideology' (Cassam 2026, McCauley 2026).
- Describing them as 'extremists' also makes it clear that their violence isn't "ordinary" criminal violence.

Non-ideological violent extremism (NIVE)



- In many cases of non-ideological violent extremism, we can't be sure what the motive is.
- We need a **placeholder** for the wide range of cases where there isn't an ideological motive or cause, but we aren't dealing with ordinary criminality.
- A suitable placeholder concept is **non-ideological violent extremist (NIVE)**. It offers a high-level characterization of a novel type of extremist. AR is one example of a NIVE but there may be others who are different from him.

Non-ideological extreme violence (NIEV)



- NIEV involves the use or threat of extreme violence that has no clear ideological purpose.
- Its implicit or explicit purpose is to shock, intimidate, or outrage a wider audience.
- The definition needs to be supplemented by a clause excluding extreme violence whose primary driver is gang-related, drug-related, etc.

False negatives



- NIEV violence is audience directed.
- Consider someone who positively values extreme violence, wants to kill people brutally, commits a mass-casualty attack, has no ideological, financial, sexual, gang or drug-related purpose, and is completely indifferent to whether a wider audience is shocked, intimidated or outraged.
- Such a person is apparently not an NIEV. Is this a problem?

NIEV vs NIVE



- NIEV and NIVE answer different questions. NIEV characterizes a type of violence; NIVE characterizes a type of person. If our concern is with identifying and understanding individuals, NIVE may be more useful.
- The case for ‘extremism’: it helps with the problem of false negatives because NIVE violence needn’t be directed at a wider audience.
- There is no strong case for preferring NIEV over NIVE when our concern is with identifying and understanding individuals.

Implications for state responses



- If non-ideological violent extremism is a real phenomenon, then we should ask whether existing frameworks are equipped to recognise and respond to it.
- **A counter-extremism framework designed for ideological violent extremists (IVEs) may miss individuals whose extremism is not ideological.**
- **We need a counter-extremism framework that has room for both IVEs and NIVEs.**

References



- Cassam, Q. (2026), 'Extremism without ideology'. *Advances in Psychology* (<https://doi.org/10.56296/aip00062>).
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2025), 'Terror without ideology? The rise of nihilistic violence'. ([Terror without ideology? The rise of nihilistic violence - Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#)).
- McCauley, C. (2026), 'The end of ideological violence'. *Advances in Psychology* (<https://doi.org/10.56296/aip00066>).
- Meloy, J.R. and Rahman, T. (2021), 'Cognitive-affective drivers of fixation in threat assessment'. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* (<https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2486>).