

Event Report

MENA Regional Hub

Roundtable on Moroccan Cities' Efforts in Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation

Tangier, Morocco
27 — 28 November 2023



Summary

On 27 — 28 November, in Tangier, Morocco, the [Strong Cities Network](#) MENA Regional Hub, in partnership with the [Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils \(AMPCC\)](#) and the [City of Tangier](#), convened a two-day roundtable to discuss Moroccan cities efforts in preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation and to explore how to strengthen the role of cities and national-local cooperation (NLC) more broadly in preventing hate and extremist-motivated violence and related threats. The event marked the Strong Cities' first engagement focused on local governments in Morocco, made possible by generous support from the [European Union's STRIVE Cities Initiative](#).

The roundtable brought together more than 25 participants, including mayors and local government representatives from nine cities across Morocco. Participants included representatives from Morocco's Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, as well as representatives from the [Moroccan](#)



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Observatory on Extremism and Violence (OMEV), United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among others.

In his opening remarks, **Mounir Lymouri, Mayor of Tangier**, emphasised the city's cosmopolitan legacy as a bridge between East and West, the city's history of openness and diversity and Tangier's newly forged partnership with the Strong Cities Network. Further, the Mayor shared the city's focus on citizen engagement to enhance social cohesion.

Asmaa Rhlalou, Mayor of Rabat and Co-Chair of the Strong Cities International Steering Committee, described the event as an opportunity to exchange experiences and good practices, as well as to learn how cities can support prevention initiatives and programmes in their communities. She also highlighted the importance of using the workshop as an opportunity to explore how cities can prevent hate, extremism and polarisation among their residents amid rising manifestations of these threats globally.

Over the two days, participants addressed challenges facing cities across a range of interconnected issues, such as hate speech, climate change, migration, the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of returnees from conflict zones and the role of cities in maintaining social cohesion in the face of these challenges. They also explored the importance of enhanced national-local cooperation (NLC) to effectively navigate these issues and were introduced to the new Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) NLC Toolkit, developed by Strong Cities, and its relevance to the Moroccan context. Discussions culminated with recommendations on how Strong Cities and other partners could best support efforts of Moroccan cities to become more involved in hate and extremism prevention work.

Key findings from the roundtable included:

- Mayors and deputy mayors recognise the important role local governments play in the prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation, even if their mandates do not specifically include work on security issues. They can contribute through inclusive policies, engagement of youth, women and minorities, as well as resilience-building.
- There was consensus among city and government officials that there is room for enhanced cooperation between different levels of government on prevention. However, clarifying roles and mandates, including for local government, around issues like countering hate speech would help local response.
- Cities could overcome challenges, such as lack of resources, by exploring partnerships with civil society, the private sector and international actors, and leveraging networks like the Strong Cities Network.
- Identifying existing local government and non-governmental structures and programmes that are impacting communities positively is critical for building a whole-of-city approach to prevention.
- Youth engagement and providing opportunities for young people are viewed as crucial by Moroccan cities to prevent extremism and build resilience. This can include promoting and developing sports initiatives, providing public spaces for youth, cultural activities and job creation, as well as establishing youth and children's councils to give them a voice and role in decision-making.



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- Strategic communication is a key area for capacity building as it can help cities build trust with local communities, which is a foundation for effective prevention.
- The impact of climate change exacerbates existing social tensions and vulnerabilities that can enable the spread of extremism and hate. Raising awareness about this threat and building societal resilience to manage it is important.

Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants noted that while Morocco has been largely safe from terrorist attacks in recent years, there is an ongoing threat as evidenced by periodic [thwarted plots](#). Extremist ideologies spreading online and economic factors, such as lack of jobs and opportunities, can make cities vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist groups and threaten social cohesion. They also shared how weak local governance and lack of youth and minority inclusion in decision-making processes can exacerbate the threats.

Participants also shared that cities lack an explicit mandate to engage in security-oriented prevention efforts. Participants said that mayors and local governments need more opportunities to share with and learn from counterparts, including from other countries and regions. This includes more exposure to good practices for how cities are contributing to whole-of-society prevention efforts in their countries, even when they may lack an explicit mandate to do so. Participants identified prevention-related awareness-raising – including enhancing local authorities' understanding of extremist threats and concepts of prevention and resilience – and capacity building as areas in which Strong Cities could offer support to local governments in Morocco.

City officials also shared how enhanced NLC around hate and extremism prevention work, which includes delineating clear roles for local governments, as well as increased engagement with local communities and awareness-raising with cities as to their prevention potential, would strengthen prevention efforts.

Moreover, discussions explored how strategic communications support could help cities develop and deliver targeted messaging around the prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation. Tailoring messages to the specific needs and contexts of their residents can enhance effectiveness and relevance, fostering a more engaged and aware community.

Finally, participants pointed to the importance of showcasing Moroccan mayoral leadership in prevention on the global stage, facilitating their engagement in international fora and integrating their views and local realities into global discussions. This can not only help increase the influence, visibility and credibility of city leaders in Morocco, but press for more involvement in prevention efforts at home.



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Key Themes

1. For an approach to be truly whole-of-society, local governments should be included

Discussions highlighted that local leaders and municipal governments play a crucial role in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation at the community level, despite not having an explicit mandate on prevention. For example, participants shared how local governments, because of their proximity to, relationships with and understanding of local communities, are well-positioned to identify and address the local grievances or divisions in communities before they manifest in violence.

However, participants emphasised that while cities and mayors play a pivotal grassroots role, the prevention challenge requires broader collaboration between various stakeholders. A whole-of-society approach should include civil society, religious and educational institutions, the private sector, community-based organisations and national ministries and agencies, as well as regional and global partners. Participants also noted that prevention efforts could be strengthened through the development of more inclusive national frameworks and more technical and financial support for local initiatives, including those led by cities.

The discourse reflected a shared understanding among municipal representatives that while they are best placed to lead localised prevention efforts, an integrated and well-resourced approach harnessing the comparative strengths of local and national stakeholders is imperative to tackle the complex and multifaceted spectre of extremism.



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City of Agadir

Challenge

The City of Agadir understood that unemployment and lack of economic opportunities can make young people more susceptible to extremist narratives. They recognised the need to diversify income sources and involve the private sector, to create new job opportunities and reduce unemployment risks.



Approach

In response, the Municipal Council of Agadir approved a [Communal Action Plan for Sustainable Development \(2022 – 2027\)](#) that contributed to enhancing the city's resilience through a series of measures that emphasise citizen participation and inclusion, sustainable resource management, critical infrastructure upgrades, support for marginalised communities and cultural heritage preservation. Through this plan, Agadir made itself more attractive to private investment and encouraged partnerships between companies and organisations working in key local industries. It is worth noting that the plan itself was developed through extensive community and stakeholder engagement, which helped encourage buy-in and build social cohesion.

Impact

Agadir's economic diversification efforts, marked by the successful issuance of the [first municipal bond at the national level](#) and the [first loan at the international level](#), have been supported by key partnerships and innovative financing strategies. This initiative, contributing significantly to the Urban Development Programme 2020 – 2024, backed by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Economy and Finance, demonstrates strong investor confidence, and marks a new era in asset classes within the capital market. These efforts play a crucial role in enhancing the city's infrastructure and stability, thereby contributing to the prevention of grievances and threats, such as hate, extremism and polarisation, and fostering a safer and more resilient community.

2. Fostering inclusive and participatory local governance is critical to effective prevention

The discussions emphasised the importance of inclusive, participatory approaches to local governance that engage multiple stakeholders, especially women and youth. Participants argued that exclusion and lack of opportunities can breed frustration, disconnection and vulnerability to extremist ideologies among marginalised groups. In contrast, actively soliciting inputs and providing platforms for participation can build trust, social cohesion and resilience and thus make Moroccan cities stronger while mitigating risks from hate, extremism and instability.



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Participants suggested establishing permanent mechanisms for consultation like local councils and committees; initiating communal decision-making processes to allow for inputs from women and youth; ensuring representation in leadership positions; and addressing needs related to economic empowerment. For instance, **Abeid Mryzig, Deputy Mayor of Layoune**, shared that the city “built 20 spaces dedicated to cultural, music and theatre activities ... [and] established an institution in collaboration with the Ministry of Health to prevent the use of drugs and addiction”. Additionally, he said that the city has focused on women’s empowerment by “building 17 spaces to teach and train [on] a number of artisanal missions, as well as the launch of a football team for women”.

Moreover, **Said Karimi, Mayor of Errachidia**, shared:

“We always focus on extending and building bridges between the city and civil society organisations, educational institutions, religious institutions and the university. This resulted in developing clear programmes with specific goals, mainly promoting human rights culture, and clinging to our noble values. Therefore, responding to extremism, terrorism and hatred is posited [within] a cultural, educational, scientific and developmental approach for us, and where there are economic and social disparities, these become breeding grounds for hate and extremism ... we work on reducing them through inclusive programmes that integrate youth, encourage investment, as well as seek to cooperate with various economic and social partners.”

“What has been covered and discussed in this roundtable shed light on issues of concern to cities on all layers of the society including local grievances and conflicts and the impact of climate change. Being at the forefront, and serving the public as elected officials, is difficult.”

Hakima Al Hatri, Deputy Mayor, City of Fes



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City of Tetouan

Challenge

The city of Tetouan has faced challenges, including a fragile economic base, unable to provide jobs or resources for its rapidly growing population, the proliferation of informal settlements, inadequate infrastructure and services especially in marginalised neighbourhoods, disorganised transportation, environmental degradation related to water resources, insufficient inclusion of women, youth and disabled people in cultural/sporting activities, and a lack of community trust in local government among many grievances.



Approach

Tetouan embarked on a number of reforms and initiatives to address these challenges, including by becoming the only Moroccan member city of the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#), and establishing the [Ahmed Ajzoul Social Center](#) in a marginalised neighborhood to provide social, educational and vocational services. This center has become a pivotal institution for the community. It aims to improve the quality of life for nearby residents, serving a diverse group that includes children, adolescents, young men and women, as well as the wider neighbourhood community. Among its most notable services are the ones specifically aimed at victims of violence, with a particular focus on women and children, and services that include support and guidance against various forms of abuse.

Impact:

The center has significantly improved the lives of its residents by:

- Providing educational services to more than 200 children and adolescents, aiding in their personal and academic growth.
- Facilitating the participation of more than 1000 individuals in sessions aimed at enhancing community education and social awareness.
- Offering guidance in 200 cases of abuse, reflecting its dedication to addressing social issues.
- Benefiting around 300 individuals with vocational training and guidance programmes, and engaging a further 300 residents in cultural, artistic and sports activities.
- Organising ten greening and sports initiatives in the neighbourhood, involving children in artistic and environmental projects.

Addressing issues like abuse, gender violence and exclusion are key to fostering a cohesive, inclusive society – an essential foundation for preventing hate, extremism and polarisation.



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3. National-local cooperation (NLC): building trust through multistakeholder collaboration is key for successful rehabilitation and reintegration

The importance of NLC in prevention, including the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of returnees from conflict zones, emerged as a cross-cutting workshop theme. Participants highlighted how NLC can support and strengthen the prevention-related capacities of Morocco's territorial communes (local governments), particularly those required to contribute to R&R efforts. Discussions highlighted how overcoming the challenges that R&R present requires a coordinated and multi-level approach that is encapsulated in a national framework and includes city-led and other local initiatives that focus on building trust with returnees and between returnees and receiving communities and, more broadly, social cohesion. Participants underscored how R&R efforts should include national and local government partnerships with civil society organisations that are deeply embedded in local communities. These grassroots organisations, they said, can provide targeted psychological, social and economic support to returnees and their families based on in-depth understanding of on-the-ground realities.

In addition, discussions highlighted how local governments can facilitate R&R efforts by ensuring there is flexibility in administrative procedures related to documentation, licensing, banking, etc., that returnees need to navigate upon return to their communities. Streamlining bureaucratic hurdles for these individuals and families can help build trust with returnees, mitigate stigma and avoid further marginalisation.

The need for a two-way dialogue between national and local actors to develop context specific R&R approaches was emphasised. For example, participants felt that local government officials would benefit from guidance from security experts in the Ministry of Interior on rehabilitation good practices while those experts would benefit from local leaders sharing their insights on the needs of local communities.

Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils

Challenge

Strengthening cooperation and coordination between different levels of government remains an important area of focus in Morocco. Often, central government policies do not effectively correspond with the actual conditions and realities in regional areas. Especially in rural and isolated areas or remote regions, there tends to be minimal interaction with the central authorities. Additionally, local government officials and leaders who are from marginalised groups like women and youth tend to get left out of national policy decisions.



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Approach

Established in 2013 as part of the country's shift towards decentralisation, [the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils](#) (AMPCC) helps bridge local and national levels of government in Morocco. Today, the association represents the interests of elected officials of all 1503 communes across the 12 regions of Morocco. It facilitates dialogue and coordination between these local entities and the national government on enhancing local governance and ensuring the successful implementation of public policies at both the local and national levels.

Impact

The AMPCC was instrumental in establishing the Moroccan Network of Locally Elected Women in Rabat ([REFELA-Morocco](#)), within its Advisory Committee for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities, a sub-network of the African Network of Locally Elected Women (REFELA). This initiative has empowered locally elected women in Morocco by providing them a platform to represent local concerns and perspectives at the national level, ensuring their inclusion in national policy discussions. By fostering collaboration between different government levels, including national bodies focused on gender equality and local governance, REFELA-Morocco has been instrumental in enhancing NLC through forming a unified approach to address the challenges and roles of women in local governance. Its mission amplifies women's voices, boosts political participation, and shapes strategies addressing women's needs and priorities in governance.

“This roundtable achieved its objectives. The theme is complex and multifaceted (religion, ideologies, mindsets, development, climate change, etc.). This will help the cities and communities to adapt to the context they live in. What makes me happy is the level of the participants, and their awareness about decentralisation at the local level and the importance of going further, and to protect what has been achieved so far, as well as planning for the future. There is maturity, as well as awareness of roles and responsibilities that add to the democratic values, and the participatory democracy at the local level.”

M Hamed Nejjari, Administrator, Moroccan Association for Mayors



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Recommendations & Next Steps

The Strong Cities roundtable featured several practical recommendations for follow-on Network engagements in Morocco and, more broadly, for enhancing the role of Moroccan cities in prevention. These include:

- Raising awareness among local governments about the threat as well prevention approaches and building local government leadership prevention capabilities.
- Establishing local government committees to develop prevention strategies and action plans.
- Providing spaces for constructive dialogue between different stakeholders (government, civil society, religious and cultural leaders) to build trust, address community issues and discuss how cities can best contribute to preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation.
- Enhancing national-local cooperation when it comes to prevention and the countering of hate, extremism and polarisation across communities.
- Facilitating (through Strong Cities) peer-to-peer exchanges and learning between Moroccan cities, as well as other cities globally.

Strong Cities' MENA Regional Hub will continue to work with Moroccan cities and national-level actors to support them in taking forward some of the workshop's key findings and to translate recommendations into action. This will include by providing further opportunities for city-city learning and expert support, and by leveraging Strong Cities' new [Guide for Mayors](#) and [Guide for Cities](#), as well as the [NLC Toolkit](#), developed by the Network for the GCTF.

Additional Resources

- A Guide for Mayors: Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation, Strong Cities Network, September 2023 <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/a-guide-for-mayors/>
- A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation, Strong Cities Network, September 2023 <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/a-guide-for-cities/>
- National-Local Cooperation (NLC) Toolkit – GCTF Initiative on the Practical Use of the GCTF Memorandum on Good Practices on National-Local Cooperation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, September 2023 https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/GCTFNLCToolkit_EN.pdf
- Engaging Local Governments in the Prevention and Response to Violent Extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Strong Cities Network, September 2023 <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/news/engaging-local-governments-in-the-prevention-and-response-to-violent-extremism-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-mena/>
- MENA Regional Hub Inaugural Workshop, Strong Cities Network, March 2023 <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/news/mena-regional-hub-inaugural-workshop/>



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- Addressing the Overlooked Role of African Cities in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, Strong Cities Network, September 2022
<https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/news/new-publication-addressing-the-overlooked-role-of-african-cities-in-preventing-counteracting-violent-extremism>

Donors & Partners

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Contact Information

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities' MENA Regional Hub, please contact menaregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org.



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