

## Event Report

# MENA Regional Hub Operationalising a Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE): Roles and Needs of Iraqi Cities

Baghdad, Iraq  
31 May – 01 June 2023



## Summary

The Strong Cities Network's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Regional Hub held its first country roundtable on 31 May – 1 June 2023 in Baghdad, Iraq in partnership with the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism (NCCVE) and the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Iraq. The two-day workshop focused on “Operationalising a Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE): Roles and Needs of Iraqi Cities” and gathered more than 35 representatives from the Iraqi national government, governorates and cities, endowment authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs), and international organisations. The workshop was held under the auspices of Strong Cities' EU-funded [STRIVE Cities](#) programme.

Participants discussed local drivers to violent extremism in Iraq, the national response and institutionalisation of P/CVE strategies, roles and responsibilities of local governments in P/CVE efforts, achievements and gaps in national-local cooperation (NLC) in prevention and existing partnerships and support offered by international and multilateral organisations to national and local actors across the country.

Three key findings emerged out of these discussions:



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- 1) The roundtable highlighted the need to raise awareness among sub-national actors regarding their role in Iraq's National Strategy for CVE. Many stakeholders were unaware of their responsibilities and lacked an understanding of the strategy's scope and expectations.** The roundtable offered such actors the opportunity to learn more about the strategy and to explore how best to implement it at the local level.
- 2) Achieving sustainability for the national strategy requires improved collaboration between local and national actors, as well as local, national and multilateral institutions.** The lack of understanding amongst Iraqi local governments of the role they are expected to play in implementing the national strategy is due, in part, to a lack of NLC – a deficit many other countries face. Participants agreed that enhancing NLC should be a top priority for the national government and cities across the country and that Strong Cities is well-placed to support through facilitating more national-local dialogues. Participants also agreed that efforts to streamline relevant engagement by international institutions, like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), should be intensified.
- 3) The potential for optimising P/CVE efforts across Iraq by proactively leveraging existing structures and mandates at the local level was recognised.** By leveraging these structures, local governments can effectively implement the national strategy and scale city-led P/CVE efforts more broadly.

Overall, discussions underscored the importance of existing multilateral, national and local P/CVE efforts, and participants agreed that the roundtable provided a useful forum in which to raise awareness about these efforts and how best to improve coordination to maximise and sustain their impact.

## Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Political instability and distrust in law enforcement agencies, socio-economic conditions and displaced populations lacking stability and basic services were highlighted as some of the local drivers of violent extremism that extremist groups exploit.

Additionally, participants - city representatives in particular - raised concerns about the country's ability to repatriate, rehabilitate and reintegrate those affected by violent extremism, particularly women and children. Cities have thus far not been consulted on their needs for supporting this process, despite it being within cities where such individuals are expected to reintegrate. Local leaders thus urged counterparts and representatives from the national government and multilateral institutions to support cities in preparing for these processes, including through comprehensive capacity building and by helping design, implement and monitor reintegration programmes. Access to psychosocial support, education, vocational training, creating more job opportunities and community-based partnerships for reintegration were highlighted as essential to enable such efforts to succeed.

City leaders also acknowledged the need to address the lack of collaboration between local governments and the private sector, recognising the untapped potential that exists within this



domain. Although they considered public-private partnerships for P/CVE a novel concept that they have yet to fully delve into, they expressed commitment to actively pursue this opportunity as part of their – and the country’s – broader commitment to enabling a truly whole-of-society approach to P/CVE.

Overall, participants stressed that local governments across the country would benefit from capacity-building, including access to P/CVE-related tools and guides, monitoring and evaluation support, and more to empower them to meet their potential as leaders in P/CVE. Participants observed that Strong Cities can support this by fostering regional and global connections with peers in other cities, and by encouraging their active engagement in national and multilateral decision-making processes.

“The national government, along with the CVE strategy, grant you the mandate and support to engage in this typically securitised field. We highly urge you to embrace this chance, take proactive steps, and work on local CVE action plans and start implementing. It is essential to develop projects and initiatives that address the specific needs of your communities, enhancing their resilience against violence, extremism, hatred, and retaliation”.

Ali Abdullah Al Badiri, Chair of the NCCVE, Iraq

## Key Themes

- 1. The roundtable highlighted the need to raise awareness among sub-national actors regarding their role in Iraq’s National Strategy for CVE. Many stakeholders were unaware of their responsibilities and lacked an understanding of the strategy’s scope and expectations.**

The Chair of the NCCVE affirmed that since 2017, Iraq’s approach to addressing extremism and terrorism has turned into a regional model for a whole-of-society approach to P/CVE. The adoption of a national CVE strategy coupled with the creation of a specialised authority, the NCCVE, which is mandated to lead its implementation and to encourage local governments to launch local action plans, is testimony to the inclusive and flexible approach that the country has adopted. He noted the intentionally broad nature of the national strategy, which was launched in 2019, and how it allows for flexibility and adaptability as well as ease of application in various settings. Following its launch, the NCCVE commenced a process of operationalising and institutionalising the strategy, which involved:

- **Disseminating the strategy to all government institutions and ministries across the country**, the objective of which was to allocate specialised responsibilities for implementing it within different institutions. These responsibilities were distributed across institutions such



as development and education sectors, youth, labour, social affairs, security, and the judiciary. Each institution, including the Ministry of Health, took responsibility for developing a sub-plan to effectively implement the strategy. All institutions formulated their sub-plans based on a standardised template provided by the NCCVE.

- It then became necessary to **establish administrative units or subcommittees** within these ministries and institutions, the purpose of which would be to help with implementation of the sub-plans. These Ministerial subcommittees operate under the supervision of a member of the NCCVE representing the respective ministry.
- Within a few months of this process, the NCCVE recognised that local governments were missing from the picture, and thus sought to engage them. The NCCVE Chair emphasised, for example, that they realised community engagement would be core to the effective implementation of the strategy. Although ministries and government institutions had representation in all governorates<sup>1</sup>, they understood that forming CVE subcommittees at the local level was necessary to effectively reach the community. Consequently, **local governments were granted the authority and support to establish subcommittees** and develop local action plans.

Participants – from local governments and international partners to CSOs – commended the efforts of the Iraqi government to decentralise the national strategy and initiatives through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. However, participants pointed to the need to raise awareness about the mandate provided to local governments to establish subcommittees and develop local action plans to facilitate the localisation of the national framework. For example, a number of city mayors expressed uncertainty regarding their specific roles within the relevant governorate-level subcommittee and whether they had the authority to establish their own subcommittees at the city level. Through constructive and transparent discussions, the Chair of the NCCVE and deputy governors clarified that the strategy allows for various possibilities and options.

For instance, cities have the choice to form their own subcommittees if needed. Alternatively, they can proceed with an action plan independently, or they can join a CVE subcommittee at the governorate level as members and contribute with projects and initiatives inspired by the governorate's action plan. This flexibility within the strategy empowers cities and districts to decide which approach best suits their needs and those of their communities. While the roundtable provided participants from cities clarity and guidance about this, **they recommended the governorate-level CVE subcommittees make a concerted effort to ensure all city and district governments are made aware and supported to realise this mandate** (see Theme 2 for more).

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<sup>1</sup> This is to note that as of the publication of this report, there exist two types of CVE subcommittees in Iraq. The first type consists of Ministerial CVE subcommittees operating within various ministries and government institutions. The second type comprises CVE subcommittees established in all governorates.



“The roundtable provided invaluable insights, enabling me to gain a deeper understanding of Iraq's CVE strategy.”.

Bassem Yaqoub, President, Tel Kaif District

## **2. Sustainability of the strategy can only be achieved through improved and sustained collaboration between local and national actors, and between different sub-national actors (e.g., cities and governorates).**

The importance of NLC was raised repeatedly throughout the two-day programme. For example, the lack of awareness amongst cities about their role in implementing the CVE strategy shows how the absence of national-local communication can impede on the whole-of-society approach to P/CVE which is enshrined in the national strategy and to which the NCCVE has committed.

Further, the Chair of the NCCVE noted that the strategy may need to be updated, given the threat landscape in Iraq now differs notably from when it was formulated in 2017. In this context, participants recommended a collaborative and national-local consultative approach for revisiting the strategy, one where local actors – including mayors and other city officials and CSOs – are able to provide their perspectives on both the evolving threat landscape and their needs for responding effectively.

In addition to the need for enhanced NLC to raise awareness about and update the national strategy, participants urged greater cooperation to collectively address the drivers of violent extremism at the local level. For example, amongst the key factors that extremists exploit in Iraq are high levels of school dropouts and unemployment. In this context, representatives from the Ministry of Labour informed participants of the existence of vocational training centres throughout the country, which cities should leverage to address these challenges. She suggested, for example, that the governorate-level CVE subcommittees should work with these centres: they can train centres staff on P/CVE, encourage community members to enrol in vocational courses, and even develop databases to connect registered unemployed individuals with potential employers. The Chair of the NCCVE welcomed this suggestion and expanded on its potential, highlighting how such centres could play a crucial role in fostering a sense of citizenship and trust in government institutions within the community.

This suggestion exemplifies the need for improved NLC, and how bringing national and local actors together to share with and learn from each other can result in practical initiatives that can help address the underlying local drivers of hate and extremism.

At the sub-national level, participants also expressed the need for better collaboration both within and between the city and governorate levels. For example, participants requested that subcommittees in each governorate make use of existing governorate-level specialisations and mandates. There are, for example, dedicated units in all governorates responsible for development,





youth, health, NGOs and civil society. These departments are already equipped to manage societal issues and should be given clear roles and responsibilities for implementing sub-plans. Therefore, participants highlighted the importance of sharing the workload with these units, allowing them to develop their own CVE plans. These units can then represent the governorate-level CVE subcommittees at the NCCVE, with the Chair of the subcommittees taking on a supervisory role. This approach also applies to ministries such as the Ministry of Immigration, Ministry of Labour, and Ministry of Youth, as they have offices in all governorates. Moreover, it was pointed out that by distributing tasks and projects based on specialisation, the overall workload will be significantly eased. This will enable the deputies to serve as supervisors, auditors, and reviewers of these units, ensuring effective implementation and coordination.

Further, it was proposed that the NCCVE should provide the chairs of the governorate-level CVE subcommittees with the mandate for ensuring the widespread dissemination and circulation of the national strategy to all mayors of cities and districts within their respective jurisdiction. This will ensure that all relevant stakeholders are aware of the national framework and can align their efforts accordingly. Additionally, the chairs of the subcommittees were advised to proactively engage with the mayors of cities and districts falling under their jurisdiction. This engagement should aim to foster sub-national collaboration and explore the best approach for implementing the national strategy at the city and district levels. By involving the mayors in the decision-making process, their specific concerns and perspectives can be addressed and reflected, leading to a more tailored and effective implementation plan.

### **3. P/CVE efforts can be optimised through continued collaboration between international partners present in the country.**

Participants also recognised the important role of international organisations in P/CVE across the country. For example, UNDP is the primary partner engaged in P/CVE efforts at the governorate level. They work closely with governorate-level subcommittees, facilitating meetings, monitoring the implementation of their sub-plans, and enhancing the capabilities of committee members.

IOM, on the other hand, serves as the primary partner of the NCCVE for P/CVE initiatives at the ministerial and district levels. They help support the development and launch of local CVE action plans at the city level in collaboration with CSOs and have focused on implementing the national strategy in seven cities across Iraq. Those action plans seek to determine and address drivers of violent extremism at the local level and were developed in partnership with the respective local governments. IOM is also facilitating local and national dialogues, roundtables, study visits, and workshops and by supporting ministerial subcommittees.

While both levels of effort are essential in ensuring the NCCVE's vision for enabling a whole-of-society approach to addressing extremism, participants agreed they would benefit from improved coordination and collaboration. For example, regular meetings between UNDP, IOM, and the various subcommittees they work with would provide a platform for sharing learnings, achievements, and challenges with P/CVE efforts at each level: city, governorate, national, etc. Such meetings can also serve to ensure complementarity (rather than duplication) among these efforts and could highlight partnership opportunities to scale them further.



## Next Steps

Participants agreed that additional roundtables such as this one would help ensure the above key findings are addressed, particularly the need to improve coordination and collaboration within and between local, national and multilateral actors. Strong Cities Network will continue to work with the NCCVE and EUAM to facilitate such dialogues. Further, Strong Cities will use its upcoming guide for implementing the [Global Counter Terrorism Forum's Memorandum on Good Practices on Strengthening NLC in P/CVE](#) to support with enhancing NLC in Iraq.

In addition, Strong Cities will look for opportunities to collaborate with UNDP, IOM and other international partners. For example, IOM is currently exploring a partnership with Strong Cities to effectively implement a number of local CVE action plans, which have been developed by a few Iraqi cities with the support of IOM. This partnership aims to address immediate needs that would contribute to the successful implementation of these plans. IOM recognises the unique role played by the Strong Cities Network as a platform for knowledge sharing among local leaders, both regionally across MENA and globally. The extensive network of the Strong Cities enables invaluable peer learning and expertise exchange opportunities, a crucial aspect highlighted by all participants during the roundtable discussions.

Furthermore, the IOM is particularly interested in the Strong Cities' ability to develop innovative and pioneering toolkits, specifically designed for local governments with input from their network of cities, focusing on PCVE topics. Strong Cities is currently in the process of creating a set of toolkits that will be launched during the Strong Cities Global Summit in New York in September. Although these toolkits have a global scope, applicable to all local governments, Strong Cities is keen to collaborate with interested cities to customise and adapt the toolkits, to create tailored guides that resonate with the city's unique local context and realities.

## Additional Resources

- [Iraq's National Strategy for CVE Conducive to Terrorism](#)
- [Global Counter Terrorism Forum's Memorandum on Good Practices on Strengthening National-Local cooperation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism](#)
- [The Role of Religious Institutions in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Iraq](#)

## Donors & Partners

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## Contact Information

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

