

Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities

Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis

Introduction

From COVID-19 to rising levels of hate and polarisation, to the cost-of-living crisis, to unprecedented migration and increased urbanisation, the impact of successive global crises is being felt acutely at the local level. In recent months, mayors and the cities they lead have also been grappling with how to navigate local manifestations of the Israel-Gaza crisis, which has sparked protests in cities around the world, dividing communities, accelerating rising antisemitism and Islamophobia and threatening social cohesion.



*Demonstration on the National Mall in Washington, DC (United States).
Image: Getty Images*

From Sydney to Sacramento, London to Lisbon, Berlin to Bogota, city leaders and councils are seeing communities mobilise in the face of this latest global crisis. Protests and public demonstrations — pro-Palestinian, pro-Israel and pro-peace — have been seen in cities around the world. [ACLEd](#) has reported that during the first three weeks following the 7 October Hamas attack, approximately 4,200 demonstrations were held in almost 100 countries and territories. The UN has [warned](#) of a sharp rise in cases of antisemitism, Islamophobia and other hate speech in both the online and offline environments. Surges have been reported in a range of geographies, including [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [South America](#), the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#).

Analysis by the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD), which hosts the Strong Cities Network Management Unit, has also [identified](#) a dramatic [upsurge](#) in online antisemitism, including targeting and harassment in online spaces, a three-fold increase in anti-Jewish slurs on alt-tech social media platforms (including 4chan, Bitchute and Gab), and a major rise in threats against Jewish institutions and individuals. Existing social fractures are deepening; community cohesion is eroding. This polarisation is being further accelerated by a barrage of harrowing images, videos and narratives, and mis/disinformation on social media; an environment ill-suited to address the complexity of the crisis and arguably exacerbating and driving trauma.

How mayors, city councils and other subnational government leaders and bodies manage the local impacts of this latest global crisis could have significant long-term impacts on social cohesion and the connective tissue that binds disparate communities in our diverse cities.

Mayors are searching for approaches to calm tensions, recognise and address trauma, find common ground between diverging viewpoints, and provide spaces for community voices to be heard while mitigating rising hate. There is not a single measure or approach that will work for all cities. The contexts in which cities operate vary widely, influenced by broader national, regional and cultural dynamics, and the individual lenses through which residents will view and experience such crises.

Strong Cities, through its engagement with many of its 220 members and other cities around the world, has identified a series of considerations that can support mayors and cities in navigating these turbulent times. While the specific examples cited in this article may not be appropriate for all contexts, they are illustrative of approaches that may inspire and support.

This policy brief uses Israel-Gaza crisis to refer to the unfolding situation in Israel and Gaza since 7 October 2023. We understand that the crisis can be described in many ways. The words chosen are aligned with the UN Secretary-General's most recent speech and are not intended to convey any political view on this or the wide Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The views expressed and examples cited in this policy brief do not necessarily reflect those of Strong Cities members, partner organisations or sponsors of the Network's mission.

Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities

1. Do no harm

How leaders choose to navigate and address the local impacts of a global crisis can have profound impacts – both short and long-term – on the city's social cohesion. If the goal is to repair and strengthen the social fabric, address trauma and ensure residents feel safe and welcome in their city, a “do no harm” approach is advised. This means, essentially, mitigating or avoiding negative and unintended consequences for the potential beneficiaries and implementers of city-led interventions and seeking to influence these dynamics in a positive way.

The complexity and diversity of experiences and trauma triggered by global crises, such as the Israel-Gaza crisis, cannot be overstated. How residents experience a city-led intervention will vary widely and it is imperative to recognise that one person's healing could be another person's trauma. How residents experience the crisis and the city's interventions will be shaped by their personal experiences, generation, values, priorities and worldviews.

A “do no harm” approach in this context prioritises the city's long-term needs and social cohesion over a personal desire or pressure from constituents to take a side or assert a particular political position on the crisis. While city leaders may feel it is their personal or moral obligation to take a position, they should also consider if and how that position will change the trajectory of the global crisis and at what cost to the city's social cohesion. Ensuring that the city is a safe harbour for all residents impacted by this or another global crisis will not only calm tensions in the short-term but will serve the city's long-term efforts to maintain social cohesion.

2. Speak out against all incidents of hate and facilitate reporting

Ensuring that the city remains a welcoming and inclusive space for all residents amid such polarisation does not preclude – in fact, it should compel – city officials to speak out clearly to condemn hateful incidents when/if they occur. Mayors and other officials should make clear that such hate and discrimination runs contrary to their city's core values and therefore has no place in the city. This can be done through official statements and other online or offline messaging or standing in solidarity with those who have been targeted by hate or in support of those who have stood up against it.

Many mayors around the world have taken such stands in the context of the current crisis. For example, in his response to rising hate in his city, the [Mayor of London \(United Kingdom\)](#), Sadiq Khan said

“[t]here are clearly differing, passionate views within our communities, but we must not let events overseas lead to hate and division in our city ... Over recent weeks we've seen an appalling rise in Islamophobia and antisemitism. As Mayor I'm determined to stamp out hate crime in our city - not only by ensuring the police take a zero-tolerance approach to these crimes, but by continuing to fund and support community-led groups to challenge hate.”

In Toronto (Canada), in response to a surge in antisemitic hate, including Jewish homes and businesses being targeted and vandalised, and videos posted online calling for a boycott of a Jewish-owned café chain, newly-elected [Mayor Olivia Chow](#) said that

“[a]s your Mayor, let me be clear: any assault on the freedom of people practicing their faith or religion, is not welcome here. Threatening the safety of businesses is not welcome here. Violence, in all its forms, is not welcome here. Hate is not welcome here.”

In a separate statement, she added that

“[t]here is no place in our city for antisemitism, Islamophobia, hate, intimidation and harassment of any kind ... Through all the pain and anger so many are feeling right now, [do] not lose sight of our common humanity ... Toronto must be a city free from hate where everyone belongs and can live without fear.”



The Mayor of Toronto, Olivia Chow, speaks about tensions in the city over the Israel-Gaza crisis. Image: CP24. Image: XXXX

More than 30 mayors from small cities and villages around Chicago, Illinois (United States), recently joined together to release a [statement](#) condemning “all acts of hate”. These local leaders emphasised that

“[d]uring these times of strife, we are more committed than ever to safeguarding our communities. We strive to be inclusive and welcoming spaces for the residents, businesses, and students who call our communities home as well as any visitors, and strongly oppose hate-motivated hostility that only serves to sow division and fear.”

When releasing the statement, they made [clear](#) that it was “not in response to any specific incidents” but is an acknowledgment of the “widespread increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic language, imagery and behavior” that has coincided with the Israel-Gaza crisis.

3. Activate the city's rapid response/crisis management committee and networks

During times of crisis, mayors and city leaders need to activate their networks and the relationships they have built with different stakeholder communities, including faith leaders, private sector leaders and civil society organisations. It is crucial that the local government understands how the crisis is impacting various communities and these relationships will serve as an early warning system to prevent further escalation and address community needs.

It is thus advisable to convene a crisis management group or other assembly of city officials and community leaders to support city efforts to navigate the crisis. The group or committee should be representative of the city, including trusted interlocutors with and representatives of vulnerable communities. Ideally, the city will have an existing committee or group that can be activated when a crisis emerges.

An open, continuous dialogue with this group will not only provide the mayor and other city leaders with a deeper understanding of how the global crisis is manifesting locally but can also serve as a sounding board to ensure that community needs are being addressed and that public messaging and city approaches are “doing no harm” (see consideration #1). Ensuring that the committee is structured to facilitate information sharing among its members and with the community and to respond to developments in real-time is crucial.

In the context of the current Israel-Gaza crisis, engaging faith leaders from all relevant religions is pivotal. Where they are seen as trusted messengers and representatives by their communities, their involvement and engagement with the local government in navigating the crisis can provide much-needed insight to shape, guide and support the delivery of local interventions. Many faith leaders in cities around the world, such as in [Manchester](#) (United Kingdom), are working together to promote unity and solidarity within and between their communities. It is important to recognise, however, that in some cases, one faith leader may not be able to speak for or represent the entire faith community or may have an agenda not aligned with the city's focus on inclusivity. It is, therefore, important to work with communities to identify the most suitable representatives and/or messengers and build trusted relationships as part of a comprehensive prevention plan (see conclusion).

4. Be alert to events and dynamics that can impact and/or trigger residents

Mayors and other city leaders must ensure that they remain tapped in and attuned to the needs and priorities of their cities' diverse communities throughout the crisis and alert to dynamics that might trigger residents. This requires not only understanding a city's demographics and having built pre-existing relationships with community leaders and vulnerable communities but also staying abreast of global, regional, national, local triggers.

We saw this in the city of Utrecht (the Netherlands) following the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel. Understanding that the situation could escalate and might trigger volatility and unrest

between communities in her city, [Mayor Sharon Dijksma](#) met with leaders of Utrecht's Jewish and Muslim communities and released a joint statement that said, in part

“[w]e are together in solidarity to talk about how we can preserve and promote peace in our city ... The Utrecht flag will fly at half-mast at city hall ... to commemorate all civilian victims who fell during the intense violence last weekend. Our thoughts go out to Utrecht residents with loved ones in the affected areas.”

This proactive measure ensured that from the start of the crisis, the mayor made clear that the city was united and focused on working together with all communities and standing together in support of all affected Utrecht residents.



*The Mayor of Utrecht (Netherlands) and faith leaders meeting on 8 October 2023.
Image: @sharon_dijksma*

Many mayors || including in [London](#) and the [Liverpool City Region](#) (United Kingdom) || have convened similar meetings and roundtables during significant moments and surges in hate crimes during this latest crisis.

5. Consider carefully whether city resolutions, public statements or demonstrations of support will unite or further divide

The Mayor of Utrecht's decision to fly the city's flag at half-mast in commemoration of civilian victims, rather than flying the Israeli or Palestinian flag, also sent a strong message to residents that the city stood in empathy with all impacted but would not take a political

position. Which flag to fly at half-mast sparked [considerable debate in the Netherlands](#). Following several hours of talks with community groups in his city, the [Mayor of Rotterdam](#), Ahmed Aboutaleb, chose to fly his city's flag at half-mast in support for the victims, a decision also taken by the [Mayor of The Hague](#), Jan van Zanen (Co-Chair of the Strong Cities Network [International Steering Committee](#)). While these decisions were not without criticism from some local political and faith leaders – and may not be appropriate for every city to follow – they mitigated this symbolic act from potentially becoming a trigger for further division in the city.

Similarly, citing a “measurable rise” in both antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents and recognising that the city's sizeable Jewish and Muslim populations “had suffered in the long-running conflict”, the Mayor [of Sydney](#) (Australia), Clover Moore, [resisted pressure](#) to light up City Hall with the colours of the Israeli flag, stating the move would be “divisive, harmful and counter to the city's values of harmony and inclusion”. She later added

“[n]ow more than ever it is vital we reflect our values of diversity, solidarity and inclusivity. There is no place for violence, discrimination or expressions of hate in our city. Antisemitism and Islamophobia have no place in our city.”

In the United States, many city councils have held lengthy and often heated sessions debating calls for [ceasefires and resolutions](#) on the Israel-Gaza crisis. More than a dozen councils from Seattle to Akron to Detroit have passed such resolutions. In Richmond, California, a contentious public debate concluded with the [passage of a resolution](#) affirming the city's support and solidarity with the Palestinian people of Gaza “who are currently facing a campaign of ethnic cleansing and collective punishment by the state of Israel”. Speaking against the resolution, [one Jewish resident](#) said she felt that the resolution was intended ~~to~~ “create hatred toward Jews and divisiveness in our community” and would make her feel “very unsafe in the community”. In Atlanta, the city council voted 12-0 in favour of a resolution supporting [The Carter Center's recent call](#) for a ceasefire, a resolution backed by Jewish and Muslim council members.

City leaders and councils will need to consider and balance whether such resolutions and debates can achieve their desired ends or whether they will simply stoke division within their communities. [In a number of cases](#), such sessions have provided a platform for antisemitic and Islamophobic remarks and/or spurned online hate and threats to public officials, while in some cities, sessions have become so heated that councils were unable to resume in-person meetings.

What is clear is the importance of considering how the city approaches public demonstrations of support during international crises. Support for one cause will be held up as a precedent (regardless of changes to city leadership) and can raise a community's expectations for the handling of future crises. For example, decisions to display the colours of the Israeli flag on iconic buildings around the world (e.g. [Eiffel Tower](#), [Brandenberg Gate](#), [10 Downing Street](#), [White House](#), [Sydney Opera House](#)), similar to previous demonstrations of support for many causes (e.g. Ukraine, LGBTQ+ community, the 75th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter), but not for communities in Gaza, has sparked significant debate

on online platforms and has been experienced by some communities as divisive and triggering. A key consideration, therefore, should be whether such demonstrations of support might undermine a city's commitment to inclusivity, potentially triggering communities that feel the city is catering to the concerns of some residents but not others.



The Eiffel Tower lit up in the colours of the Ukraine flag. Image: Adobe Stock

6. Create a safe space for voices to be heard

By “holding the centre” during a crisis that has divided their communities, mayors and local leaders create a space where all residents can have a voice without feeling they are being marginalised by louder voices or political agendas. A mayor’s proximity to the city’s residents makes them well-placed to identify community concerns, bring disparate groups together, and demonstrate through their words and actions that theirs is an inclusive and supportive city. This includes committing to building an inclusive identity for the city to which all residents and communities feel a sense of connection. It involves creating opportunities for all to be active members of their communities and for grievances to be aired peacefully, while limiting the space for mistrust to manifest and, thus, for hate and polarisation to take root, a topic addressed in further detail in Strong Cities’ new [Guide for Mayors](#).

Sacramento, California (United States), has experienced many local impacts of the Israel-Gaza crisis. From high school [students protesting](#) in support of Palestine and against the humanitarian crisis, to the city’s Jewish community calling for the [release of all hostages held by Hamas](#), to community efforts to support Sacramento’s Israeli sister city of [Ashkelon](#), and pro-Palestinian protestors occupying the convention hall being used for the [California Democratic Party convention](#).

Community tensions were also on show during an intense city council meeting. During public comments, a group of Palestinian-Americans were expressing their concern regarding the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, when two individuals not associated with their group directed antisemitic comments towards the city's Jewish Mayor, Darrell Steinberg.

The Palestinian-Americans immediately got up to leave in protest over how the mayor was being treated. He urged them to stay and met with them, demonstrating a model for civic dialogue during such crises. He explained

When you started leaving the chambers when someone was accusing me of being a racist, your actions moved me – We are brothers and sisters. We are Sacramentans. We are friends. We may have different points of view on the history of the wars and conflicts between Israel and Palestine, but there is more that binds us than divides us, and I want to say to you that I recognise your humanity – the humanity of all people. I condemn the deaths of all innocent people, including the Palestinian people.



*The Mayor of Sacramento, Darrell Steinberg.
Image: The Sacramento Bee*

7. Prioritise inclusivity: make the city a safe harbour for all residents

A mayor alone will be unable to address the full spectrum of reactions or feelings of injustice or trauma that residents might experience during a global crisis. However, by making clear the values their city stands for, such as equality, diversity, equity and transparency, city leaders can help make all residents and communities feel safe and welcome in their city. Committing to building an inclusive identity for the city to which all residents and communities feel a sense of connection is the first key step to building inclusivity and providing a safe harbour for all residents, including in the midst of a global crisis.

Mayors and cities also need to ensure they are creating opportunities for all residents to participate in city life. During times of crisis, this must include equal opportunity and space to air peacefully views, concerns and grievances, and equal access to the support and protection they need to feel safe in their city. This will help build trust between the local government and vulnerable communities, ease social tensions, and build resilience against the corrosive impacts of hate, extremism and polarisation. In the context of the current crisis, this could include providing vulnerable communities safe spaces to gather or receive support for trauma, as well as additional law enforcement protection and visible security measures around houses of worship, schools and community centres. Amid rising antisemitism and Islamophobia, we have seen local and national governments, including [Argentina](#), [Australia](#), [Brazil](#), [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [New Zealand](#), the [United States](#), and elsewhere, increase security around soft targets and vulnerable communities.

In [Vancouver](#) (Canada), the Jewish community felt exposed and vulnerable following calls by a former Hamas leader for worldwide protests. While law enforcement reported no specific threat to Vancouver, the city proactively increased visible security around synagogues, schools and community centres to ensure that all members of the Jewish community felt safe. Leaders of Jewish and Muslim communities called for peace in the Middle East and led prayers for civilians killed and wounded in the latest violence, and Mayor Ken Sim issued a [statement](#) urging peace and respect. He said, in part

“Make no mistake about it, Vancouver is a place of peace, love and inclusion.”



A Vancouver Police Department officer embraces a community member outside the Al Masjid Al Jamia mosque in Vancouver. Image: Ben Nelms/CBC

Similarly, in [Montreal](#) (Canada), while no specific threats were reported, the City and law enforcement implemented "a visibility plan" near places of worship and other locations

connected to the Israel-Gaza crisis, and police chiefs met with the leaders of Montreal's Jewish and Muslim communities.

8. Managing protests and balancing free speech against public safety

At the onset of this current crisis, the national governments of [France and Germany](#) – home to the European Union's largest Jewish and Muslim communities respectively – initially banned pro-Palestinian protests in an effort to stop public disorder and prevent antisemitism. While balancing public safety with providing a space for voices to be heard can be challenging and context-specific, a blanket ban on pro-Palestinian protests enraged those who wished to publicly express their support, further exacerbating feelings of injustice and division.

This is a challenge addressed in Strong Cities' new [Guide for Cities](#). The right to protest and challenge authority can be undermined and abused by those who stoke hate, extremism and polarisation and aim to enact or incite violence. As the sites of protests and sometimes their direct targets, cities face these challenges particularly when applied to physical gatherings and demonstrations. Working closely with central governments and police, cities are often required to identify and then uphold the subtle balance between free speech and public safety. [Article 5 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) provides a guide: no individual's rights extend to the right to infringe upon the rights of others. The article offers a protest or demonstration as an example of where the line can be crossed and where public safety may be at risk.

Managing organised rallies and opening communication with organisers, as well as those of any counter-demonstrations, should be pursued from the outset with lines of dialogue and negotiation made clear. Such engagement should set behavioural expectations and explain why the activity is taking place. Similarly, community engagement and outreach should be conducted with all groups affected by the demonstration, including any specific groups that are targeted by those protesting. Cities also need to be aware of groups that may take advantage of the planned march or demonstration to further their own agenda, including via social media.

The role of mayors and other local leaders in calling for peaceful protests and to respect for freedom of expression is crucial during such times. In Cape Town (South Africa), [Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis](#) underscored

“Cape Town's commitment to tolerance and freedom of expression is sacrosanct. In a time of great global dispute and conflict, Cape Town has thus far been an example of tolerance. While we have seen violent protests all over the world in recent weeks, protests here have been an example of peacefulness, with very few exceptions. As mayor, I have been proud of our city. We have shown restraint, maturity and a commitment to the rights of all residents to express themselves.”



*A statement by the Mayor of Cape Town, Geordin Hill-Lewis.
Image: @geordinhl*

9. Ensure consistent and inclusive public communications

Ensuring city messaging and communications with residents is consistent and inclusive is imperative not only at the onset of a crisis but throughout its different phases. Key priorities in this regard include ensuring public messaging is "stress-tested" by the crisis management committee (see consideration #3) to ensure that all representatives have an opportunity to provide feedback as to how messaging will be received by different communities.

Cities also need to ensure that residents have support and clear instructions for reporting hate crimes, and clear channels for the efficient and multilingual exchange of information between policymakers and the public. Maintaining proactive and regular outreach by trusted

liaisons to vulnerable communities and residents who may find themselves the targets of hate or stigmatisation is also imperative.

Given how quickly and widely media – whether traditional or social – can sensationalise any communications misstep, local governments should provide communications training or guidance on engagement with media or use of social platforms to all key stakeholders. A communications plan outlining diverse scenarios and responses, as well as the platforms and messengers best able to communicate with vulnerable and hard to reach communities, is advised.

10. Learn from this crisis how to better handle the next

Ongoing assessments of how a city is navigating the local impacts of a global crisis will ensure that key stakeholders remain vigilant and connected with the community and that the city's approach remains responsive to the evolving crisis and how it is impacting residents. Lessons learned from how the city has managed a crisis should also inform and shape future crisis management planning. A crisis management plan can be applied in various contexts, potentially benefiting authorities and civil society institutions dealing with wider societal issues. For instance, how the city manages protests during this crisis can reveal key lessons for managing future protests. Likewise, good practices identified in supporting vulnerable communities impacted by this crisis could be invaluable to inform policies and practices related to social support in other contexts, such as support offered to migrants, refugees or stigmatised communities.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate that there is no "one size fits all" approach for maintaining community cohesion during a global crisis such as this one, but there is much to be gained by sharing and learning from approaches taken by mayors and cities facing similar challenges: the foundation of the Strong Cities mission.

The considerations and approaches in this policy brief focus on addressing and responding to local impacts of global crises. Having in place a whole-of-society prevention plan would be a force-multiplier for any city interventions during such crisis.

Cities such as Newark, New Jersey (United States), which has prioritised building a comprehensive prevention framework, have in place the relationships, processes and structures they need to draw on during times of crisis. Under the leadership of [Mayor Ras J. Baraka](#), and with support of Rutgers University [Newark's Public Safety Collaborative](#), the city is [reimagining public safety](#) around inclusivity to more dynamically address internal tensions. Other city stakeholders become "co-producers of public safety", a concept that will support city-led outreach and interventions designed to manage local impacts of global crises around inclusivity to address internal tensions more dynamically. Other city stakeholders become "co-producers of public safety", a concept that will support city-led outreach and interventions designed to manage local impacts of global crises.



The Mayor of Newark, Mayor Ras J. Baraka, delivering a keynote address during the Strong Cities Network Fourth Global Summit in New York in September 2023.

Given its multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary nature, coordination among different sectors and actors is a prerequisite for effective and sustainable prevention that includes maintaining community cohesion when global crises are impacting different parts of a city. Operationalising a whole-of-society approach necessitates integrating contributions from a multitude of offices, organisations and individuals. This applies as much to local as national efforts and includes cooperation between these two levels. Cities should bear this in mind whether they are looking to become involved in prevention for the first time or to deepen and broaden their existing involvement.

Global crises, and the impact of social media (and the proliferation of mis/disinformation), will continue to cause seismic waves, impacting cities and communities far and wide. The Strong Cities Network is committed to providing platforms – both virtual and in-person – for mayors and other local leaders to share and learn from each other, and from good practices drawn from across the global network and beyond, as they navigate these challenges.