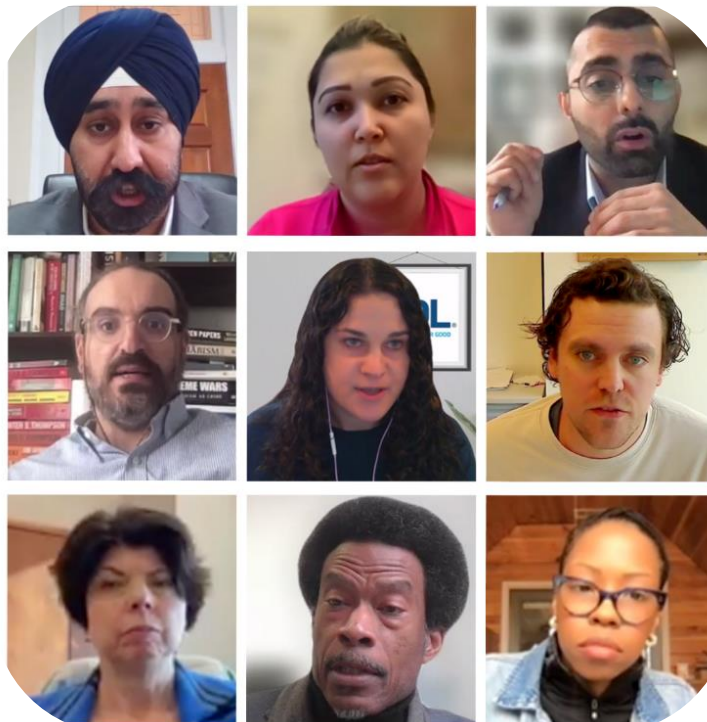


Event Report

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

Webinar
23 January 2024



Summary

On 23 January 2024, the [Strong Cities Network](https://strongcitiesnetwork.org) hosted the second in a series of monthly webinars on Global Crises, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion and How Cities Can Respond. Successive global crises – from COVID-19 and migration to the war in Ukraine, climate change, and, most immediately, the Israel-Gaza conflict – have had impacts on social cohesion in cities around the world, including in North America. Strong Cities invited mayors and other city officials from Hoboken (New Jersey), New York City (New York) and Seattle (Washington), and experts from the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](https://www.instituteforstrategicdialogue.com) (ISD) and the [Anti-Defamation League](https://www.adl.org/) (ADL) to discuss what cities are facing and how local leaders can most effectively manage 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 of hate and inter-communal tension that threaten to undermine social cohesion.

Eric Rosand, Executive Director of the Strong Cities Network, explained how this monthly webinar series responds to growing requests from its members and other cities for opportunities to share and learn from each other as they try to navigate the local impacts of the Israel-Gaza conflict and other global crises. There is currently no playbook or guidelines for mayors and local governments to turn to in such times of crises and Strong Cities will continue to look for ways, including through this webinar series, in-person dialogues and the identification and dissemination of good practices and lessons learned, to address this lacuna.

Key Takeaways

- 1. The impact of the Israel-Gaza conflict is manifesting locally across the United States in several ways, including on college campuses and in inciting lone actors.** In the months since the 7 October Hamas attack, antisemitism on campuses has reached an all-time high in the United States and the increased polarisation and rise in antisemitic, Islamophobic and other hate speech resulting from the Israel-Gaza conflict has left people feeling at risk or that they have a duty to act violently. The largely unchecked misinformation surrounding the conflict makes the threat landscape even more volatile.
- 2. Mayors and cities can take legal and other measures, as well as devise programmes, to prevent and mitigate the threat.** Mayors should speak out when a hateful incident occurs, 'name the hate' and reaffirm their city's values of tolerance, inclusivity and civility. Cities should focus more attention on community-based programming that addresses the enabling environment and the 'us vs. them' mentality that can exacerbate the threats. City councils should put in place lawful ordinances that help protect local leaders and public buildings from hate-filled harassment or attacks.
- 3. Attempts to address the concerns of one community can have unintended outcomes for another.** Mayors need to be empathetic to the different affected communities in their city, irrespective of the mayor's personal view. Rather than taking sides on a global conflict, the role of city leaders is to listen, educate themselves about how the crisis is impacting local communities and mitigate its impact on the city's social cohesion.
- 4. City leaders must allow for peaceful, free expression while messaging the importance of dialogue and social cohesion.** People in cities across the United States are hurting as a result of the Israel-Gaza conflict and they should be allowed to express themselves as long as they do so peacefully. Mayors and other city leaders should restore civility and dignity in conversations about emotional topics, creating safe spaces for different perspectives to be shared.

The Global Threat Is Manifesting Locally in Many Ways, Including Among Lone Actors and on College Campuses

Moustafa Ayad, Executive Director for Africa, the Middle East and Asia for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), spoke about how the Israel-Gaza conflict has increased the threat of lone actor plots and attacks in the United States. He noted that several U.S. law enforcement agencies

have released public service announcements spurred by the 7 October Hamas attack, specifically mentioning the threat of lone actor violence.

Ayad said the threat can be broken down into four categories:

1. **Recruitment by ‘Foreign Terrorist Organisations’:** For example, following the 7 October Hamas attack, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) specifically called for attacks on U.S. and Jewish targets, and ISIS’s message to followers was “kill them where you find them”.
2. **Plots and attacks primarily incited by the internet and/or media narratives and motivated by hate or fear:** For example, the murder of a six-year-old Muslim-American boy in Plainfield Township, Illinois.
3. **Attacks on soft targets, such as religious institutions and/or faith leaders:** For example, a recent shooting at a synagogue in Albany (New York), where the alleged perpetrator said the motivation for his attack was shaped by events in the Middle East, which made him feel victimised. Ayad said that there has also been an increase in bomb threats at Jewish and other religious institutions in the United States since October.
4. **‘Old plots, new realities’:** while there is nothing new about religious sites being considered ‘soft targets’ for extremists and hate groups, this threat has become heightened in the context of increased polarisation and the rise in antisemitic and other hate speech resulting from the Israel-Gaza conflict, with more individuals feeling they have a ‘sacred duty to act’. Meanwhile, the on- and off-line misinformation makes the landscape even more susceptible to lone actor attacks.



Amy Feinman, ADL’s Interim Vice President of Civil Rights, highlighted the spike in antisemitism and other hate on college and university campuses since 7 October. For example, she said that the three months following the Hamas attack saw 500 antisemitic attacks on campuses, compared to 42 during the same period last year. Examples of campus incidents have included: 1) intimidation, harassment, actual threats targeting Jewish centres/ institutions; 2).physical assaults on students; 3) laser projections of hate-filled messaging; and 4) concerning statements from professors (e.g. a Cornell University professor saying the 7 October attack was “exhilarating and energising”).



Feinman also shared ADL data that highlighted the increase in the percentage of Jewish students who have experienced or witnessed antisemitism since the beginning of the school year in September 2023 and who are now more concerned about their emotional and physical safety on campus than before 7 October and the growing discomfort experienced by Jewish students on campus with other people knowing their religious affiliation. She outlined ADL’s comprehensive response to this crisis. It includes open letters to university leaders on key steps they can take; the launch of the [‘Not on My Campus’](#) campaign that will include resources for parents, students and alumni to engage in advocacy in response to these trends, new asks for

administrators, and a sample code of conduct for colleges and universities to enact; a soon-to-be-released report card on how campuses have responded to these incidents; and a new campus antisemitism hotline that offers free legal advice and support, which has registered more than 400 complaints so far.

Hassan Naveed, Executive Director of the New York City Mayor’s Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes (OPHC), reported that the city has seen an increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes more broadly since the start of the conflict.

Mayors and Cities Can Take Legal and Other Measures, As Well As Devise Programmes, to Prevent and Mitigate the Threats

Speakers discussed different steps mayors and local governments are or could be taking to address these challenges in their cities. For example, in the context of threats on college campuses, **ADL’s Amy Feinman** recommended that mayors should: 1) learn more about what is happening on campuses and share concerns with campus leaders; 2).coordinate with campus security and make sure they have the resources they need; 3).speak out when hateful incidents take place; 4) ‘name the hate’ and reaffirm their city’s values, especially when conduct crosses a line; 5) prioritise safety when protests take place off-campus while making sure that free speech rights are protected; and 6) coordinate with faith, ethnic and other community partners to better understand residents’ concerns and trends.

Amy’s colleague, **Robert Sills**, ADL’s Director of State and Local Government Affairs, said the ADL is also helping cities across the United States to mitigate the threats, which include an increase in antisemitic and other hate-related harassment and trolling by hate groups at city and town council meetings and other public fora, as well as the private property of local leaders. ADL has developed a number of [recommendations](#) for city council members and other local leaders to follow, which include putting in place “time, place and manner” ordinances – based on legal precedent – to limit this activity. The recommendations include guidance on how to use local ordinances to curtail the unauthorised use of laser and light projectors on public and prominent buildings and relying on public safety risks (e.g., distracting drivers) to prevent the dropping of hate-filled banners on highway overpasses.



Ayad also emphasised how, although there is no single or one-size-fits-all solution to these challenges, cities should focus more attention on community-based programming that addresses the enabling environment and “the ‘us vs. them’ mentalities that exacerbate the threats”. This includes, for example, interventions that tackle the “psycho-social needs of citizens, [such as] diversionary programmes, open dialogues and cohesion-building projects”.



Ravi Bhalla, Mayor of Hoboken (New Jersey), spoke about how 7 October was “crippling to the psyche of the Jewish community – something [he had] never seen before as mayor”. He reflected on how, “with mothers crying on your shoulder about what’s happening [in Israel-Gaza], people with relatives who are missing, [it was] not the time to get into geopolitics” but rather to take on the role of “consoler-in-chief”, which is what he did. He visited the city synagogue and, during a vigil with the Government of New Jersey that included people from neighbouring cities, spoke about his visit to Israel.

Attempts to Address the Concerns of One Community Can Have Unintended Outcomes for Another

Mayor Bhalla underscored the need to carefully balance the different and evolving needs and expectations of community members affected by a particular global crisis. He shared his recent experience in Hoboken, where the city raised the Israeli flag over City Hall as a show of solidarity with the Jewish people – a step that was initially well-received by much of the community. The flag remained above City Hall for a period of just over a month. It was intended to show solidarity with the people who were hurting from the events of 7 October.

However, the flag was ripped down in the middle of the night on several occasions – law enforcement is investigating – and the city kept putting it back up. Then, as humanitarian concerns surfaced following the launch of the Israeli counter-offensive in Gaza, members of the community started associating the flag with support of the actions of the Israeli government in Gaza. He said Hoboken residents were voicing support for both the Palestinians and Israelis, but not the Israeli government, and they interpreted the raising of the flag as the city’s tacit endorsement of those actions.

Former Akron (Ohio) City Councilmember Russel Neal shared an example of how the city has sought to balance the diverse and evolving needs of local communities. Following 7 October, Akron Mayor Shammias Malik and a member of the Akron City Council put forward a resolution to demonstrate solidarity with the Jewish residents of Akron and Israelis. However, because the resolution did not reach the council for a vote until after the Israeli counter-offensive had commenced, with many Palestinians already killed, it also stirred anger and resentment among other residents who were trying to show solidarity with those in Gaza. This includes those who equated the behaviour of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) with that of the Akron police when it shot an unarmed black man 46 times while he was running away in 2022.



With this as the backdrop, grassroots organisations and members of both Akron’s Muslim and Palestinian communities asked for their perspectives and voices to be reflected in a council resolution. Neal said that this led to the council crafting such a **resolution**, “even though it was

painful for members of our Jewish community to accept [its] contents”, for example, calling for an immediate ceasefire, which ended up receiving support from the city’s Jewish and Muslim communities.

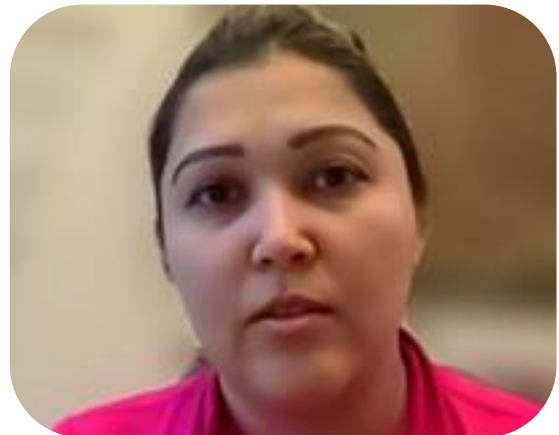
Neal asserted that it is critical to no longer view these emotional and divisive issues through the lens of race, religion or politics, but rather through a humanitarian one. This approach, he said, helps avoid a situation where people “place a value system on those who are apart and [then have] people ... stand in their individual corners based on their religious or political perspective, and stand in their cubby holes”. By approaching problems this way, cities are much more likely to find the necessary solutions.

More broadly, Neal called for more emphasis to be placed on education so that more people are aware of the history in their community, city and country, “where members of the Jewish, Muslim and white communities” joined Black Americans in the civil rights struggle. The more educated people are about how different communities have worked together in times of crisis in the past, the more likely they are to join together to overcome challenges in the future.

City Leaders Must Allow for Peaceful Free Expression, While Messaging the Importance of Dialogue and Social Cohesion

Amarah Khan, Executive Director of the Office of the Employee Ombud for the City of Seattle (Washington), emphasised that public officials are in a very precarious position when there is a global crisis like the Israel-Gaza conflict that has different impacts across different parts of a city. They need to maintain peoples’ rights to express themselves, while at the same time, resist pressure from residents to take a position on the crisis, one way or another.

She commented that in emotionally-charged situations like these, workplaces sometimes “attempt to be very sterilised”, seeking to limit what can be said on a particular topic. However, citing the strong free speech and freedom of religion protections in the United States, she said that these protections, which include the right to wear turbans, crosses and hijabs, are protected during both times of peace and crisis. Local governments, she asserted, should be focused on creating safe spaces for different opinions on this, or any other conflict/crisis that elicits strong reactions, to be aired in a peaceful manner. Curbing religious or other expression “will not solve the situation; it will create its own problems”, which she said can manifest in three ways: 1) disparate treatment; 2) disparate impact; and 3) harassment.



She shared how the City of Seattle has sought to navigate these issues, recognising that there is nothing the City can say or do that can help resolve the Israel-Gaza crisis. The City’s focus, therefore, has been offering safe spaces for residents with different views on the conflict to discuss the situation without engaging in hate speech. She said that “this is a hard line to draw and maintain but we are doing our best”.

“We should be trying to return to civility and dignity in conversation. Even before October 7, we’ve been working in this politically-contentious environment that has been over-politicised. We have lost the ability for people to have actual conversations with each other – we can’t even agree to disagree.”

Hassan Naveed, Mayor’s Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes, New York City, New York



Much like in Seattle, **Mayor Bhalla** did not feel it was appropriate for him or the Hoboken city government to take sides on such a divisive issue, particularly when doing so would have no impact on the conflict itself. Instead, he said that the role of mayor was “to provide a safe space for individuals to express their views and to do so in a peaceful manner”. He underscored the importance of making clear to all residents that the city respects the rights of all people to express their views peacefully, whether or not its leaders agree with them. To this end, Hoboken invested resources in “making sure people could worship fearlessly as they have a right to do”.

Hassan Naveed said that New York Mayor’s Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes (the first of its kind in any US city), is actively working to eliminate hate, bias and discrimination across the city, recognising the threats they pose to social cohesion and democracy. He said it was crucial for OPHC to adopt an even-handed approach that works to safeguard local communities and the right to protest peacefully. In order to safeguard these communities, OPHC is able – through its funding of, and other support for, 70 local community-based organisations – to gather qualitative information on hate and extremism and better understand what is actually happening on the ground, including incidents that people might not be comfortable reporting to law enforcement, which can in turn help ensure that the city’s anti-hate resources are appropriately targeted. He said that since 7 October, many of these organisations have seen a spike in requests from community members who believe they have been the target of hate, bias and discrimination.

Next Steps

This webinar was the second in a series of monthly gatherings of mayors, city representatives and research organisations for timely discussion and exchanges of approaches around ‘Global Crises, Local Impacts’. Hosted by the Strong Cities North America team, the next session is scheduled for 28 February 2024.

Additional Resources

- [Not on My Campus: No Tolerance for Antisemitism](#), Anti-Defamation League, January 2024
- [Global Crisis, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion & How Cities Can Respond](#), Event Report, Strong Cities Network, December 2023
- [Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities – Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis](#), Strong Cities Network, December 2023
- [Speaking Out Against Bigoted, Dehumanizing Rhetoric: What We Can Do](#), Bridging Divides Initiative/Western States Center, December 2023
- [43-fold increase in anti-Muslim YouTube comments following Hamas' October 7 attack](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 2023
- [Cross-ideological antisemitism and the October 7th attacks](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 2023
- [A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism & Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [A Guide for Mayors: Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [Toolkit for Responding to Extremist Disruptions at Public Meetings](#), August 2023
- For more information on ADL's 'municipal ordinance package' assisting cities with combatting hate propaganda spread via tactics that threaten public safety, please contact Robert Sills at rsills@adl.org.

Contact Information

For more information on this event or other Strong Cities North America programmes, please contact Jordan Reimer, Senior Manager, North America, at na.hub@strongcitiesnetwork.org.