

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

### Key Findings and Recommendations to Date

Webinar Series

April 2024

In late 2023, in the absence of an existing relevant playbook or guidelines for mayors and local governments, Strong Cities began receiving requests from member and non-member cities across Europe and North America for guidance and opportunities to share and learn from each other as they navigate the local impacts of global crises, such as Israel-Gaza.

Strong Cities has looked to address this lacuna through the development of a policy brief – [Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities – Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis](#) – capturing ten lessons learned from city-led efforts to manage the impact of global crises on social cohesion. The Network is also leading a monthly webinar series for mayors and other city officials, together with independent experts and researchers, to discuss how these global crises, most recently the Israel-Gaza crisis, are manifesting in their communities, and how mayors and local government are responding. Event reports from the first four webinars in this series are available here: [December 2023](#), [January 2024](#), [February 2024](#) and [March 2024](#).

Below we share some of the key takeaways and recommendations from the webinar series to date, which have convened more than 300 mayors, other local leaders and city officials and subject-matter experts.

#### The threat facing cities – online and offline manifestations:

- Ongoing global crises correlate with an increase in hate and extremist threats from across the ideological spectrum, including rising levels of antisemitism and Islamophobia.
- Extremist actors and hostile state actors are exploiting the conflict to spread hateful rhetoric and calls for violence, including cyberattacks.
- The proliferation of online mis/disinformation regarding the Israel-Gaza crisis persists, and social media users are primarily turning to unreliable news aggregators and commentary accounts for information rather than traditional news. With the proliferation of artificial intelligence, users admit that they no longer know what information can be trusted.
- Most offline mobilisation has been peaceful, although there have been a number of violent protests and counterdemonstrations, physical attacks and threats.
- Demonstrations related to the Israel-Gaza crisis spiked immediately after 7 October 2023, but have been trending downward since.

## The impact on cities – heightened community tensions, anxiety, safety concerns:

- Local governments have been shaken by the impact of the Israel-Gaza crisis on their local communities, with Jewish, Muslim and other affected communities increasingly concerned for their safety.
- Numerous protests and rallies have sought to shut down operations (e.g., malls, roads, places of worship, hospitals and other institutions) and cities have seen increases in hateful graffiti and hate speech.
- Many communities have seen the bonds of inter-communal relations tested, with affected communities feeling significant amounts of sadness, fear and trauma.
- Many residents have been impacted directly by the Israel-Gaza crisis. They, and their supporters, want to be both seen and heard by the city and its leaders. They have demanded action from city leaders, including through city councils (e.g., by issuing calls for a ceasefire).

## The response of elected local leaders – engage, listen, reassure, unite:

- Residents impacted by the Israel-Gaza crisis should be allowed to express themselves, as long as they do so peacefully.
- At times, Jewish and Muslim residents have turned to city leaders asking for the local government to host convenings to bring the two communities together in dialogue and in the service of humanity.
- City leaders should avoid taking sides on a global crisis that divides their communities, particularly when doing so will not have an impact on the crisis. The overriding principle – important for both short-term response and long-term social cohesion – should be ‘Do No Harm’.
- Communications play a pivotal role during this time and there are a number of steps mayors can take in response to such crises, including:
  - **Engage and listen to understand:**
    - Meet with affected community members regularly to hear and understand what is going on inside the communities, as well as to ask the community leaders for their help in calming tensions.
    - Listen to affected individuals and provide safe spaces for residents to freely express their fears, concerns and even anger.
    - Coordinate with faith, ethnic and other community partners to better understand residents’ concerns and trends.
  - **Reassure:**
    - Acknowledge the suffering – both privately with victims and publicly with grieving communities – and demonstrate empathy through public displays of sympathy and affirmation, while carefully balancing the different and evolving needs and expectations of community members affected by a particular global crisis.

- Communicate clearly and frequently to residents that their pain is seen and reassure residents with overt displays of enhanced public safety measures.
- Demonstrate empathy towards the different affected communities in the city – irrespective of the mayor’s personal view – recognising that attempts to address the concerns of one community can have unintended consequences for another.
- **Unite around city’s values:**
  - Speak out when a hateful or violent incident occurs – name the hate – and reaffirm the city’s values of tolerance, inclusivity and civility.
  - Reorient perspectives among affected residents towards one of shared community, while upholding impartial values.
  - Shift narratives from diametrically opposed viewpoints (‘us versus them’) to an ‘us versus us’ approach, enabling residents to view the issue as arising within a single city family.
  - Allow for peaceful, free expression while messaging the importance of dialogue and social cohesion.
  - Restore civility and dignity in conversations about emotional topics and create safe spaces for different perspectives to be shared.

## **The response of local governments and city councils – calm, prevent and mitigate:**

- Local governments and city councils should consider how they can best calm tensions and, more broadly, prevent and mitigate threats to social cohesion that global crises can pose, including by:
  - Enacting appropriate legal measures to help protect residents and public buildings (e.g., schools, places of worship and others) from hate-filled harassment or attacks (e.g., a code of conduct for rallies and protests).
  - Focusing more attention on community-based programming that addresses the enabling environment and the ‘us versus them’ mentality that can exacerbate the threats, particularly when a global crisis, such as Israel-Gaza, has diverse impacts across a city.
  - Investing in interventions that tackle the psychosocial needs of residents, such as diversion programs, open dialogues and cohesion-building projects.
  - Enacting “time, place and manner” ordinances to limit hate-related harassment and trolling by hate groups at city council meetings and other public places, as well as the private property of residents and elected local leaders.

## **City-led prevention and response – two sides of the same coin:**

- Effective city-led response when a global crisis impacts social cohesion starts with prevention: preparedness is key for an effective response and the local government should have infrastructure in place before a crisis hits.

- Cities should proactively forge and nurture strong, trust-based relationships with community actors to not only leverage them for prevention initiatives, but also for deploying a rapid, comprehensive and coordinated response in times of crisis.

## Networks and partnerships – crucial during times of global crises:

- Particularly given the number of cities globally impacted by the Israel-Gaza crisis, tapping into city networks (e.g., Strong Cities Network, National League of Cities, etc.) and the advisory services and other support they offer, and being able to exchange experiences and strategies with peers, both within the same country and globally, has helped mayors and other local elected leaders navigate this latest crisis.
- Mayors and city officials have underscored the importance of having built and spent time investing in partnerships with civil society *prior* to crises, reinforcing the importance of a broader multi-actor, whole of society approach to prevention and social cohesion.
- Cities can benefit from leveraging local institutions, such as colleges and universities.
- Cities can also benefit from accessing and understanding good practices and learnings from other cities facing similar challenges, so that successes are replicated in a tailored manner and mistakes are not repeated.

## Further Support for Mayors, Other Local Leaders and Cities

In addition to policy briefs and other resources, Strong Cities has a series of ‘living’ guides to support cities and local leaders. Developed through consultations with mayors and city officials in different contexts globally, the guides draw on experiences, good practices and advice from leaders and city officials around the world, and a diversity of examples of city-led approaches on prevention and response. Available in Arabic, English and French, and housed in our online [Resource Hub](#) as PDFs and multi-media tools, the Strong Cities Guides are crucial resources for in-depth training and support for mayors and city officials globally. Explore our Guides:

- [A Guide for Mayors](#): Key questions, decision points, good practices, and lessons learned to help mayors prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation.
- [A Guide for Cities](#): Support for local government officials, practitioners and staff on their role, and that of local government, in preventing hate, extremism and polarisation.
- [A Guide for City-Led Response](#): Support for mayors and cities in formulating a sensitive and effective response in the wake of a hate- or violent extremism-motivated attack, incident or crisis.

## Contact

For more information on the Strong Cities Network, our Global Crises, Local Impacts Initiative, or other Network activities, please contact [info@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:info@strongcitiesnetwork.org) and explore our website: [www.strongcitiesnetwork.org](http://www.strongcitiesnetwork.org).