

Event Report

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

Webinar  
20 March 2024



### Summary

On 20 March 2024, the [Strong Cities Network](https://strongcitiesnetwork.org) hosted the fourth 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 crisis – have had impacts on social cohesion in cities around the world, including in North America and Europe. Organised under the auspices of the Strong Cities [Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative](#), city officials from The Hague (Netherlands), Portsmouth (United Kingdom), Strasbourg (France) and Toronto (Canada) shared the challenges they are facing as they navigate the various effects of these crises on their residents and what local leaders and city governments are doing to de-escalate inter-communal tensions and bridge differences that have emerged during or exacerbated as a result of them.

**Eric Rosand, Executive Director of the Strong Cities Network**, explained how this monthly webinar series responds to growing requests from the Network's 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 crisis in particular. Mr. Rosand 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. Ongoing global crises correlate with an increase in hate and extremist threats from across the ideological spectrum.** Global crises or significant events, such as elections, often align with surges in targeted hate harassment and violent extremist mobilisation. These threats come from across the ideological spectrum and have an impact on social cohesion.
- 2. Cities are dealing with heightened community tensions, anxiety and safety concerns.** Cities on both sides of the Atlantic have been shaken by the impact of the Israel-Gaza crisis on their local communities. From numerous protests and rallies that have sought to shut operations down (e.g., malls, roads, places of worship, hospitals and other institutions) to increases in hateful graffiti and hate speech, cities are grappling with community tensions, and residents have demanded action from the cities, including through city council resolutions calling for a ceasefire.
- 3. Mayors and cities have at their disposal a number of legal, policy and communications tools to calm tensions and, more broadly, prevent and mitigate threats to social cohesion that global crises can pose: they should use them.** Mayors should speak out when a hateful or violent incident occurs and reaffirm their city's values of tolerance, inclusivity and civility. City councils should enact appropriate legal measures to help protect residents and public buildings (schools, places of worship and others) from hate-filled harassment or attacks. Local governments should focus more attention on community-based programming that addresses the enabling environment and the 'us vs. them' mentality that can exacerbate the threats, particularly when a global crisis such as the Israel-Gaza conflict has diverse impacts across a city.
- 4. Effective response starts with prevention: work needs to begin before a crisis so that infrastructure and partnerships are in place should a hate- or extremist-motivated incident occur.** Preparedness is key for an effective response; local government should have an infrastructure in place before the 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.
- 5. City-to-city sharing, learning and cooperation, more broadly, is more important than ever.** Particularly given the number of cities impacted by the Israel-Gaza conflict, tapping into city networks, 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. Cities benefit from accessing and understanding good practices and learnings from others so that successes are replicated in a tailored manner and mistakes are not repeated.

## Ongoing Global Crises Correlate with an Increase in Hate and Extremist Threats from Across the Ideological Spectrum

**Jacob Davey**, Director of Policy and Research, Counter – Hate at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), gave an overview of the hate- and extremist-threat landscape. He said that major global crises or significant events, such as elections, often correlate with surges in targeted hate harassment and violent extremist mobilisation. He warned that cities in Europe and the USA are at a heightened risk of disruptive cyber and violent attacks, with an increase in hate crimes targeting Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities, and threats coming from across the ideological spectrum. Actors include individuals unaffiliated with extremist groups, neo-Nazi accelerationists, militant anarchists, Islamist extremists and broader radicalised protest movements with a range of targets. These include religious institutions (synagogues and mosques), Muslim and Jewish community members, public officials, protesters, as well as universities and corporations. He highlighted some of the tactics they deploy, including protests and rallies, death and terror threats, targeted online violence, online harassment, doxing and hate crimes. Mr. Davey said that ISD’s team is also [seeing](#) an increase in information manipulation and interference by state-sponsored groups, foreign and domestic extremist actors and conspiratorial groups sharing misleading, false and hateful narratives around the Israel-Gaza conflict.



Mr. Davey shared that ISD’s [research](#) has identified a trend of cross-ideological support and collaboration. For example, he pointed to [neo-Nazi channels](#) praising Hamas’ attacks and calling for guerilla-style tactics to be used against Jews, while highlighting that antisemitism has been a unifying factor across ideologically diverse [fringe movements](#), who have shared conspiracy theories about 7 October. ISD data also [shows](#) there has been a significant spike in Anti-Muslim hate (with comments on YouTube rising almost 43-fold), promoting conflict-related anti-Muslim narratives such as that Islam promotes terror/killing/hate/violence, dehumanises others and is evil by nature.

## Cities are Dealing with Heightened Community Tensions, Anxiety and Safety Concerns

**James Pasternak**, Toronto City Councillor for York Centre (Canada) said Torontonians “have been shaken to the core” by the impact the Israel-Gaza crisis had on their city, which has typically ranked in the top ten cities globally when it comes to safety and quality of life. He said Toronto has experienced numerous protests and rallies that have sought to shut things down (malls, roads, places of worship, hospitals and other institutions) and the city has also seen a 93% increase in hate crimes since 7 October.



**Noor Duisterhoff, Policy Officer for Polarisation and Radicalisation from the Municipality of The Hague (The Netherlands)**, shared that, like Toronto, The Hague has “seen a lot of unrest, outrage and demonstrations over the situation in Gaza” in both the City’s Muslim and non-Muslim communities, with some city residents unhappy with the way the Dutch Government has responded to the Israel-Gaza crisis. On the other hand, she said the Jewish community in the city is feeling unsafe. Although there have not been many reported threats or incidents, the feeling of insecurity among the community is very real and the city is working to ensure the security of the Jewish premises (schools, synagogues and other).



**Eric Poinot, Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Officer from the City of Strasbourg (France)** said that the tensions in the city – which is home to large Muslim and Jewish communities – existed previously, but that they were significantly exacerbated after the 7 October. He pointed to the high number of demonstrations related to the Israel-Gaza crisis, a significant rise in graffiti with disturbing content and in on- and offline hate speech, as well as a few instances of violence.

He said that the city was caught by surprise when, following 7 October, the Jewish community immediately withdrew from the decade-long inter-religious dialogue the city had been leading because other religious groups did not show immediate support for Israel and the Jewish community in the aftermath of the attack. Mr. Poinot shared that this rupture demonstrates that, rather than a war in a distant land, the Israel-Gaza conflict is perceived by some residents in Strasbourg as one between local communities in the city.

## **Mayors and Cities Have a Number of Legal, Policy and Communications Tools to Calm Tensions and, More Broadly, Prevent and Mitigate Threats to Social Cohesion that Global Crises Can Pose: They Should Use Them**

**Charlie Pericleous, Preventing Violent Extremism Officer from the City of Portsmouth (United Kingdom)** shared that Portsmouth is home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the UK and Haifa, Israel is a Sister City. He said that shortly after the 7 October attack, the city council issued a statement that condemned the violence, called for a permanent ceasefire and reiterated support for the two-state solution. In addition, a number of local councillors have set up community forums to hear directly from the residents. The city has a strong monitoring system and after detecting anxiety from students in local schools around the crisis, the city council provided resources to the schools to engage with their students on this topic.



**Mr. Poinot** shared that Strasbourg adopted a number of motions related to the conflict. One called for peace and protection of the civilian population on all sides to remind all Strasbourg residents that the city stands firmly against all acts of hate, extremism, racism, discrimination and violence. He said that this motion also calls the situation a political crisis requiring a political solution, in an



attempt to ensure there is a clear distinction between the international conflict and the local situation. Another motion called for international solidarity and cooperation in resolving the conflict, and in February 2024 the municipal council decided to provide financial support for the humanitarian aid in Gaza, through Red Cross. **Mr. Poinso** underscored that “all of these actions are aimed at ensuring the neutrality of the city in the eyes of its residents”.

**Councillor Pasternak** highlighted how the Chief of Police in Toronto visits places of worship to reassure everyone that the city and the police are doing everything in their power to protect the communities, and the city has organised community safety townhalls and social gathering to hear from the affected communities directly. Further, there was a consensus that local elected officials need to speak out and that **Mayor Chow**, in particular, plays a critical role in condemning all the disruptive and violent actions and behaviours inspired by the conflict in the Middle East. He commented on the challenges in reigning in or otherwise limiting the protests, given the broad free speech protections under Canada’s federal law. However, he said that the municipal council is focused on what they can do within their mandate to mitigate the impact of the Israel-Gaza crisis on the streets of Toronto. For example, **Mr. Pasternak** recently put forward a motion in city council to create a code of conduct for rallies and protests as these have proven to be particularly disruptive.

**Ms. Duisterhoff** shared that the Hague is working very closely with a number of stakeholders, including police, Ministry of Justice, civil society organisations and schools, and has been supporting local initiatives that focus on bringing people together to discuss their concerns and perceptions. For example, two synagogues invited all schools from the city to visit and ask them questions about Jewish community in an attempt to change the narrative. She further highlighted the importance for mayors and other local leaders to create opportunities and spaces for engagement with different communities where their members’ grievances can be aired peacefully.

The Hague city officials engaged with the leaders from affected communities through a series of dialogues so that residents can share their concerns directly. **Mayor Van Zanen** has been meeting with the Jewish and Islamic community 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. ‘People are frustrated, angry, afraid but being there and listening to them works well.’ She added that this approach to engagement should be part of a wider local government-led effort to build an inclusive identity for the city to which all residents and communities feel a sense of connection.

“Municipalities and cities play a key role in promoting social cohesion and making sure there is no violence and we do everything we can to eliminate hate.”

**James Pasternak, Toronto City Councillor,  
York Centre, Canada**



Speakers shared how mayors and elected officials need to engage and listen to the impacted communities in their city. Rather than taking sides on a global conflict that is escalating existing or creating new inter-communal tensions, 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. A city needs to remain a safe space for all its residents.

## **Effective Response Starts with Prevention: Work Needs to Begin Before a Crisis so that the Necessary Infrastructure and Partnerships are in Place Should a Hate- or Extremist-Motivated Incident Occur**

Panellists agreed that prevention is key to effective response. They discussed the importance of preparedness, both in terms of having a crisis management plan in place, as well as the importance of clear, consistent and coordinated communication with both national and local government officials and local communities. **Mr. Pasternak** reiterated the need to have the platforms, programmes and partnerships in place (e.g., dialogues, forums, engagements and relationships) before a hate or extremist incident occurs so that the city can turn to them in times of crisis. Underscoring this point, Ms. **Duisterhoff** shared how, following 7 October, the city was able to deploy a rapid and coordinated response by leveraging the strong, trust-based relationships the city had built with the community actors and religious communities over time.

Underscoring the importance of general, long-term prevention, education and awareness raising, particularly among children and young people, **Mr. Poinsot** highlighted Strasbourg's educational tool – [Equality Spacep](#) (Espace Égalité) – that helps familiarise children and young adults with 26 discrimination criteria and fully understand the impact of discriminatory behaviours in order to be prepared to counter those.

## **City-to-City Sharing, Learning and Cooperation More Broadly Is More Important than Ever**

**Mr. Pericleous** highlighted the importance of city-to-city peer support and learning and knowing that the city is not dealing with this type of crisis in isolation. He shared that the UK network of local authorities provides a forum where cities can speak informally on different issues, and this forum has proven very valuable in discussing strategies and approaches cities across the UK have taken to mitigate the impact of this most recent threat to social cohesion. Similarly, The Hague has engaged with other Dutch cities to exchange ideas and experiences.

Speakers agreed that local governments and their leaders benefit from accessing and understanding good practices and learnings from others so that successes are replicated in a tailored manner and mistakes are not repeated. There was also recognition of the value that membership in the Strong Cities Network can bring, from connecting mayors with fellow local leaders around the world who have experienced or are experiencing similar challenges, to accessing the [resources](#) and advisory services from the Strong Cities team.

## Next Steps

This webinar was the fourth 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 24 April 2024.

## Additional Resources

- [Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative: Ten Key Findings in 2023](#), Strong Cities Network (March 2024)
- [50 Possible Questions to Open Israeli-Palestinian Dialogues](#), International Ombuds Association (February 2024)
- [Rise in antisemitism on both mainstream and fringe social media platforms following Hamas' terrorist attack](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (updated February 2024)
- [Global Crises, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion and How Cities Can Respond](#), Event Report, Strong Cities Network (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)
- [Unpacking antisemitic narratives about the Hamas attack and the Israel-Hamas Conflict within YouTube comments](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (December 2023)
- [Information disorder in the Israel-Hamas war highlights shifts in the fight against online misinformation](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (November 2023)
- [Islamist groups unite around Israel attack, diverge on Hamas](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (November 2023)
- [Hate united: Neo-Nazi accelerationist support for Hamas](#), 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, the webinar series, or other Strong Cities Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative programmes, please contact Allison Curtis, Deputy Executive Director at [ac@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:ac@strongcitiesnetwork.org).