



Strong Cities Network
Fourth Global Summit
19—21 September 2023

Fourth Global Summit Event Report

Engaging Local Governments in the Prevention and Response to Violent Extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

New York City, USA
19 September 2023

Summary

On 19 – 21 September 2023, Strong Cities Network held its [Fourth Global Summit](#) in New York City, which brought together over 240 participants, including city leaders and practitioners representing more than 115 cities from 50 countries globally. The Summit featured 11 events and provided city officials from diverse contexts with the opportunity to share and learn from promising practices for city-led prevention of hate, polarisation and extremism. **Read the Event Report [here](#).**

As part of this programme, the Strong Cities' MENA Regional Hub and [United Nations Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate](#) (UNCTED) hosted an informal dialogue on 19 September with a number of mayors and city officials from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The dialogue was an opportunity to discuss how the UN and specifically CTED can better engage with local governments and leaders in the region as they seek to implement counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) frameworks. The event additionally provided city officials with a rare opportunity to engage directly with the UN, and to hear more about the work of the UNCTED as a leading entity in the UN counterterrorism architecture and a possible advocate for the role of local governments in both countering terrorism and P/CVE on the global stage.

Introducing UNCTED

UNCTED experts explained the evolution of international counter-terrorism framework since the Security Council adopted Resolution 1373 (2001) in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, highlighting the Council's relevant actions since then, including the adoption of a number of resolutions that are legally binding amongst UN Member States. They shared, for example, how the Security Council originally requested States to put efforts primarily towards countering the financing of terrorism and through increasing international cooperation. This was then broadened in 2005 with calls for Member States to counter 'incitements' to terrorism (Resolution 1624), before adopting other operational resolutions,

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namely those targeting the movement of foreign terrorist fighters (Resolutions 2178 and 2396). UNCTED experts noted that this ultimately paved the way to the current focus on addressing violent extremism and its “root causes” through a whole-of-society approach. Today, these resolutions are considered a key component of the international legal and policy framework to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

UNCTED experts then shared more about their own role in implementing this framework, primarily as an entity that reports to the Security Council’s Counter-Terrorism Committee, and that conducts, inter alia, assessments of Member States’ counter-terrorism and P/CVE measures in light of the relevant Security Council resolutions and international best practices and standards, identifies emerging threats and trends of terrorism and facilitates technical assistance for Member States. Experts further remarked that UNCTED has increasingly focused on issues of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, recognising that these both catalyse and are themselves fuelled by violent extremism and terrorism, as underscored by the Security Council in Resolution 2686 in June 2023.

The Role of Local Governments

While a whole-of-society approach is globally recognised as good practice, there was consensus amongst participants that the potential of local governments in this approach remains untapped in both multilateral and many national efforts to address violent extremism and terrorism. As mentioned, this dialogue sought to address this gap by bringing city officials from MENA together with UNCTED to place a spotlight on city-led efforts to prevent and respond to violent extremism and related challenges.

To set the tone, mayors from the region shared their perspectives on why local governments should be involved in efforts to address violent extremism and terrorism. They noted, for example, that through good governance and deploying development-focused initiatives (such as investing in the job market, education and the local economy and other areas that local governments already have a mandate for), they build trust in the local government and thus mitigate risks of the absence of such trust being exploited by extremist and other harmful actors. They further observed that local governments can play a vital role in trust-building by adopting, both in words and actions, a human rights-oriented approach to governance that recognises the dignity and rights of all peoples, and that demonstrates that local governments exist to serve the people, rather than the other way around.

Importantly, this role was exemplified in the number of city-led practices that were shared by participants. For example, to mitigate threats of hate and extremism, the local government in **Sousse (Tunisia)** has invested heavily in educational programming and community-based partnerships. This includes initiatives that reduce school violence and school dropout rates by leveraging civil society organisations to provide psychosocial briefings and other support

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to educators and students. The city has also invested in employability training for its vast migrant community, which it delivers in partnership with international and private organisations. Employability support is supplemented with efforts to socially integrate migrants by bringing them together with long-term residents in cultural and sporting activities that the city regularly organises. Finally, the city has established an Observatory for Migrants, which is dedicated to identifying and mitigating the social implications around migration, supporting migrants directly with their integration, and more.

Further, a representative from a city in **Morocco** shared how their local government's approach to preventing threats of hate and extremism is framed primarily around "human development". This is encapsulated in four pillars: 1) to address gaps in basic infrastructure and insufficient public service delivery; 2) to provide dedicated support to individuals in what are deemed vulnerable situations; 3) to improve income and economic opportunities for youth, and 4) to promote human development for future generations. Like other cities, the city has dedicated resources to social programmes that focus on cultural exchange and that bring different communities together through sports, among others.

What are some of the challenges and needs of cities?

The dialogue also gave city officials in the room the opportunity to share some of the challenges they experience in preventing hate and extremism. Firstly, participants pointed to sustainability and continuity as a key challenge, requesting guidance on how to ensure prevention efforts initiated by one mayor are continued beyond that mayor's time in office. Some officials raised concerns around implicitly securitising local government-led programmes by framing them around prevention, noting that this can be mitigated by considering prevention as part of urban development more broadly, as the cities of Sousse and others do. Finally, city officials raised inter-ethnic and inter-religious hate as a continuous challenge, noting that while there are examples of coexistence, extremist groups and other actors have tapped into identity politics, scapegoating ethnic and/or religious minorities for social grievances and thus fuelling polarisation. There are concerns that this will only escalate in the context of increased migration, whether climate-, conflict-induced or otherwise.

To help address some of these concerns, city officials stressed the importance of more opportunities to engage with other cities. It was emphasised that cities in the region can benefit significantly from twinning and establishing direct partnerships with other cities that have more experience with addressing such challenges not only within their region but also globally, including Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. Furthermore, to address the sustainability challenge and to scale their efforts, participants agreed that cities should be supported to align their agendas with those of other stakeholders, including donors and technical assistance providers, while being mindful not to reinforce the concerns around

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securitisation of city-led programmes. The convergence of these agendas holds the key to developing effective programmes and securing support for cities in tackling these critical issues. Lastly, participants commented on the need for cities to be supported with diligently documenting the results of their programmes. Investing in monitoring and evaluation has multiple benefits: it not only provides the evidence base that many donors now expect when they look for initiatives to support but can also build trust between the city, its residents and community-based organisations if such evaluations are publicly available as it demonstrates a commitment to transparency and a genuine interest in having impact.

Enhanced Global-Local Cooperation

Finally, city and UNCTED participants discussed how their respective efforts can be maximised through enhanced global-local cooperation. For example, when it comes to its assessment visits, UNCTED shared that these are intended to provide Member States with the insights and guidance they need to improve their counter terrorism measures, including to apply international best practices. The visits are underpinned by dialogue and exchanges of experience and expertise, with Member States encouraged to cooperate for three reasons: 1) so they can more easily adapt to the needs of the threat, i.e. by addressing new offences and criminalising them in their national legislation; 2) to build their understanding of the operational needs that come with this evolved threat in terms of training and capacity building (e.g., for frontline practitioners); and 3) to address the transnationality of the threat, which requires increased inter/intra coordination at the local and national level, including with local governments as well as cross border cooperation.

Participants agreed that local governments should be consulted in such assessment visits and that UNCTED and cities can jointly encourage national governments to ensure local efforts to prevent and respond to violent extremism and related challenges receive the necessary political and funding support.

What's Next?

The dialogue provided both UNCTED and local governments the opportunity to come together to share what each is doing to respond to threats of hate and extremism. Strong Cities will continue to facilitate such dialogues between local governments and multilateral partners such as UNCTED, the UN Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOCT) and others, in recognition of the fact that local governments and multilateral partners otherwise have little direct interaction on the prevention of violent extremism, despite this being important to achieve not only the whole-of-society approach to such challenges that is considered best practice, but also Strong Cities' mission to enhancing city-led prevention efforts on a global scale.

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As part of these efforts, UNCTED and Strong Cities Network are committed to seeing more local government voices included in UNCTED's assessments of Member States' implementation of UN Security Council resolutions, and that UNCTED and other UN agencies are included in Strong Cities-led activities in MENA and beyond.

Donors & Partners

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The views expressed in this summary do not necessarily reflect those of all workshop participants, Strong Cities, all its members, nor UNCTED or the Summit sponsors.

Contact Us

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities' MENA Regional Hub, please contact Zouhair Racheha, Head of MENA Regional Hub, at zra@strongcitiesnetwork.org.

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