



Event Report

## MENA Regional Hub Inaugural Workshop

Rabat, Morocco  
16 – 17 March 2023



### Summary

On 16-17 March 2023, the [Strong Cities Network's](#) MENA Regional Hub held its inaugural workshop in Rabat, Morocco with generous support from the European Union (EU). The workshop, which was co-hosted by the City of Rabat, brought together more than 70 representatives from local governments, national governments and civil society from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as from the United Nations (i.e., [UN-Habitat](#), the [UN Office for Counter Terrorism](#) (UNOCT) and [Office for Drugs and Crime](#) (UNODC), [United Cities and Local Governments Africa](#) (UCLGA), and other international partners. This included mayors, deputy mayors and other local government officials from 27 municipalities or governorates from across MENA.

The workshop served as an introduction to the MENA Regional Hub and [its five pillars](#), and invited participants to exchange perspectives on the threats facing cities across the region and the needs and priorities of local governments in order to strengthen their role in preventing and responding to extremism, hate and polarisation as part of a whole-of-society approach to addressing these challenges. Among the key needs identified were:

- 1) **Greater sensitisation – amongst all stakeholders – to the role of cities in preventing and responding to extremism, hate and polarisation.** While there is clear understanding of the impacts of these



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threats, there is less awareness of the concrete role of mayors and local government practitioners in prevention and response, including in building trusted partnerships with hard-to-reach residents, the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of foreign fighters and their families, engagement with young people, women and marginalised communities and maintaining social cohesion in the midst of an influx of migrants and other “new arrivals” in their cities.

- 2) **Technical capacity-building and thematic awareness-raising** for cities, equipping them with the confidence and tools to leverage existing and/or develop new local infrastructure, processes and networks to prevent and respond to these challenges. This includes training on building and sustaining relationships between local governments and youth and other historically underrepresented groups, like women and ethnic minorities, ensuring local networks are in place before extremist- or hate-motivated violence manifests.
- 3) **Improved and sustained national-local cooperation (NLC)** where there are processes in place to facilitate two-way communication and coordination between local and national governments on issues that have generally been seen as falling within the exclusive purview of the latter, in particular security actors. This underscores the need to bridge the gap between a currently heavily securitised and centralised approach to countering violent extremism and terrorism, and non-kinetic efforts at the local level to prevent these threats from occurring in the first place.

Over the next six months, the Regional Hub will leverage its Technical Support Fund – a financial provision to support the Regional Hub’s engagement with cities – to host city/mayoral roundtables, national-local dialogues, trainings and other activities to address these priority areas. Where appropriate, the Regional Hub will partner with existing city-focused efforts in the region, like that of [UCLGA](#), [Arab Towns](#) and UN-Habitat’s [Safer Cities Programme](#), to support and scale this effort.

## Threats and Key Challenges

Participants identified several challenges and threats that hinder economic growth and social stability in the MENA region, including ongoing violent conflicts, high unemployment rates among youth, human rights abuses – often committed in the name of countering terrorism – and food and land insecurity, all of which are exploited by extremist groups for recruitment purposes. These challenges are both causing and exacerbated by mass displacement and migration, resulting in demographic fluctuations that local governments are currently ill-equipped nor supported to respond to. This contributes to tension between new arrivals and long-time residents (e.g., due to a more competitive job market or more demands for limited public services), creating conditions conducive to hate, polarisation and extremism.

Ongoing challenges presented by the repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families, processes for which are currently insufficient or non-existent especially at the local level, further complicate the situations. Participants from Iraq commented in particular on the added burden (on the region’s resources) of FTFs and families from outside of the region, particularly Europe, as well as others that were displaced by Islamic State-related violence, who remain in camps in the country and northeast Syria, despite international pressure on countries of origin to repatriate their citizens. The urgency and scale of the situation is compounded by the dire living conditions in the camps. Related to this, some participants commented on challenges with managing the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals more broadly.

Although much of the burden from these situations falls on cities, participants commented on how few local governments across the region feel they have a mandate or clear role to play in addressing them. They added





that central governments are typically reluctant to share information or otherwise coordinate with their local counterparts on what they see as primarily a national security issue.

This disconnect between local and national governments results in local officials lacking necessary knowledge – including of extremism - and strategies to support the implementation of national frameworks for addressing extremism and terrorism, while national officials lack access to potential threat, risk and needs’ assessments that local governments could generate based on their understanding of and relationships with local communities.

In addition, participants observed that extremists continue to use digital platforms to spread disinformation, exploit local grievances and disseminate propaganda. This is particularly concerning given the penetration rate of social media across MENA (Egypt is in the [top 20 countries](#) globally for Instagram usage, for example). Participants shared how the accessibility of harmful content online is coupled with high rates of youth unemployment, leaving young people feeling disenfranchised with their local and national governments, and which may result in them looking towards harmful groups for security and prospects.

Finally, participants commented on the need for greater inclusion and consideration of rural localities. There may be some interaction between large urban centres – like capital cities – and the national government on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and related challenges. However, the point was made that remote towns and rural communities are largely neglected in such discussions despite often dealing with significant extremism-related challenges.



“The MENA region is particularly vulnerable. We expect to see further fragility due to decreasing food security, climate change and demands for participatory governance.... When paired with lack of investments in social infrastructure and public services, [this] will lead to frustration and decreased trust... in public institutions.”

Jean-louis Romanet Perroux  
North African Policy Initiative (NAPI)

## Key Themes

### 1. The intention for prevention: sensitisation to the role of cities in preventing and responding to hate, polarisation and extremism.

Overall, participants stressed the need for more multi-actor engagement, trust and coordination to develop a shared understanding of how each actor – whether at the civil society, city, national or regional level – can play a role in preventing extremism.

In regard to the role of cities in particular, there was broad consensus that they play an important role in preventing hate, polarisation and extremism. However, participants identified a need for clearer



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understanding and guidance for what this role actually looks like, and how it can be executed. For example, while many participants understand that cities face the brunt of the impact of extremist and hate-motivated violence, there was less awareness of the role cities can play to proactively and **intentionally** mitigate the risk that of threats manifesting in violence and/or extremist recruitment. For instance, numerous examples were given of city-led initiatives to promote sustainable development, youth engagement, gender equality and/or economic growth: while participants pointed to their importance to reduce the socioeconomic conditions that might make one susceptible to extremist recruitment, they were generally not developed as part of a local strategy let alone with the explicit intention to reduce hate and extremism.

Discussions highlighted how creating an intention at the city-level for the prevention of hate and extremism is important to facilitate strategic decisions around investment of resources and funds and the local partners to leverage in public service delivery. It also creates a framework against which to evaluate such efforts and provides an evidence base that cities can bring to their national government and/or regional actors. This then allows them to highlight on a grander scale why they deserve more support to become leaders in this space. Further, creating and, importantly, communicating such an intention promotes a 'city identity' in which hate and extremism are not condoned, ultimately relaying to the local populace that safeguarding all residents from these threats – regardless of religion, ethnicity, etc. – is an explicit priority for the city.

In this context, participants welcomed the announcement of two forthcoming Strong Cities guides (one for mayors and the other for local government practitioners) that will be launched at the Network's Global Summit in New York City in September 2023. These guides will provide accessible and actionable steps that cities can take to address hate, polarisation and extremism, and to sustain such efforts in the long-term. However, participants stressed the importance of recognising that cities across the region operate in different socioeconomic and political contexts and national frameworks, so their role in prevention and the steps they are able to take to enable this will differ from city to city. For example, in more 'stable' contexts, cities are at greater liberty to focus on addressing long-term crises that fuel extremism, such as climate change, while in conflict and post-conflict areas, the priorities of cities are typically different (for example, the immediate physical security of their residents). Participants therefore advised the Strong Cities MENA Regional Hub to be cognisant of these situational difference as it helps cities apply these guides and support local governments more broadly.

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“Local governments are an important part of the solution [to violent extremism].”

Carlos Alexandre Monteiro Reis  
Head of Programme Office for Counter-Terrorism and Training in Africa,



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### Practice Example – Local Partnerships for Gender Equality in the City of Rabat, Morocco

- **Goal:** *Promoting gender equality and protection of rights of women and children.*
- **Approach:** *Partnerships between the City of Rabat and different stakeholders at the national level, as well as local civil society organisations working on protecting women and children. This led to the establishment of centres across the city to address these challenges.*
- **Impact:** The centres were established with the purpose to prevent and respond to verbal and physical harassment against women have made a significant impact. With their efforts, they have reached out to over 80,000 students at schools and educated them about the principles of human rights. The students were taught about how women's rights and safety are at the core of these principles.



## 2. Technical capacity-building and thematic awareness-raising for cities

In addition to broad sensitisation to the role of cities in preventing hate, polarisation and extremism, participants identified the need for both a) greater access to data to develop city-level understandings of the threat and needs and priorities and b) technical capacity-building on structures, processes and practices for city-led prevention efforts.

When discussing the main drivers to extremism, there was consensus amongst participants about the threat landscape being complex and multi-faceted. There were, however, discrepancies as to the key drivers in the region. Some participants identified ideology as a key factor; many, however, citing a growing body of independent research, including that [recently published by UNDP](#), pointed to lack of employment and wider socioeconomic conditions as the main factor. Discussions also signalled a need for awareness raising around the threat as it exists beyond proscribed groups like Al-Qaeda and Da'esh. This includes, for example, [redpill subcultures](#) online and extreme misogyny, which continue to result in threats of violence against women's rights activists. Overall, there is a lack of accessible and actionable research around the threat catered specifically to a city-level audience.

In terms of technical capacity building, a key area identified during the workshop is the need for more sharing and learning about how to develop and sustain relationships between local governments and young people, and local governments and other community-based actors, particularly historically underrepresented groups, like women and ethnic minorities. Participants shared examples of local prevention networks as a practice to facilitate such relationships, and participants were able to hear from cities in Jordan and Lebanon that have established local multi-actor frameworks that bring together the comparative advantages of diverse community-based service providers in a united effort to reduce vulnerability to hate and extremism.



Participants agreed a local multi-actor approach as such is core to effective and sustainable city-led prevention. They emphasised how the benefits of a networked approach as such lies not only in prevention, but also in post-attack response and in supporting the R&R of family members of FTFs, where these local networks can be mobilised to mitigate risks of polarisation and stigmatisation.

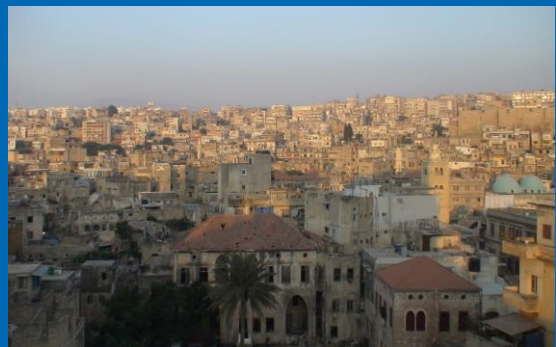
“Our city aims to be proactive in addressing violent extremism and hate... through promoting sustainable development.”

Asmaa Rhlalou

Mayor of the City of Rabat, Morocco

#### Practice Example – Local Partnerships for Youth Reintegration in the City of Tripoli, Lebanon

- **Goal:** *The effective reintegration of former juvenile prisoners into local communities.*
- **Approach:** *Partnership between the Municipality of Tripoli and local civil society organisations to support the reintegration of youth in society through creating job opportunities.*
- **Impact:** *The project employed and reintegrated youth with the help of local civil society organisations and the Municipality, but the country’s worsening socio-economic situation halted these efforts as national and local priorities shifted. **Sustainability was raised as a key challenge after the project’s funding expired.***



### 3. Enhancing NLC in preventing and responding to extremism, hate and polarisation

Participants expressed a keen interest in establishing (or strengthening existing) processes and structures that facilitate collaboration at local, national, regional, and global levels. They stressed that a functioning national-local relationship is the first step towards effective multilevel cooperation and identified NLC as a key practice the Strong Cities MENA Regional Hub should support cities with. Participants recommended, for example, that the Regional Hub serves as a platform and repository for good NLC practice related to P/CVE, which cities can refer to as they seek to strengthen NLC in their countries.

Enhanced NLC was further highlighted as essential to addressing the disconnect between highly centralised and securitised approaches to address the manifestations of terrorism and violent extremism, and



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preventative efforts to address their underlying drivers. This is due, in large part, to a lack of communication between national security agencies and the local actors implementing social, cultural, economic, and other non-security-focused programmes to address inequality, marginalisation and feelings of injustice.

Further, the point was made that enhanced NLC will prove vital in the R&R of those returning from conflict zones. For example, as national governments repatriate (and, where relevant, prosecute) FTFs and their families, a process will need to be in place to eventually facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration into the relevant local community. Having two-way information-sharing protocols and other national-local structures in place prior to this will help ensure prompt and sustainable provision of R&R support to individuals who have been repatriated and the communities into which they are (re-) settling. Regular communication between the national and local level also helps ensure local governments and the community-based actors that support R&R are given time to prepare to 'receive' individuals that require this care.

Related to this, Strong Cities Network's Executive Director, Eric Rosand, highlighted the Network's existing efforts to bridge these gaps through national-local dialogues, where cities are brought together with central government officials in effort to facilitate NLC and to advocate for the role of cities in prevention to national governments. The MENA Regional Hub was encouraged to replicate such efforts on a country-by-country basis.

"Prevention efforts complement and do not undermine national counter-terrorism efforts."

Mohamed Taher Elsherief  
Governor of Alexandria, Egypt



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### Practice Example – Sub-Committees for the Prevention of Extremism in Iraq

- **Goal:** *To create local infrastructure for the implementation of Iraq’s National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism.*
- **Approach:** *The creation of sub-committees that sit within local government and are comprised of civil society actors and local government officials. These committees are supported by the National Security Advisory and have a mandate to create local action plans that implement the National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism. The plans are developed following a consultative multi-stakeholder mapping of local needs and challenges. As stated by Mr Ali Abdullah Al Badiri, Chairman of Iraq’s National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism, these committees have also been allocated a portion of the country’s 2023 budget for countering extremism, enabling them to turn their plans into action through the delivery of local programmes to address the identified needs and challenges. Further, these committees are expected to report to the National Committee on a quarterly basis, thus providing a structure through which NLC is sustained.*
- **Impact:** *While too soon to tell the impact of these structures, with the first of a minimum of seven of such committees and plans having launched in March 2023, this is a promising practice that aligns with international guidance for NLC in prevention (for example, the Global Counter Terrorism Forum’s Memorandum on Good Practices for Strengthening NLC in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism).*



## Next Steps

The Regional Hub will liaise with cities represented at the workshop and beyond to brainstorm and deliver activities (supported, where relevant, by international partners) that address the key themes outlined in this summary. This will include, for example, national-local dialogues in which cities are brought together with relevant central government agencies to enhance NLC in prevention and R&R; city-city roundtables where officials from different cities can exchange practices for prevention; broader R&R support for local governments, and trainings on youth-local government engagement facilitated through Strong Cities' [Young Cities](#) programme. To further contextualise these efforts, the Regional Hub will work collaboratively with cities to develop needs assessments for cities (ranging from capitals to remote border villages). Further, the MENA Regional Hub will work with cities across the region to collect their insights for the two above-mentioned guides being produced, and to ensure city officials from MENA are present at the Strong Cities Global Summit in New York City in September 2023, elevating their voices to global discussions about the role of cities in prevention.

## Additional Resources

- [Policy Paper – Responding to Today’s Refugee Crisis While Maintaining Social Cohesion: Lessons from Cities](#) by the Strong Cities Network
- GCTF’s Memorandum on Good Practices on Strengthening NLC in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism – Available in [English](#), [Arabic](#) and [French](#)
- [Toolkit for Urban Inclusion in Arab Cities](#) by UNESCO
- [Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement](#) by UNDP

## Donors & Partners

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## Contact Information

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities MENA Regional Hub, please contact Maria Sarkaz at [msa@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:msa@strongcitiesnetwork.org).