Event Report

Global Crises, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion and How Cities Can Respond

Webinar
13 December 2023

Summary

On 13 December 2023, the Strong Cities Network hosted a webinar on 'Global Crises, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion and How Cities Can Respond.' Given the range of threats facing cities in North America as a result of global crises – ranging from COVID-19 and migration to the war in Ukraine, climate change, and, most immediately, the Israel-Gaza conflict – Strong Cities invited mayors (from Athens, Ohio; Highland Park, Illinois; and Overland Park, Kansas), researchers (from the Bridging Divides Initiative and Institute for Strategic Dialogue), and a community convener in Vancouver, Canada (Foundation for a Path Forward) to discuss what cities are facing and how local leaders can most effectively manage the inter-communal tensions resulting from these crises.

Speakers shared insights on the range of challenges cities are facing as well as strategies and examples for preventing and responding to the rising levels hate and inter-communal tension that threaten to undermine social cohesion. Key takeaways included:
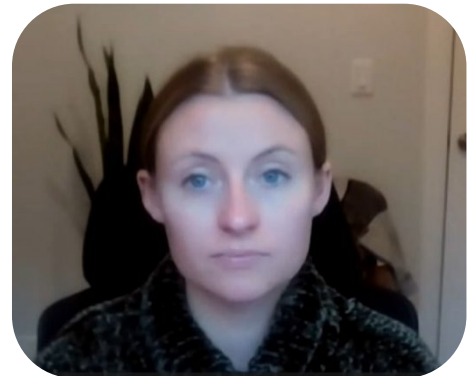
- **As online and offline threats proliferate, communities are afraid.** Extremist actors from across the ideological spectrum are exploiting the conflict to spread hateful rhetoric and direct calls for violence, including cyberattacks. Fortunately, most offline mobilisation has been peaceful, though there have been a number of violent protests and counter-demonstrations, physical attacks, and threats. Jewish, Muslim, and other affected communities are increasingly concerned for their safety.

- **Communities are shaken, and some are fraying.** More homogenous communities have responded to the unfolding events as a moment to come together despite political

differences. However, many others have seen the bonds of inter-communal relations being tested in this fraught moment, with all affected communities feeling significant amounts of sadness, fear, and trauma.

- **Mayors should engage and reassure their residents and, above all, listen**. In such fraught times, communities often do not feel heard or their feelings acknowledged. Mayors should communicate clearly and frequently to their residents that their pain is seen, and then reassure residents with overt displays of enhanced public safety measures. Often, just listening to affected individuals and providing safe spaces for residents to freely express their fears, concerns, and even anger can be reassuring.

- **It is vital to reorient perspectives towards one of shared communality, while upholding impartial values**. Rather than try to navigate between diametrically opposed viewpoints ('us' vs. 'them'), a more successful strategy is to shift narratives to an 'us vs. us' approach, enabling residents to view the issue as arising within a single city family. This is most effective by ascribing to, and not deviating from, universally applied moral principles regardless of the circumstance at hand.

As Online and Offline Threats Proliferate, Communities are Afraid

Researchers and analysts from counter-extremism research organisations provided insight on how online and offline threats related to the Israel-Gaza conflict are manifesting in communities in different parts of North America. [Katherine Keneally](#), **Head of Threat Analysis and Prevention at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue**, revealed that extremist actors online across the ideological spectrum – white supremacists, neo-Nazi accelerationists, Islamic extremists, and militant anarchists – are spreading violent content and hate-fuelled propaganda which has led to a spate of hate crimes offline targeting Jewish, Muslim, and/or Palestinian residents of cities. There has been a proliferation of terrorist content on social media, mostly associated with Hamas, but then amplified by neo-Nazi accelerationists who exploit the material to radicalise individuals against Jews, recruit them to their movement, and/or inspire followers to violent action. On the other side, hateful comments against Muslims as 'terrorists' or 'invaders' are on the rise as well. Ms. Keneally shared how platforms are failing to moderate this content, despite violations of platform policies, with minors inundated with violent and graphic images related to the conflict. Meanwhile, 'hacktivist' groups and state-backed actors are engaging in both cyberattacks against city infrastructure and information manipulation to further exacerbate tensions in communities. There have been calls from both neo-Nazi accelerationists and militant anarchists to attack critical infrastructure, with groups sharing tactics on how to effectively target energy grids, public water systems, and railways. While some of these groups have made unconfirmed claims that they have already successfully done so, there are already confirmed reports of Iranian-backed groups attacking US critical infrastructure since the Hamas attack on 7 October.

The Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) at Princeton University has been gathering quantitative data related to offline mobilisation in response to the Israel-Gaza conflict, captured in a [series of memos](#)

on the subject. According to **Roudabeh Kishi**, **Chief Research Officer at BDI,** though demonstrations related to Israel-Palestine immediately spiked after 7 October, they have been trending downward ever since. Of the 1,300+ demonstrations documented by BDI, over 95% have been peaceful, and the rate of contentious demonstrations – ones that have triggered violent counter-demonstrations, an extremist presence, police involvement, etc. – has likewise been declining. However, while about half of the concerning offline mobilisation related to the conflict are instances of vandalism and/or propaganda, the other half is violent activity – physically aggressive counter-demonstrations, physical attacks (street assaults, car rammings, etc.), and direct threats.

Together with the documented rise in dangerous speech in the United States, BDI's data indicate that Jews, Israelis, Palestinians, and Muslims all feel less safe, and are even changing their daily habits to account for potential threats. This sentiment was reflected from featured city representatives as well. In the city of **Highland Park, Illinois** – already traumatised from a mass shooting at a July 4 parade in 2022 – residents, particularly Jewish residents with personal and familiar ties to Israel, are fearful, feeling re-traumatised and unsafe. Students from the area have experienced antisemitism on college campus, including neo-Nazis marching in nearby Madison at the University of Wisconsin. Residents of **Overland Park, Kansas** are likewise fearful, with both Jewish and Muslim school-aged children and adults on college and graduate school campuses all sensing a climate of hostility and insecurity.

Communities are Shaken, and Some are Fraying

Though no participating cities indicated having experienced any direct threat or violence due to the Israel-Gaza conflict, all indicated that residents feel tremendously impacted by those events. In **Highland Park** – which features a large Jewish population, with Holocaust survivors and their descendants as well as residents who have served in the Israeli military and/or have children currently serving – **Mayor Nancy Rotering** – noted that the 7 October attack has galvanised the community, where individuals with differing views on the Israeli government have come

together, regardless of politics, to stand with each other and recognise the personal and familial pain that residents are feeling.

In **Overland Park** – with its large Jewish community and growing Muslim and Palestinian population – **Mayor Curt Skoog** said that there is tremendous sadness in all affected communities. He shared that the conflict has shaken the bridges that have been built between religious and ethnic communities in his city over the past two decades. Mayor Skoog hopes to restart those inter-communal conversations to reconnect communities to one another in due course.

In the city of **Athens, Ohio** – home to Ohio University – Mayor Steve Patterson echoed these sentiments. In a university town, with students from 110+ countries, multiple and vocal Muslim student groups, and a large Jewish population on and off campus, the conflict has "shaken the community to its core," given the direct impact that students and residents are feeling, despite the distance from the conflict. This level of impact is rare for Athens, according to Mayor Patterson, which is based in remote Appalachia 75 miles from the closest metropolitan area.

Yusuf Siraj, co-founder of Foundation for a Path Forward, the first official faith-based community convener for anti-racism in **British Columbia, Canada**, said that the feeling of trauma is pervasive in all affected communities. As in Overland Park, in Vancouver, the "pain and suffering that people are experiencing is both very real and very similar," for both Jewish and Muslim residents.

Mayors Should Engage and Reassure Their Residents and, Above All, Listen

Multiple cities appear to have faced a similar dilemma: communities who don't feel heard, who don't feel that their pain is being acknowledged. In Highland Park, **Mayor Rotering** said that the "community wants its pain recognised" and feels that it hasn't received that recognition to the degree it feels it deserves. In Vancouver, according to Mr. Siraj, both Muslims and Jews feel like their concerns are not being addressed, or at least, that each's perspective is not "reflected in the approach of the other community" to their own.

In response, **Mayor Rotering** made a deliberate effort to engage and reassure her community, beginning with denouncing the attack of 7 October and then sharing "compassionate communications" – clearly and frequently – recognising the pain and personal impact on the community, and especially parents. A key component of the mayor's reassurance efforts was demonstrating through action – namely, ensuring a strong law enforcement presence at a community event at a synagogue featuring families of Israeli hostages. She also organised dozens of other towns and cities throughout Illinois to issue a regional statement denouncing hate and assuring all residents that their public safety is the highest priority.
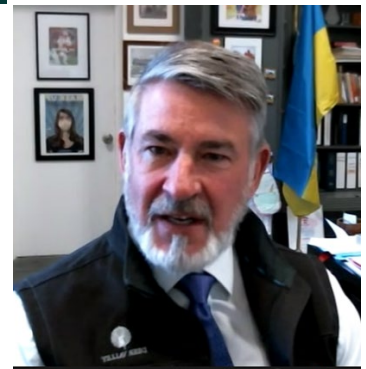
In **Overland Park, Mayor Skoog** began similarly: issuing a statement against the 7 October attack and increasing patrols and presence of law enforcement in faith communities to assure patrons and the public that police would be vigilant to keep everyone safe. He then also sat down with individuals from the local Palestinian, Muslim, and Jewish communities – in small groups – to get a personal feeling for what each was feeling and what they needed from their city. One session, with a Palestinian man who

said over 40 family members of his were killed in a single bombing in Gaza, was particularly profound for the mayor, who had never before met someone so profoundly impacted by such a tragic incident.

A key component of engaging and listening is providing a platform for individuals to speak and be heard. According to **Mayor Patterson of Athens**, it is essential to create safe spaces for individuals to freely express themselves. The city has a 'protest square' where peaceful protests are welcomed. According to the mayor, having the square itself is a tremendous asset, as one such designated safe space. He feels that in his role as mayor, it is essential to build strong relationships with the university so the campus and community can come together to have safe common spaces.

"People want to be heard. So often, resolution can come about from just being able to know that you're in a safe environment and speaking openly with each other, to see where each other is and to find that common ground."

Steve Patterson, Mayor of Athens, Ohio

Another such example of a safe space in Athens was a 'New Communities Welcome Dinner,' pre-planned for late October at a local middle school. Organised by the city's vibrant community relations commission, the local racial equity coalition, and multiple Muslim student groups on campus, the dinner was attended by 150 people. Organically, it evolved into an event recognising 7 October and the ensuring conflict, where residents felt safe to share their stories and talk freely about their fears, concerns, and anger with city leadership. While such dinners usually last about an hour, this event lasted about four hours, demonstrating just how empowering the opportunity was for the community, with residents leaving feeling supported and safe.

Reorienting Perspectives Towards Shared Community, While Upholding Impartial Values

As the Israel-Gaza conflict demonstrates, global crises can often lead to the undermining of social cohesion, where two communities seemingly hold diametrically-opposed views and force others to take a side. One component of this issue is the 'silo-isation of narratives,' where people are able to express very well their own experience of pain but not the experience of others. According to **Yusuf Siraj of Foundation for a Path Forward**, the key is to shift narratives from an 'us vs. them' mentality to one of 'us vs. us' – not two groups in opposition, but two groups in one family. This 'trauma-informed,' 'human-centric' approach provides flexibility for collaborative problem solving, he

stressed, allowing to shift the focus from the righteousness of political narratives to questions such as, 'How can we benefit each other?' Local leaders cannot begin to start solving problems across the globe, and shouldn't attempt to – rather, they should focus on finding communal harmony here at home. Often, the use of religious language and religious leaders can play a key role in healing fractured communities – whether through a shifted narrative of a shared 'single human family' in service of a higher calling, providing counselling and support

services to individuals in crisis, or showing the public through dialogue that religious communities often share the same lived experiences of hate and discrimination and that they are not alone.

Mayor Skoog of Overland Park put this theory to action, issuing a personal letter to the community following his listening sessions, acknowledging the pain that each community is feeling and urging residents to do the same – to "show compassion for all who are suffering," to "reach out and care for neighbours, colleagues and friends." As the mayor put it during the session, he asked fellow residents to tap into their shared 'Midwestern' values of caring, loving, and being helpful to each other. People don't need to be subject matter experts in all of the complex politics of the geopolitical situation to just case for their neighbours.

The mayor also warned that when these situations arise, "a lot of people want you to say things publicly that really may not relate to your community" and are more globally than locally focused. He urged leaders to "be cautious and thoughtful [before] joining on to public comments" about a global conflict or other crisis that might come from "various directions." According to Mr. Siraj, when elected officials are seemingly faced with polar opposite positions that they must choose between, they would do well to synergise both perspectives in a single response, based on a principled stance that would apply universally, regardless of the issue at hand.

To that effect, **Mayor Rotering of Highland Park** shared that in her community, activists placed flyers in support of Israel in public areas against local regulations – when the Public Works department removed those flyers, employees were harassed and even doxed. Mayor Rotering emphasised that an even-handed insistence on an equal application of the law in all circumstances, no matter how hurtful to residents and no matter how fierce the resistance, was essential to ensuring justice for all. It can be done compassionately, and with clear and consistent messaging, but it must be done, she said.

Next Steps

This virtual convening is the first of a planned monthly series of 'Global Crises, Local Impacts' webinars hosted by Strong Cities North America featuring mayors, city representatives, and research organisations.

Additional Resources

- 'Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities – Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis,' Strong Cities Network, December 2023: https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/news/navigating-local-impacts-of-global-crises-ten-considerations-for-mayors-and-cities-lessons-from-the-israel-gaza-crisis.

- 'A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism & Polarisation,' Strong Cities Network, September 2023: https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/a-guide-for-cities.

- '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.

- 'Rise in antisemitism on both mainstream and fringe social media platforms following Hamas' terrorist attack,' Institute for Strategic Dialogue, October 2023: https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/rise-in-antisemitism-on-both-mainstream-and-fringe-social-media-platforms-following-

- [-terrorist-attack](#).

- 'Use of words, phrases and hashtags associated with anti-Muslim mobilisation surges amid Israel-Gaza conflict,' Institute for Strategic Dialogue, November 2023: https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/use-of-words-phrases-and-hashtags-associated-with-anti-muslim-mobilisation-surges-amid-israel-gaza-conflict.

- 'Speaking Out Against Bigoted, Dehumanizing Rhetoric: What We Can Do,' Bridging Divides Initiative/Western States Center, December 2023: https://www.westernstatescenter.org/speakingout.

Contact Information

For more information on this event or other Strong Cities North America programs, please contact the Strong Cities North America Regional Hub at na.hub@strongcitiesnetwork.org.