

# MAPPING THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMERS

TO STREAMLINE THE PROCESS OF ENGAGING IN CVE



Hedayah  
countering violent extremism

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To help better understand a *Former* extremist's journey from disengagement to CVE involvement, Hedayah hosted a workshop that looked to map this unique experience. The workshop began by detailing the sequential process *Formers* took across 7 stages and correlating them to what they were **Doing, Thinking** and **Feeling** at each stage. From this information, key focus areas were determined as potential areas that both government and non-government can focus their efforts on when trying to attract *Formers* in to becoming active with CVE. These areas include:

- Importance of determining credibility
- Making the *Former* feel safe
- Re-calibrating *Formers* identity
- Types of involvement

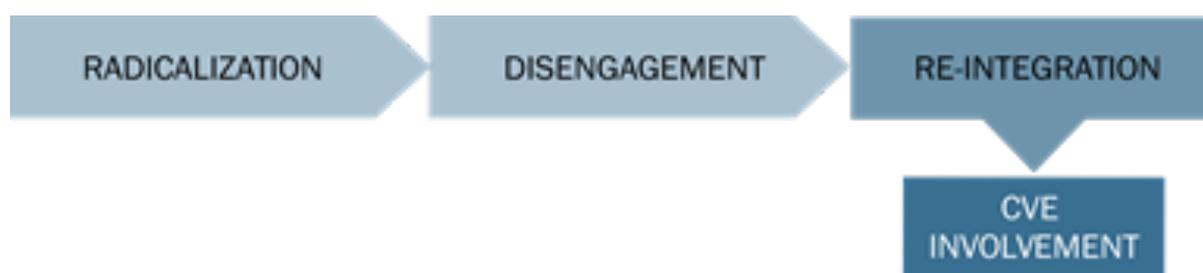
The report also includes implementable initiatives that can help governments and NGOs tackle some of the concerns *Formers* prior to becoming involved in CVE. These programs and ideas are listed below (and detailed in the report):

- *Formers* Re-integration Assessment
- Reserve the Right Safety Toolkit
- Renewed Identity
- Ruckus Events

Finally, follow-up opportunities are included that aim to build upon the workshop and assist much of the work *Formers*, governments and NGOs are currently involved in. These focus on areas such as networking, development of unified risk assessments and training toolkits.

## BACKGROUND

The increasing need to proactively tackle the growing threat of violent extremism has led to considerable effort and research focused on furthering the understanding of what leads an individual towards violent extremism as well as what prompts them to disengage. This is often done by studying the push and pull factors that kick start the radicalization process, as well as the motivations that lead to de-radicalization and disengagement. However, once an individual has fully de-radicalized and disengaged, there remains a third phase that remains understudied. *What leads an individual to use their experiences to actively counter a message and/or organization that was once central to their lives?*



Building upon the work and action plan developed in the expert meeting, *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Responses to the Challenge of Foreign Terrorist Fighters*, Hedayah hosted “*Mapping the Experiences of Formers to Streamline the Process of Engaging in CVE*” to better understand the third phase and find answers to the proposed question. The mapping workshop aimed to establish key factors, across various stages of this process, which both Government and non-government organizations (NGOs) can focus their efforts. By identifying these specific factors, organizations could connect with formers resulting in the increased likelihood of them becoming involved in CVE.

To map these intervention points, Hedayah championed an innovative model by inviting a customer mapping industry expert to help guide the discussion. This technique is more commonly associated with the consumer industry and mapping the experiences of customers with a specific brand. However, this technique was adapted to help illustrate

the various stages of the process that a *Former* goes through until they become actively involved in CVE. This is done through understanding their actions as well as their psychological and emotional responses.

To best achieve the goals of the workshop, participants included *Formers* from both Islamist Extremist organizations and Far-Right White Supremacist organizations. This ensured that any factors that could potentially be targeted were not focused on individuals with specific ideological backgrounds. Additionally, representatives from various governments as well as non-government organizations working directly with formers participated which ensured the experiences of various actors could be better understood. This allowed participants to share their experiences of working with one another in addition to building bridges amongst the various actors; an issue that remains key to counter violent extremism.

The workshop took a phased approach which first allowed *Formers* and NGOs to discuss their experiences. This was followed by consolidating these experiences into key themes or potential intervention areas and finally coming up with implementable initiatives that could directly target these themes.

## MAPPING EXERCISE

In the first session, *Formers* were given the opportunity to discuss their personal journey to becoming active in CVE. This was done against a pre-constructed framework of a map that was first agreed upon by all workshop participants. At the top of this framework lies seven key stages detailing the process that *Formers* go through. This begins with when they first became aware of CVE up to point that they are actively advocating for it. *Formers* were asked to describe what they were **Doing, Thinking** and **Feeling** at each of these stages. This session was followed by an exercise that allowed governments and NGOs to discuss their activities aimed at targeting these various stages as well as some of the barriers that *Formers* may encounter when getting involved. Below is a more detailed description of *Formers* experiences at the seven stages of the process.

### 1. Discover:

When discussing how the *Formers* became aware of CVE and the roles they can play, it is often initiated through getting contacted by a *Former* or an NGO. This served as the trigger point for most of them. Emotionally, guilt over their actions and previously adopted ideologies were intensified during this period of their lives. This resulted in most questioning themselves on how to make amends.

### 2. Learn:

Having begun the process, the opportunity to become involved in CVE

now becomes more appealing. However for *Formers*, more needs to be learnt and understood which involves talking with others and researching opportunities. Throughout this part, the level of skepticism is high. *Formers* remain unsure how they can contribute in addition to contemplating the risks that may relate to becoming involved.

### 3. Decide:

At this stage of the process, *Formers* make their decisions. For some, the risks outweigh the benefits or they are simply not ready. However, others decide that they need to join the cause after first “straightening out”

identification issues they may have, more of which will be discussed later. This is often driven by a sense of obligation to atone for their previous involvement within violent extremist organizations. Although their decision to become involved has been made, questions relating to one's identity persist. Having been completely immersed within an organization, which often results in a loss of individuality and independence, may leave lingering doubt

#### **4. Act:**

Now comes the time to act. *Formers* take the opportunity to either talk about their experiences publicly across various platforms, or become involved within the grassroots level of CVE. Alternatively, a more low-key role may be considered that allows them to not feel so exposed. Although the methods used amongst *Formers* varied, becoming actively involved in CVE helped empower and motivate them to continue work. Nevertheless, this does not come without self-doubt. During this stage, *Formers* question if their message will be believed or listened to by the public.

#### **5. Cope:**

Having been brave enough to get involved in countering an organization and/or narrative that they were once so committed to, most *Formers* now have to endure various forms of backlash from the organizations they were once part of, communities and even family. Additionally, various forms of media often question their authenticity and credibility. This leads *Formers* to feel overwhelmed and question if this negative attitude towards them will ever end.

#### **6. Benefit:**

At this stage, *Formers* begin to recognize the positive impact they are making in addition to the value they are contributing to CVE. Furthermore, their increased levels of experience in speaking out about their experiences allows them to refine their story and focus on the most impactful elements. The increased level of positive emotions about the work they are doing helps make *Formers* feel proud of their work and reinforces their commitment. Additionally, throughout this phase, many question themselves about what

they have gained in relations to making amends and forgiving themselves for previous actions and thoughts.

#### **7. Advocate:**

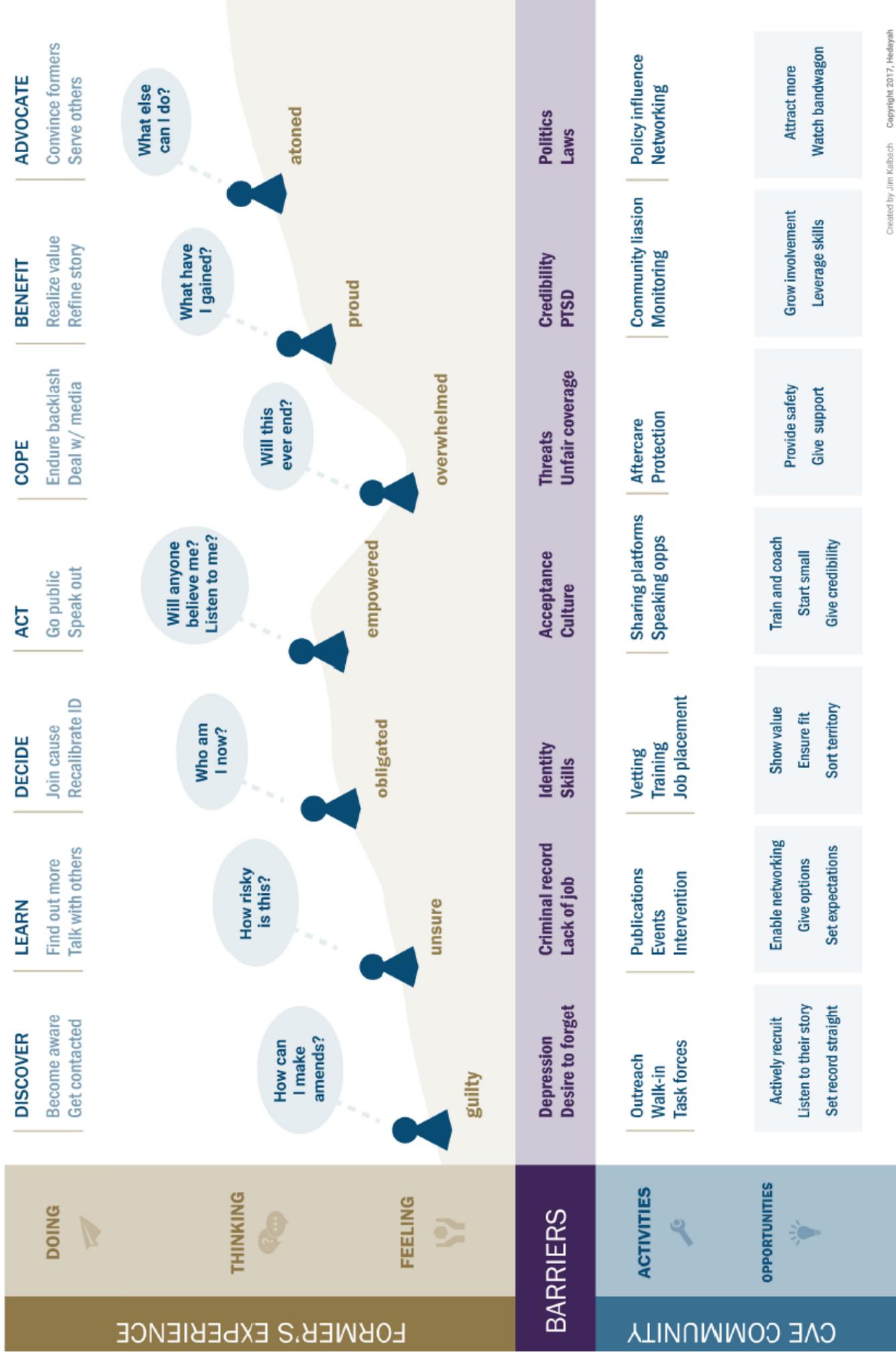
To complete their journey into CVE, *Formers* now use their experience and story to engage others to become

involved. Additionally, they use their personal experiences to help others. The most important element at this stage is that many finally feel atoned and are committed to helping counter violent extremism in their own way. At this final stage, *Formers* inquire how else they can contribute to both CVE.



# A Former's Journey to Involvement in CVE

from guilt to atonement



To complement the map, participants representing both governments and NGOs discussed activities that they are either involved in or know are taking place at all seven stages. At the early stages of the process, these mainly involved providing individuals the opportunity to approach them through various outreach programs and information. The further involved a *Former* became within the process, the more comprehensive and tailored the activities became. These activities varied from forms of training, aftercare support or being involved with influencing policy. This helped establish what was missing within these activities and what opportunities there were to help support them. Despite the willingness of *Formers* and available CVE related activities, barriers remained. During the early decision stages, some *Formers* prefer to forget about their experience entirely. Additionally, a weak skill set and criminal record meant job opportunities remained low. Furthermore, *Formers* often remain hesitant to becoming involved due to the lack of acceptance, unfair representation of themselves by others and incessant questioning of their credibility.

Throughout the mapping exercise, a number of talking points underpinned much of the discussions. *Formers* discussed that throughout their lives and work, elements of their past involvement within extremist organizations often comes back to haunt them. *Formers* highlighted that these negative elements follow them throughout their current activities. This they described as a “ripple effect” of their previous life.

Participants also recognized that while the path taken by all participants differ, their remains key commonalities in the process. Additionally, there is no set time frame for this process. For some, the need to get involved is instantaneous while for others, this remains a gradual process that can take years; if they even decide to speak out at all. This is crucial as it allows those working with *Formers* to take a phased approach when communicating with them and not try to rush their involvement. However, key to this approach is that once the decision has been made by a *Former* to get involved, expectations of both organizations and *Formers* need to be managed. Governments and NGOs cannot be seen to exploit *Formers* with their demands and simultaneously,

*Formers* getting involved must also recognize that there are limitations to what can and cannot be done to support them.

While the idea of the workshop was to encourage more *Formers* to get involved, participants raised concerns that the credibility of many *Formers* getting involved in CVE today can be questioned. While these *Formers* want to be involved, they avoid “*Starting at the bottom*” and contributing to the various efforts being done within local communities to counter extremism and build resilience. Participant’s felt this undermined much of their efforts which for some has occurred over a 10 year span. However, it was agreed that determining credibility was subjective and had to be done on a case-by- case basis as no one entity could regulate who was or was not credible.

The map has been consolidated to ensure the key points across the various stages are easily identifiable. By highlighting the various emotional responses and thoughts as well as the barriers that *Formers* face, greater attention can be focused on them by the CVE community. This will ensure *Formers* have more knowledge and support through their process of being involved in CVE.

## KEY THEMES

Having established the process that a Former goes through to becoming involved in CVE, the second and third stages of the workshop focused on first grouping individual factors into larger focus areas and subsequently developing initiatives and programs that specifically target them. *Formers* were first tasked with highlighting the areas they believed were most important in helping make the decision of becoming involved in CVE against how well they were satisfied by government and NGOs. This was essential as it helped determine both the opportunities and gaps that organizations and governments can focus their efforts.

It was noted that individuals working directly with trying to help *Formers* were good at building trust with individuals looking to leave extremist groups or get involved in CVE. Additionally, *Formers* revealed that NGO's and governments should communicate without judgment and a non-patronizing manner. More specifically for NGOs, building trust also meant ensuring anonymity and not reporting or discussing their cases with local policing authorities. This is crucial as *Formers* often find it difficult to trust individuals and speak to them about their experiences. Issues relating to the safety of family members were also key at all stages of the process. *Formers* however felt satisfied with the work being done on this front.

Some of the factors were more specifically related to certain forms of extremism. For Former Far-Right extremists, tattoos representing their views were often highly visible. Therefore, tattoo cover-ups or removal opportunities were often provided to *Formers* which helped solve appearance related issues. In relation to Islamist extremism, clarity on certain religious texts was key for member looking to leave organizations. Similarly a variety of individuals and organizations worked on providing these clarifications.

While positive work was being done by NGOs and Governments across various factors, there remained a larger collection of issues that *Formers* felt were not catered for. Through these discussions in addition to the mapping exercise on the first day, four

main themes appeared as potential areas for organizations or governments to focus on when trying to attract *Formers* to either exit extremist groups or become actively involved within CVE. These four related to credibility, safety, recalibration of identity and involvement options.

### **1. Determining Credibility:**

As previously discussed, participants remained concerned about the credibility of individuals becoming involved in CVE. Discussions included the need to introduce some form of mechanism that can help assess credibility of individuals. There are a variety of features that the term credibility includes. As well as evaluating the individual's identity and story, the ability to determine how serious an individual is to becoming involved is crucial. Alternative motives can often lead individuals becoming involved within CVE to reach vulnerable communities. Furthermore, determining if an individual is psychologically capable is critical. Psychological assessment are needed to safeguard communities from potentially unstable individuals. Additionally, *Formers* may require psychological help when readapting back into mainstream society.

### **2. Making Formers Feel Safe:**

A key overarching requirement for *Formers* to become involved in CVE is feeling safe. Similar to credibility, feeling safe is multidimensional. The regular threats as a consequence of speaking out can lead individuals to fear for their physical safety. Therefore some form of assurance on the well-being of themselves and family is significant. Supporting health related issues, inclusive of physical, emotional and mental, were also discussed as integral to affecting decisions of becoming involved. Depending on the levels of previous involvement within extremist organizations, legal support is often desired. At a more advanced stage of the process, those who decide to speak out may require assistance in feeling safe about telling their story both in portraying the right message and feeling comfortable speaking on various platforms.

### 3. Re-Calibrating Their Identity:

For *Formers*, their experiences are an integral element of who they are and the unique story they have. However, at the initial stages of disengagement, fixing elements of their identity is important. These include the most basic forms of identity such as identification cards, passports or in some contexts social security numbers. As previously mentioned, elements that visually associate an individual to an ideology such as tattoos are seen as barriers that prevent full assimilation back into mainstream society. Self-improvement opportunities such as education are also seen to help with getting jobs and making a living. Although there is a need to re-calibrate identity to help with opportunities, there is a need to preserve authenticity and their powerful stories.

### 4. The Types Of Involvement:

As well as timing, the types of involvement in CVE by *Formers* differ. While some were comfortable with speaking out about their experiences on various platforms including media outlets, others were not as comfortable or active on this front and instead want to work more actively with building resilience within local communities. This ability to become involved in CVE in different forms was a key theme throughout the workshop as it allowed *Formers* to decide how much of their story they wanted to reveal and in what capacity they wanted to help counter extremism.

## IMPLEMENTABLE IDEAS

The final section of the workshop focused on developing implementable ideas that directly address each of the four core themes. The first idea aims to ensure *Former's* are credible and mentally capable of getting involved. The second and third target safety and identity related issues *Former's* may have. The final program aims to ensure *Formers* are aware of the various opportunities they have when getting involved within CVE. Throughout discussions, it was emphasized that some government and non-government agencies working with *Formers* may already have or are in the process of developing similar programs and tools that focus on specific elements of these core themes. The four ideas discussed below are programs and initiatives that are both universal and flexible. All can be adapted and used within any context as well as being implemented by both governments and non-governments.

### 1. Former Reintegration Assessment

To ensure that *Formers* becoming involved in CVE are considered safe, stable and not a risk to themselves or the community, group 1 developed the Former Reintegration Assessment (FORA). This is a preliminary assessment that will help determine the types of involvement *Formers* are fit to take part in and includes both a risk and safety assessment. For both assessment streams, a preliminary interview focusing on the *Formers* life and experiences will allow for initial understanding of medical conditions and mental health status. Additionally, a social report will accompany this, which will discuss criminal history, violent behavior and previously adopted extremist ideologies. If it is determined that individuals may have problems with addictions and/or mental health and require ongoing support, they are referred to the relevant professional services for further assessments. Those who have criminal or violent histories will be assessed on a case by case basis with the special report indicating if they have fully rehabilitated. For those who are deemed safe and no longer a risk, a suitable form of involvement will be presented to individuals and subsequent forms of training will be provided. These can range from

peer to peer mentoring, CVE recruiting, or working more virtually through social media and hotlines.

## 2. Reserve the Right Training Toolkit

Having recognized the importance of feeling safe as a precursor for getting involved in CVE, the second idea looked to develop a tool kit that would advance a *Formers* ability to improve their skill set, ability to make an informed decision and overall safety. Additionally, the toolkit will assist in ensuring the CVE community has more active *Formers* who are able to make a difference. The toolkit itself would be an online-based training consisting of various components, including physical, psychological, and legal safety. *Formers* will be required to create a profile and complete an online questionnaire which will indicate the types of training they are seeking. The curriculum will take a gradual approach that will begin with more generic courses that provides advice on ensuring physical well-being through situational awareness and security courses. Basic courses on social related issues such as how to fill out job applications and improve financial stability will also be included. With the support of legal experts, courses will be developed to ensure that *Formers* are aware of their rights and the legal support available to them. Similarly, psychological experts will contribute to the development of training material that relates to emotional and self-confidence issues as well as others. Having been trained on the fundamentals, *Formers* can receive most advanced and tailored trainings to improve communication skills such as writing or public speaking courses. These can be done on a one-to-one basis to enhance a *Formers* ability to refine their story and feel more secure about discussing their experiences.

## 3. Renewed Identity

The concept focuses on re-calibrating an identity through developing a three staged program: stabilize, normalize and specialize. For the stabilization component, the program would begin by providing referrals and intake services for those who need specialized help. Additionally, advice on identity protection and

legal matters will be given to help ensure *Formers* are able to fully reintegrate back into mainstream society. Once the essentials are provided, the next stage will look to normalize social, emotional and for some religious aspects. This piece of the program will provide support for re-socialization which can be difficult for individuals who have been heavily involved with certain organizations. This can be done through attending certain events or a *Formers* support group that allows for increased interaction. Depending on former beliefs, tailored support can be included such as Hajj assistance programs for Muslims which may help with their religious rehabilitation. Alternatively, visits to Holocaust museums or victims may help former far-right extremists emotionally re-calibrate. The final stage of the program is to provide more specialized assistance. This includes social media or public speaking classroom training that enhance language and etiquette features. These training can conclude by providing *Formers* with opportunities to partake in conferences and workshops and continue professional development and rehabilitation.

#### 4. Ruckus Events

The final idea tackled the problem relating to the types of involvement. *Formers* are often reluctant to become involved within CVE due to the lack of options and the perceived idea that becoming involved means actively speaking out about your experience. Through Ruckus Events, an organization with links to communities across the world, locally based opportunities will be used to engage with the community. Both *Formers* and the general public can get involved with the organization to partake in alternative methods such as taking at-risk youth fishing or develop sports programs. These can also include encouraging and working with youth for humanitarian related issues, such as refugee support and integration or opening their own NGO. Furthermore, more individual methods can take place should they choose to become involved in a mentoring/ One-to-One program. Another key aspect of Ruckus will be its ability to put together locally based events across the world following a tragic event. To cope with various terrorist events across the world, communities often need to unite and stand together again.

Through its international members and partners, Ruckus would put together fitting events that show solidarity and support to the affected community. These may be smaller more somber events or large-scale festivals.

While all four ideas could be implemented independently, it is key to highlight that these themes are inter-related. While the levels of emphasis on each theme may differ amongst *Formers*, each of the themes must be addressed to ensure the *Formers* are equipped with all the necessary skills in their efforts to counter violent extremism. The diagram below demonstrates this.



## FOLLOW UP OPPORTUNITIES

The follow up opportunities below reflect some of the additional gaps identified throughout discussions during the workshop. These gaps do not directly relate to encouraging *Formers* to become involved in CVE but instead include workshops and training, for both government and NGOs, who work within to CVE.

- 1** Workshop on bringing Former Foreign Fighters (FTF's) together with government officials to help establish clear ways in which *Formers* can be better used on a more practical level.
- 2** Throughout the workshop, *Formers* discussed the need for more networking opportunities. A "Formers summit" that bring together the older generation of *Formers* with the more recent wave. A summit would allow both to exchange ideas as well as showcase the various ways that each can get involved.
- 3** Workshop on developing a unified risk assessment that can be used by both government and non-government organizations. Participants will share various risk assessment measures with the goals of compiling them into one standard toolkit.
- 4** Develop a training course that develops skillsets of NGOs to apply for grants. Participants raised the issue that some NGOs doing good work found it difficult to expand their effort as they had little capacity and knowledge to successfully apply for potential funds.