

Event Report

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

Webinar
28 February 2024



Summary

On 28 February 2024, the [Strong Cities Network](https://strongcitiesnetwork.org) hosted the third 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 senior city officials from Los Angeles (California), Athens (Ohio), Edmonton (Canada) and Columbus (Ohio) and experts from the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](https://www.instituteforstrategicdialogue.org) (ISD) and the [Institute for Social Policy and Understanding](https://www.instituteforsocialpolicyandunderstanding.org) (ISPU) 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 grappling with 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. He underscored how 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. There is a proliferation of online mis- and disinformation related to the Israel-Gaza crisis; cities have a role to play in supporting information integrity in the long term.** Social media users primarily turn to unreliable news aggregators and commentary accounts for information rather than traditional news. And with the proliferation of artificial intelligence, users admit that they no longer know what information can be trusted. Cities can promote media literacy, particularly in schools, and good practices such as lateral reading.
- 2. Muslim communities in North America have felt vulnerable for years and hate crimes have significantly risen following 7 October.** Since 2016, the American Muslim community has consistently experienced elevated levels of Islamophobia compared to previous years. This includes interpersonal, institutional and structural discrimination, from being the victim of verbal harassment to being subjected to extended scrutiny at airports to unequal treatment in the legal system. Following 7 October, cities have reported a drastic rise in anti-Muslim hate incidents.
- 3. Residents impacted by the Israel-Hamas crisis are in pain; they want to be both seen and heard by the city and its leaders.** Many Americans have direct ties to victims of 7 October and the resulting conflict, both Jewish and Muslim. Residents have demanded action from city leaders, including issuing calls for a ceasefire. City leaders should acknowledge this suffering both privately with victims and publicly with grieving communities and can demonstrate this sympathy through public displays of sympathy and affirmation.
- 4. Despite the tension, many communities want to come together; local government can help.** For example, in recent years, bonds had been growing strong between American Jewish and Muslims communities, and a majority of both share a desire for a ceasefire in Israel-Gaza. At times, these communities have turned to city leaders asking for government to host convenings to bring the two communities together in dialogue and in the service of humanity.
- 5. During periods of global crises, cities can benefit from partnerships, locally and globally.** Cities are not alone in experiencing these periods of tension. Often, they can benefit from leveraging local institutions such as college and universities. Cities also recognise the value that membership in the Strong Cities Network can bring, from connecting with peer leaders around the world to accessing advisory services from the Strong Cities team.

There is a Proliferation of Online Mis- & Disinformation Related to the Israel-Gaza Crisis; Cities Can Support Information Integrity in the Long Term

Isabelle Frances-Wright, Director of Technology and Society at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), warned about mis- and disinformation landscape related to the conflict, primarily on X (formerly Twitter), which has served as a key source for breaking news for US audiences during global crises. With recent changes in policies and enforcement, she said there has been a proliferation of false content, with users now having to rely on fact checking from fellow users (“community notes”) rather than platform administrators. Rather than relying on traditional news outlets, audiences are now turning to amateur news aggregators and “influencer” commentary accounts – some of whom intentionally peddle inflammatory rhetoric and misleading information, while others fall vulnerable to honest mistakes and manipulation by nefarious operators.



Meanwhile, so-called “verified” accounts on X (now meaning that the accounts are paid subscribers rather than an account of public interest is authentic), which receive artificial boosts in visibility on the platform, are responsible for nearly 75% of viral misinformation about the war. Flooded by decontextualised snippets of information from all directions and plagued by “narrative collapse,” audiences seek those who can help them rationalise the chaos, prioritising information that confirms their biases rather than conveys accurate reporting.

More acutely, she shared how the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has had a profound distortion on the reliability of online information. Beyond the ability of ‘deepfakes’ to present manipulated information, the knowledge itself that deepfakes exist affect how users trust *any* information, even if it is accurate. ISD research has revealed that American social media users are now saying that they are no longer sure what is and isn’t true and therefore cannot trust anything they see online. In the face of these threats, she shared how cities can invest in long-term solutions by promoting media and digital literacy. City leaders can encourage residents to embrace good practices such as “lateral reading” (evaluating the credibility/accuracy of a report by comparing it with those from other sources). And, more directly, school systems can introduce age-appropriate media literacy curricula for elementary, middle and high school students, while other agencies (e.g. library systems) can provide media literacy skills training to the general population.

Muslim Communities Have Felt Vulnerable for Years and Hate Crimes Have Significantly Risen Following 7 October

Saher Selod, Director of Research at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), discussed the Islamophobia landscape in the United States, particularly resonant in the wake of 7 October. She shared how, from 2016 to 2022, the frequency of religious discrimination against Muslims remained consistently at an elevated level from the years previous, with 60% of American Muslims saying that they experienced Islamophobia in the past year. It includes assaults and harassment, microaggressions, communities opposing mosque activities and construction, states introducing Islamophobic legislation, Muslims receiving unequal treatment in the legal and banking systems, anti-Muslim political rhetoric, mistreatment from law enforcement and airport security, healthcare and job discrimination and measures against refugees from Muslim-majority countries. ISPU has found that nearly half of Muslim families have reported a child that has faced religious-based bullying.



While polling data isn't available for 2023, and therefore the effects of 7 October cannot yet be determined, it is clear that Islamophobic incidents are on the rise. **Joumana Silyan-Saba**, Director of Policy and Enforcement for the Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department in Los Angeles (California), said that from October to November 2023, anti-Muslim hate incidents jumped 650% as compared to 2022. (Antisemitic incidents similarly rose, by 200%, as compared to the previous year.)

Residents are in Pain and Want to be Both Seen and Heard from City Leaders

Ms. Silyan-Saba highlighted that Los Angeles is home to the 3rd largest Muslim, and 2nd largest Jewish, community in the United States. As the events of 7 October unfolded, the impact was, in her words, "sheer trauma." Many Jewish residents had family members taken hostage, while others lost dozens of members of their family in Gaza in the subsequent conflict. She shared how many Muslim and Arab-American residents have been calling her office seeking support and guidance. Her office has also heard from residents experiencing discrimination in the workplace related to their expressions of support for Palestine on social media, with many others afraid to speak candidly about their thoughts on the conflict online. In all of these interactions, what her office learned was simple: "People want to be heard." Accordingly, in the wake of these events, the mayor and members of the city council met with families of hostages and with Arab-Americans to acknowledge their pain and suffering and demonstrate support in their time of need.





In Athens (Ohio), City Councilmember-at-large **Micah McCarey** discussed insistent calls from residents for the city council to issue a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the conflict. Even though residents understood that the city has no tangible role in international geopolitics, they wanted their voices amplified and their local representatives to reflect their values in opposing what they see as their state and federal leaders' unwavering support for Israel's actions in Gaza. Councilmember McCarey described, the visible trauma in the room, with many residents instigated to action based on graphic content they were consuming on social media. Though many others communicated to their councilmembers that they opposed such a resolution, and that it would prove

divisive, ultimately the city council [passed a ceasefire resolution](#). He shared how the council is now considering mechanisms to bring the community together and ensure social cohesion in the wake of potentially polarising political activity.

Salima Ebrahim, Chief of Staff and Lead for Anti-Racism and Reconciliation for the City of Edmonton (Alberta), highlighted the fact that the city has been [engaged in anti-racism work](#) for 20+ years and has deliberately stood up this work in the city manager's office, rather than a city agency, to ensure continued high visibility. In the wake of 7 October, Edmonton leaned on relationships with the city faith advisory group for guidance on how to navigate relations with the affected communities, especially young people who were processing their reactions to the conflict in real time. Applying the principles learned from its anti-racism work, Edmonton sought to explain the local Jewish and Muslim community experience for residents, contextualising their reactions of these communities to these events accordingly. City leaders approached the communities with an element of vulnerability to show that they are there to learn and want to hear directly what those communities need.



And what they heard was that the communities wanted their pain acknowledged – they wanted to be “seen and heard.” Accordingly, the city lit a public bridge in support of Israel for five days, and then for lost Palestinians lives for days after that. The city had to think critically about how to do this, especially the public communications around this action. Ultimately, it proved appreciated, and the city fielded calls from other government officials at the provincial and national level to talk through what citizens need and how to meet those needs.

Despite the Tension, Communities Want to Come Together; Local Government Can Help

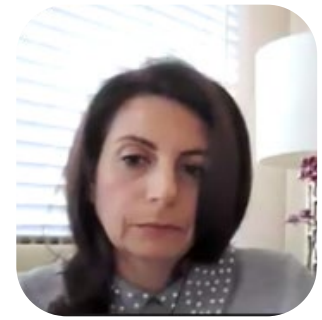
According to **Saher Selod of ISPU**, despite the recent flare-ups of tension between the American Jewish and Muslim communities, in actuality, favourable Jewish and Muslim opinions of one another has been increasing in recent years, according to ISPU [survey data](#). In fact, in 2022 Jewish respondents scored the lowest on the ‘Islamophobia Index’ (measuring how much someone adheres to prevalent anti-Muslim stereotypes) of any other religious group and the general public. This is even reflected in [recent ISPU polling](#), which found that a majority of both Muslims (75%) and

Jews (50%) support a ceasefire in Israel-Gaza. As Selod noted, the fact that Jewish and Muslim Americans share similar views on this issue demonstrates a strengthening interfaith relationship.

This converging of communal viewpoints was clear in the reaction to 7 October in multiple North American cities. Despite the obvious frictions, community leaders repeatedly sought opportunities for dialogue and coming together. In Los Angeles, **Ms. Silyan-Saba** said that community members asked her office for ‘community circle dialogues.’ In December, Los Angeles hosted a gathering in city hall ‘in the name of humanity,’ which the communities themselves asked for, to let the other know that they recognise their pain and want to focus on their common humanity. With just two days’ notice, over 80 people attended the gathering. Such an event is a archetype example of the [‘LA For All’](#) campaign, a “community focused, anti-hate and discrimination campaign to stand against hate and encourage [residents] to speak up and speak out.”

“It hasn’t been easy, but our long-standing relationships with the local Jewish and Muslim communities were foundational to recognize the fear and trauma being experienced at the local level, and ultimately contributed to a better-informed engagement in this time of crisis.”

Joumana Silyan-Saba, Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department, Los Angeles, California



Michael Schadek, Director of Regional Partnerships in Columbus (Ohio) shared that in his city, with a diverse population of 120+ nationalities, there were a large number of protests following 7 October. The city’s response has been guided by the [‘Columbus Way,’](#) a statement of principles that seeks to demonstrate that the Columbus community is welcoming to all. In line with that vision and in response to the ongoing protests, the city engaged the [Columbus Police Department Dialogue Unit](#) – established to help build social cohesion between different community groups, both in times of tension and otherwise – to do just that. The dialogue group met with the affected communities, which was seen as a means of effective engagement to ensure continued social cohesion.



During Periods of Global Crises, Cities can Benefit from Local and Global Partnerships

Panellists discussed the value that city partnerships can bring. In particular, **Mr. Schadek** highlighted a collaboration among the public, private, academic and community sectors in Columbus to deliberately work together on all issues that affect the city. The city also has a strong partnership with Ohio State University, including its John Glenn College of Public Affairs and the

Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, while the Columbus PD Dialogue Unit works across campus as well.

Councilmember McCarey shared how he has leveraged his role as director of the LGBT centre at Ohio University in Athens to inform city efforts to launch a citywide racial equity working group and support the local chapter of [Bridge USA](#), a youth movement dedicated to fighting political division. In the wake of the contentious ceasefire resolution debate, Councilmember McCarey said he also plans to collaborate with university scholars to uncover effective survey research methods to better capture public opinion data on these issues. To this point, **Ms. Ebrahim** mentioned that the city developed a formal partnership with the University of Alberta in Edmonton to devise its anti-racism strategy, which was instrumental to the effort.

Speakers also mentioned the value that membership in the Strong Cities Network has brought to their city. **Councilmember McCarey** emphasised how the Strong Cities team has been “an invaluable resource” in providing advisory services and guidance as he and his fellow councilmembers seek to navigate the tensions around the ceasefire resolution and its aftermath. As they consider mechanisms to gauge community sentiment and enhance community cohesion, the councilmembers have benefitted from the guidance imparted in Strong Cities’ [‘Guide for Cities’](#) and lessons learned from peer experiences. And **Mr. Schadek** highlighted the city’s excitement to host an in-person Strong Cities convening of North American and European mayors, city leaders and subject matter experts this coming September to discuss city-led approaches to addressing hate, extremism and polarisation in the context of a successive global crises.

Next Steps

This webinar was the third 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’. The next session, which will feature city representatives from both Europe and North America, is scheduled for 20 March 2024.

Strong Cities has also [announced a strategic partnership](#) with the National League of Cities. The inaugural joint event will be a webinar on 27 March 2024 focused on how mayors and cities can respond to incidents of hate and extremism.

Additional Resources

- [50 Possible Questions to Open Israeli-Palestinian Dialogues](#), International Ombuds Association (February 2024)
- [Global Crisis, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion & How Cities Can Respond](#), Event Report, Strong Cities Network (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)

- [Research on American Muslims and the Impact of Events in Palestine, Israel, and Surrounding Region](#), Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (December 2023)
- [Information disorder in the Israel-Hamas war highlights shifts in the fight against online misinformation](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (November 2023)
- [Violent and graphic content of the Gaza conflict served to minors' accounts](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (October 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)
- [Countering and Dismantling Islamophobia: A Comprehensive Guide](#), Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (undated)

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.