

Event Report

Strengthening the Role of Cities in the Prevention of Hate, Polarisation and Violent Extremism in the Middle East and North Africa

Identifying Emerging Challenges, Needs and Good Practices

Valletta, Malta
31 January – 1 February 2024



Summary

The [Strong Cities Network's Middle East & North Africa \(MENA\) Regional Hub](#), in partnership with [the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law \(IIJ\)](#), held its second regional workshop in Valletta, Malta from 31 January to 1 February 2024. Sponsored by the EU (as part of its [STRIVE Cities initiative](#)) and the [Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#), the workshop brought together more than 40 mayors, deputy mayors, governors and deputy governors, city practitioners, as well as representatives from central governments, civil society and multilateral organisations to discuss how to enhance city-led engagement with young people and historically marginalised groups as a means to prevent



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hate, polarisation and violent extremism. Participants also explored the contributions that local governments, including through enhanced national-local cooperation (NLC), can make to whole-of-society efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate returning family members of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and former terrorist offenders and mitigate the negative impacts of migration, whether climate-induced or otherwise, on social cohesion.

Underscoring Strong Cities and the IIJ's commitment to collaborative approaches to prevention, the workshop introduced participants to key aspects of the IIJ's [training curriculum](#) on designing and implementing multi-actor P/CVE intervention programmes, developed with support from the EU, and which was offered to cities in MENA as a useful tool to help them operationalise a whole-of-city approach to prevention.

The Strong Cities MENA Regional Hub further used this opportunity to present initial findings from its region-focused research on the state of cooperation between national and local entities in the MENA region in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The findings, which will be included in a forthcoming Strong Cities report, shed light on challenges, good practices and replicable models in NLC from across the region.

Participants were also introduced to the [NLC Toolkit](#) that Strong Cities Network developed for the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) to operationalise the [GCTF's good practices on strengthening NLC in P/CVE](#). The Toolkit provides a framework for realising effective NLC at a country-level. While primarily addressing P/CVE, the toolkit's benefits extend to fields such as public health, climate change, education, human rights and migration. Through tabletop exercises focused on youth engagement and addressing impact of climate migration on social cohesion, participants had the opportunity to put into practice the six pillars for effective NLC, as outlined in the toolkit: trust, inclusivity, capacity building, coordination, communication and sustainability. Through exchange and collaboration with other city leaders, participants were able to discuss and design plans, identify relevant stakeholders and agree on contextualised solutions for the challenges at hand.

During the event, the Moroccan cities of Agadir and Tangier, as well as the city of Valletta (Malta), were announced as new Strong Cities members. Moreover, as a further demonstration of its commitment to working with national-level associations of local governments, the Strong Cities Network signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the [Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils \(MAPCC\)](#). Among other things, this will facilitate access by Moroccan communal councils and sub-national governments to good practices from across Strong Cities members and enable Strong Cities to work with the MAPCC to build strong, socially cohesive and resilient cities in Morocco.



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Key Findings

The following key findings emerged out of the discussions:

1. Local governments in the region have an important, but often untapped, role to play in P/CVE and prevention more broadly. Although many of them lack an explicit mandate or dedicated resources from the central government to engage in the prevention of hate and violent extremism, they can overcome this barrier by integrating prevention into an existing mandate and leveraging existing resources and expertise to deliver prevention programmes.
2. Cities have a role to play in the R&R processes of returnees from conflict zones as part of a whole-of-society approach to addressing the challenge and national governments should create more opportunities for them to assume this role. These contributions include coordinating efforts of the various relevant local stakeholders at the local level, which enables returning families to access basic services, such as those related to housing, social welfare, education, trauma and other mental health support.
3. Cities should create and maintain platforms for youth engagement and participation, such as youth councils, local security councils and/or youth centres, in order to understand the needs and priorities of young people and enable them to play an active role in the decision-making processes at the city level. These platforms can help address feelings of exclusion, which can serve as a driver of hate and violent extremism.
4. While there is a quota system in most MENA countries to ensure women's participation in local and national governance, cities should work towards creating more opportunities for women to access leadership positions at the local level in order to influence local policies on prevention and response to hate, polarisation and violent extremism.
5. Enhanced NLC is needed to address the impact of global crises at the city level, as well as to ensure local governments have the mandate and resources to respond to emergencies and emerging threats such as climate change, migration, conflicts, pandemics and their potential implications on social cohesion.
6. National and regional city associations and networks present valuable platforms for strengthening interactions, collaboration and learnings among cities on the prevention of hate, polarisation and violent extremism.



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Opening Remarks

In his opening remarks, **Eric Rosand, Executive Director of the Strong Cities Network**, highlighted the MENA Regional Hub's support to city-led efforts in the region to address hate, polarisation and violent extremism, including but not limited to, connecting cities with global good practices. **Steven Hill, Executive Secretary of the IJ**, spoke of the importance of strong local leadership in stabilising communities and addressing their challenges, with a focus on coordinating effective prevention and response plans.

Speaking on behalf of the host government, **Owen Bonnici, Minister for the National Heritage, the Arts, and Local Government (Malta)**, highlighted its commitment to fostering dialogue and its enduring friendships with countries across the MENA region. He stressed the need to continue to elevate the voices of local leaders in responding to hate, polarisation and violent extremism. Similarly, **Alfred Zammit, Mayor of Valletta (Malta)**, further reinforced this commitment by highlighting the city's dedication to protection of democracy, rule of law and human rights. **Alison Zerafa Civelli, Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government (Malta)**, shed light on the need for inclusive leadership and community engagement in tackling extremism, recognizing disaffection and divisions as key components in the proliferation of extremism.

Matt Skelly, Australia's High Commissioner to Malta, underscored the significance of collaborative efforts and partnerships – including between national and local actors – in addressing these threats, emphasising the importance of applying effective tools and strategies at all levels. Finally, speaking on behalf of the EU, **Isabel Candela-Rodriguez, Deputy Head of Unit, Global and Transregional Threats, FPI**, provided insights into the rationale underpinning EU's STRIVE Cities initiative, highlighting EU's dedication to mitigating the threats posed by violent extremism, including by addressing drivers such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment, and by empowering youth, women and marginalised groups.

Threats & Key Challenges

Participants identified a number of challenges affecting the stability and development of MENA countries, including heightened levels of hate, social fragmentation and unemployment. Drug trafficking and addiction were also identified as pervasive threats, particularly affecting vulnerable youth populations: this underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to address substance abuse and protect community well-being.

Discussions highlighted how these challenges are compounded by the lack of trust in government institutions and feelings of marginalisation and exclusion among youth, which in turn fuel social tensions and further economic disparities. To help overcome this, participants emphasised the importance of empowering youth, creating job opportunities and engaging young people in the decision-making process at the local level.



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Additionally, city officials expressed concerns about emerging threats such as climate change, consequent migration flows and their potential implications on social cohesion, particularly given the lack of support provided to local governments to accommodate such demographic changes. Participants further identified limited NLC and a lack of mandate and resources as among challenges that limit the effective engagement of cities in the region in R&R work and P/CVE more broadly. They shared how enhanced NLC can help overcome the bureaucratic hurdles and governance inefficiencies that can impede coordination efforts on R&R.

Key Themes

1. City-Led Community Engagement

Participants highlighted the importance of listening to youth voices and engaging them in local government decision-making process; they showcased examples how this has been done at the local level in different parts of the region. For example, in **Jordan**, efforts to foster trust between the police and the public, particularly young people, led to the **establishment of community police officers** within the Public Security Directorate. These officers not only help raise awareness within local communities on issues such as domestic violence and online crimes, but they also engage communities on changing the stereotypes and perceptions that people have about the police. In order to reach young people as part of this process, **local security councils with youth representation** were established. During the monthly council meetings, youth can voice their concerns and the councils then engage other relevant stakeholders to address issues that fall within their respective mandates.

Participants agreed on the importance of platforms, such as **youth councils**, that facilitate participation and inclusion of youth in local governance and ensure that relevant policies and projects are youth centred. By providing a space for dialogue and collaboration, these bodies enable young people to develop leadership skills, gain valuable experience in governance and contribute to the development of policies and initiatives that directly affect their lives.

The **City of Saida (Lebanon)** highlighted how its [Local Prevention Network \(LPN\)](#), established with support from Strong Cities, played a role in building the trust between the youth and the city, in particular during the deteriorating socio-economic situation in Lebanon since 2019. This led to the creation of a youth council to serve as a platform for youth participation in the decision-making process at the municipal level.

Participants acknowledged that local governments are, in theory, well-positioned to coordinate city-wide efforts to address feelings of exclusion and marginalisation among young people. However, the point was made that in some instances this role can be compromised due to young people's lack of trust in these governments, which they feel are not addressing their needs.



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Participants further emphasised that local governments should work towards creating more opportunities for women to access leadership positions at the local level in order to influence local policies on prevention and responses to hate, polarisation and violent extremism. In this context, participants stressed the need to increase and expand leadership and capacity-building programmes specifically designed for current and potential women leaders, including those that seek to mitigate the stigma women can face in seeking and assuming leadership positions.

Discussions highlighted some examples across the region of steps being taken to support women local leaders. For example, in **Libya**, the Ministry of Local Governance established the Forum for Elected Municipal Council Women, connecting female local government officials nationwide. This initiative aims to empower women leaders through peer-to-peer learning, experience sharing, and targeted capacity building support. In **Iraq**, the Office of the Ministry of Women Empowerment at the **Saladin Governorate** launched various initiatives to empower women in assuming their role in prevention of hate and violent extremism, such as integrating women into local P/CVE committees (e.g. the deputy of the Saladin CVE Subcommittee is a woman), as well as training women on leadership, women's rights and P/CVE.

Participants emphasised that local governments in the region could benefit from training and capacity-building on how to engage communities, in particular historically marginalised ones, on P/CVE and related issues where a lack of trust and risks of stigmatisation can create barriers to engagement. They spoke about how the IJJ's curriculum on multi-actor P/CVE interventions could be a useful tool in this regard. In fact, **Hakima Al Hatri, Deputy Mayor of Fes (Morocco)** expressed interest in having her city benefit from training on the curriculum.

“We work with individuals that show signs of becoming violent. At some point, some youth did not want to collaborate with us. Eventually we met with them, we engaged them, and some of them even became part of our youth council.”

Mirna Sabbagh, Advisor to the Mayor, City of Saida, Lebanon



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City of Tangier, Morocco

- **Challenge:** Lack of youth friendly, public spaces (sports, cultural, entertainment and others) contributed to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, fostering frustration and lack of trust in government, increasing the likelihood of youth engaging in delinquent or violent behaviours.
- **Approach:** The City of Tangier, in partnership with other local institutions and the national government, built over 80 playgrounds throughout the city, primarily within marginalised neighbourhoods. These playgrounds are managed by community-based sport associations that focus on youth engagement and empowerment at the neighbourhood level.
- **Impact:** Youth now have a safe space within their neighbourhoods to spend their free time engaging in sports, cultural and educational activities, as well as creating communities that promote values of communal living, solidarity, and integration and offer alternative outlets to channel their energy and talents.



2. Whole-of-Society Approach for Effective Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R): Don't Overlook the Role of Local Governments

Participants were introduced to the recently-published, [Rehabilitation and \(Re\)integration through Individual, Social and Structural Engagement \(RISE\) Action Guide](#) developed by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). It offers relevant stakeholders a peacebuilding framework to support individuals in their reintegration process and reconciliation with their local communities. Instead of emphasis the need to change people's beliefs and ideology, RISE focuses on changing behaviours and the broader social environments of the individual. It calls for preparing both the individuals and the communities for reintegration, especially through stigma prevention and restorative justice, and therefore requires broadening the coalition to include all relevant stakeholders, including cities. Participants welcomed training on how to apply the principles in the guide to their local contexts.

Discussions highlighted how while the central government typically oversees the repatriation of FTFs and their families, cities, along with other local stakeholders, are critical to ensuring receiving communities are welcoming. This includes by helping to mitigate the stigmatisation



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and marginalisation of returnees. Related to this, participants shared how cities can help ensure returnees have access to the basic services, including those related to residence permits, housing, jobs, health and education, required to make the reintegration effective and sustainable. Particular attention was placed on the contribution that cities can make to address the individual and collective trauma among the returnees, displaced people, as well as victim communities, and which requires active engagement and collaboration with specialised, and often community-based, organisations. **Local governments, it was suggested, can, if properly resourced and mandated, play an important role in coordinating the support that these individuals and/or communities may require.**

Despite the comparative advantages that cities have to offer when it comes to R&R, **participants acknowledged that local governments have largely been overlooked in this field.** However, some examples of local government involvement in this work were shared and participants recognised that cities from across the region would benefit from support and guidance from national and international partners to allow more of them to contribute to a whole-of-society approach to R&R.

For example, **Ali Omer Khalaf, Deputy Governor of Nineveh (Iraq)** spoke about how, after the liberation of the region from ISIS, the Iraqi Government, in collaboration with the Governorate, city leaders, tribal chiefs and other relevant stakeholders, started a long and complex R&R process. The governorate, he said, played a role in convincing families to return, and ensured, in collaboration with tribal leaders, that returning families were relocated to communities that would be accepting of their return. At the national level and with the support of local committees, a whole-of-society approach was adopted to provide legal documentation, access to education, job opportunities and psycho-social support to returnees and their families.

In addition, the **City of Tangier (Morocco)** reported that it signed a [partnership agreement](#) with the [Mohammed VI Foundation](#) for the reintegration of returning individuals from conflict zones, to support educational programs for terrorist offenders and other prisoners. At the end of 2023, the Governorate of the same region partnered with the Foundation to support 18 former terrorist prisoners by providing them with seed-funding and in-kind support to help them set up income-generating activities following their release.



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City of Miqdadiyah, Iraq

- **Challenge:** Miqdadiyah is a multi-ethnic city, located in the northeast of Baghdad, which was widely affected by ISIS, resulting in the displacement of 18,000 families and the destruction of 48 villages. The city had to navigate various challenges in the aftermath of ISIS, including restoring peace and stability, bringing back the internally displaced families, promoting social cohesion, and supporting the victims while preparing for the rehabilitation and reintegration.
- **Approach:** The city took an active part in the central government-led reconciliation process led through the implementation of a reintegration program and by strengthening resilience of both the communities that were controlled by ISIS and those that were not. The city further supported the implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism and Terrorism, using existing infrastructure to respond to the needs of returnees and their families, as well as receiving communities, and to promote a culture of coexistence and social cohesion.
- **Impact:** as a result of these efforts and collaborations with various relevant stakeholders, 15,000 displaced families successfully returned to the city and surrounding villages, including those whose family members were part of ISIS.



3. Addressing the Impacts of Global Crises at the Local Level: The Role Cities and Mayors

Cities and mayors serve as the frontline responders to global crises such as climate change, migration, pandemics and regional conflicts, and they are often the first to experience the direct effects on their populations and infrastructure. Participants discussed how these local stakeholders play a pivotal role in coordinating emergency response efforts, mobilising emergency services and ensuring the safety and well-being of their constituents. They also shared how local governments are crucial to building social cohesion and fostering community resilience to withstand the hate and violent extremism that can be linked to regional or global conflicts and can divide and/or destabilise communities. They can do this, including by recognising localised trauma, calming tensions within and among different communities and providing space for voices to be heard.

Participants emphasised that national governments should ensure local governments have the mandate and support necessary to allow them to assume the above roles most effectively. According to **Owen Bonnici, Minister for the National Heritage, the Arts and**



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Local Government (Malta), global challenges require global solutions which can be achieved solely through ensuring that all actors, including city leaders, understand the responsibilities for mitigating and resolving threats to peace and security.

Participants further shared some concrete examples of how cities in the region have helped mitigate the impact of global crises on their communities. For example, during COVID-19 pandemic, **the City of Sousse (Tunisia)**, provided access to humanitarian assistance to both Tunisians and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and, as part of its effort to manage the challenges posed by international migration, the City created a special office to manage funds and coordinate projects promoting employability among migrants.

Hakima Hatri, Deputy Mayor of Fes (Morocco) shared how, as part of the city's effort to promote a culture of tolerance and inclusivity, it initiated awareness raising campaigns on the need to get the COVID-19 vaccine and to protect communities most vulnerable to the virus. Similarly, the **City of Ajloun (Jordan)** ran educational raising campaigns to ensure citizens have information on how to protect themselves and their communities against COVID-19.

In order to mitigate the negative impact of climate change, **Chasib Alhajjaji, Deputy Governor of Maysan (Iraq)** said the Governorate introduced a number of measures (metric pumps, water trucks, use of rainwater) to ensure that communities have access to water for agricultural purposes, as communities have been reluctant to return to their villages after the ISIS, due to the prolonged periods of drought. The Governorate further engaged the national government in order to mobilise funding and resources to address effects of climate change and its impact on social cohesion. In **Morocco, the Cities of Oujda and Agadir** supported the national government in raising awareness among their residents regarding the rationalisation of the use of drinking water and created systems for distribution of drinking water, in an attempt to prevent community tensions, inter-communal conflicts, and potential for violence, due to the scarcity of water and other natural resources.

"Cities are the primary interlocutors for migrants in terms of access to basic services. As local leaders, we have become engaged in migration management even though it is not part of our mandates by the law. The City of Oujda has implemented several projects with international organisations to address migration."

Mohamed El Yousfi, General Director of Services, City of Oujda, Morocco



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City of Amman, Jordan

- **Challenge:** While Amman is a pedestrian-friendly city, it suffers from urban design shortcomings, lack of proper sidewalks and poor lighting. This impedes efforts to manage crises such as natural disasters, including by not allowing for citizens to have easy access to essential services during such crises.
- **Approach:** As part of the [Global Mayors Challenge](#), the City of Amman raised 1 million US dollars to design an online platform composed of interactive maps that can share updates during times of crises to inform the public about blocked areas, evacuation plans, alternative routes and other relevant essential services. The user-friendly maps, which are currently supported by UNDP, are also expected to inform citizens about instant natural disasters such as flash floods, by displaying the areas that are widely affected on the app, supporting both citizens and decision makers to make informed decisions to mitigate risks and limit their impact.
- **Impact:** The platform is expected to promote equality and accessibility at the city level, increase the efficiency of city services, assist decision-makers in prioritising crisis responses and increase urban resilience.



Next Steps

- The Strong Cities MENA Regional Hub will support the cities in the region with implementing the various resources presented during the workshop, from RISE, the GCTF NLC, Strong Cities guides and other resources.
- Strong Cities will disseminate its NLC mapping report for MENA to national and local governments and other relevant stakeholders in the region, highlighting challenges, as well as good practices and replicable models; the findings from and recommendations in this report will guide Strong Cities efforts to work with cities, national governments and other key stakeholders to enhance NLC in the region.
- Strong Cities will continue supporting cities in the region to strengthen their roles in the R&R of returnees from conflict zones through continuous capacity building, sharing of relevant tools and practices, and creating platforms for collaboration and coordination based on the principles enshrined in the GCTF NLC toolkit.
- Strong Cities will support additional, dedicated peer learning and other capacity-building opportunities for municipalities from the region, with an added focus on engagement of youth and other marginalised communities including by



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leveraging the Strong Cities Technical Support Fund to develop and pilot city-led young engagement platforms in select cities II as well as responding to impacts of global crisis at the local level.

- Strong Cities will build on the MOU it signed with the [Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils](#) and seek partnerships with other relevant city networks such as [Arab Towns](#) and [United Cities and Local Governments of Africa \(UCLGA\)](#) to jointly support local governments across the region in unlocking their full potential in prevention of hate, polarisation and violent extremism.
- Strong Cities will work with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to support selected Iraqi governorates in the implementation of their local prevention plans, thus contributing to Iraq's National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism and fostering community resilience against violent extremism.

Additional Resources

- [Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities II Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis](#), Strong Cities Network, December 2023
- [RISE: Rehabilitation and Reintegration through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement](#), United States Institute for Peace, November 2023
- [Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returnees from Syria and Iraq: Ten Lessons from the Berlin Experience for Local Governments](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [A Guide for Mayors: Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network, September 2023
- [National & Local Cooperation \(NLC\) Toolkit](#), developed to support the operationalization of the Global Counterterrorism Forum's (GCTF) good practices on strengthening NLC, September 2023
- [Journey to extremism in Africa: Pathways to recruitment and disengagement](#), United Nations Programme for Development, February 2023
- [Developing Multi-Actor P/CVE Intervention Programmes: Implementing a 'Whole of Society', 'Do No Harm' Approach](#), The International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, June 2021
- [Memorandum on Good Practices on Strengthening National-Local Cooperation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism](#), September 2020



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Contact Information

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