

# Strengthening City-Led Prevention of Hate, Extremism and Polarisation in the Middle East & North Africa

## How Bringing Local Governments Together is Catalysing Action

### Introduction

In March 2023, with support from the European Union (EU), the Strong Cities Network launched its [Middle East and North Africa \(MENA\) Regional Hub](#) to strengthen city-led prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation across the region. The Hub's work has been shaped by the needs cities across the region have identified. These include: greater awareness among national and local stakeholders on the role of cities in preventing and responding to hate, extremism and polarisation; strengthened cooperation between national and local stakeholders, including municipalities, to build coordinated and sustainable prevention efforts and enhanced training and capacity-building on how to best leverage existing and/or develop new programmes, processes and networks to prevent and respond to these challenges in an effective and sustainable manner.

Since then, through in-person and virtual country-focused and regional convenings of cities, as well as through city pairings, the Regional Hub has inspired action and commitment amongst local and national actors. As a result, more cities are learning from each other's experiences; mayors and local leaders have a better understanding of the roles they can play in whole-of-society approaches to addressing threats to social cohesion and public safety in their communities and are working with the Regional Hub to implement practices and policies to do so; and national governments are increasingly committing to working more closely with local governments to create safe and resilient communities.

As highlighted below, the benefits of investing in and advocating for local governments as vital actors in prevention are numerous, demonstrating the potential for change when cities are supported to learn from one another.

### Catalysing Action Through City-to-City Learning

As a result of gaining a better understanding of the roles they can play in preventing hate, extremism and polarisation in their communities, cities across MENA have shown leadership and initiative in putting their learnings from Strong Cities convenings into practice. Similarly, after gaining a fuller appreciation of the contributions that local governments can make to the localisation of national prevention frameworks, central governments have committed to including local governments in prevention-related policy and programming discussions, from which they had typically been excluded. For example:

- **Inspiring Leadership:**

In Morocco, following the MENA Regional Hub's [inaugural workshop](#) in March 2023, the then **Mayor of Rabat** expressed strong interest in supporting the mission of Strong Cities Network and was selected as Co-Chair of the Network's [International Steering Committee](#). She has since participated in Strong Cities [Fourth Global Summit](#) and various virtual and in-person events and has played a crucial role in mobilising other Moroccan cities (Agadir, Fes, Marrakech, Oujda, Rabat, Tangier) to join the network, promoting city-city learning and advocating for the role of cities in prevention of hate, violent extremism and polarisation. Her successor, Fatiha El Moudni, has since taken on the Co-Chair role and represented Rabat at the Strong Cities [Fifth Global Summit](#) in December 2025.

**“This important meeting represents a valuable opportunity to highlight the role of local governments and civil society in building and empowering social cohesion and integration. It is also an occasion to exchange experiences and good practices, and to strengthen the bonds between our Moroccan cities, from Tangier to Lagouira.”**

Asmaa Rhlalou, Former Mayor of Rabat (Morocco) speaking at the Strong Cities national roundtable in Tangier (Morocco) Working Group in Arusha (Tanzania) in May 2024

In Iraq, the **Mayor of Miqdadiyah**, following his participation in a MENA [regional workshop](#) in January 2024, has become pivotal in mobilising the City's efforts to enhance its response to hate, extremism and polarisation. Inspired by the lessons and practices on youth engagement in prevention shared during the event, he decided to develop a youth council at the city level to ensure that young people are involved in the design of prevention initiatives for youth.

Similarly, after hearing from the **City of Saida** (Lebanon) about their experience and benefits of establishing a youth council as part of its local prevention network, the **Deputy Mayor of Fes** (Morocco) requested technical support from the MENA Regional Hub to design a youth engagement framework for her city.

As a result of their participation in [Strong Cities Regional Innovations and Solution Exchange](#), in Amman (Jordan), where the **City of Sabha** (Libya) presented on how they use digital monitoring to identify threats to community cohesion and then organise community dialogues to tackle misinformation before it fuels tensions, **Cities of Halabja and Tel Afar** (Iraq) committed to enhancing their understanding and monitoring of online threats impacting their communities.

- **Strengthening National-Local Cooperation:**

In Iraq, the Regional Hub partnered with Iraq's [National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism](#) (NCCVE) and the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) there to convene a [two-day roundtable](#) on operationalising a whole-of-society approach to prevention as part of an effort to facilitate the localisation of Iraq's National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, which provides a mandate for local governments in hate and extremism prevention. The event gathered more than 35 key national and local stakeholders with the aim of strengthen national-local cooperation (NLC) and raise awareness of governorates and cities on the National Strategy's content and their role in supporting its implementation. Since the roundtable, NCCVE has been engaging with Iraqi local governments to design data driven and context relevant preventing violent extremism (PVE) initiatives using the tools developed by the NCCVE, including short educational and awareness raising [videos](#) on PVE issues and capacity-building toolkits. Some of this work is featured in the NCCVE's [monthly newspaper](#) which, among other things, showcases local governments' efforts in prevention. NCCVE is also expanding the network of local PVE subcommittees they are actively engaging with and has committed to providing support and guidance to local governments during the process of design and implementation of PVE programmes at the local level.

**“We are at the stage of prioritising measuring impact to make informed and accurate decisions ... As part of this process, we are committed to supporting local subcommittees in this area.”**

Ali Abdullah, Chair of the NCCVE (Iraq)

In November 2023, Strong Cities hosted a [national roundtable](#) in **Tangier** (Morocco) bringing together mayors and local government representatives from nine cities across Morocco, civil society organisations, as well as representatives from different national government ministries. During this event, participants exchanged views on the critical role local governments play in the prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation, even if preventing these threats has historically been considered the mandate solely of national security actors. Given this role, they emphasised the importance of strengthening NLC in PVE related matters.

As a result of this roundtable, the Ministry of Interior committed to including local governments in their PVE efforts. Moreover, Strong Cities signed a memorandum of understanding with [Moroccan Association of Mayors](#) (AMPCC), which committed to facilitating dialogues between the national and local governments in Morocco.

**“This roundtable achieved its objectives. The theme is complex and multifaceted (religion, ideologies, mindsets, development, climate change, etc.). This will help the cities and communities to adapt to the context they live in. What makes me happy is the level of the participants, and their awareness about decentralisation at the local level and the importance of going further, and to protect what has been achieved so far, as well as planning for the future. There is maturity, as well as awareness of roles and responsibilities at the local level.”**

Hamed Nejari, Administrator, Moroccan Association for Mayors (Morocco)

In Tunisia, the **MENA** Regional Hub has established a strategic partnership with [Tunisia's National Counter-Terrorism Commission](#) (CNLCT), which has resulted in a collaborative framework to enhance NLC in PVE. In September 2024, Strong Cities and CNLCT, [convened](#) more than 60 local and national government officials and community-based organisations in Tunisia to discuss how best to localise the implementation of the recently updated National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism. This gathering marked the first time national and local government officials had been convened on this topic and laid the foundation for enhanced NLC in strategy implementation.

What's next? Building on this momentum, Strong Cities and CNLCT are working together to build the capacity of Tunisian municipalities to implement the national strategy at the local level. They will provide training on prevention frameworks and equip municipal officials with practical tools to develop prevention initiatives aligned with Tunisia's national framework while fostering sustainable cooperation between national and local stakeholders on PVE.



**“For an effective contribution of local governments in the prevention pillar of the revised national strategy to counter violent extremism and terrorism, we have the existing mechanisms, networks and partnerships. What is required is concerted efforts and increased coordination, communication and trust at the local – local and national – local levels.”**

Adnen Sassi, Municipality of Sousse (Tunisia)

# Inspiring City-Led Action Through Peer Learning and Advisory Support

Cities across MENA are committing to implementing new or strengthening existing prevention policies and programmes including by learning from their counterparts across the globe, as well as supporting each other to do so. For example:

- **Strengthening City-Led Response and Crisis Management Capacity in Amman (Jordan):**

Following its participation in the MENA Regional Hub's two regional workshops ([March 2023](#) and [January 2024](#)), the **Greater Amman Municipality** (GAM) has sought support from Strong Cities to strengthen its approach to crisis management and city-led response as it deals with heightened tensions from the ongoing Israel-Gaza crisis, the lingering impact of COVID-19 and the effects of climate change. As such, the Regional Hub is now assisting the municipality in developing a tailored framework for responding to incidents motivated by hate, extremism or polarisation that can undermine social cohesion.

As part of the support, the Hub organised a training for GAM officials, during which city practitioners from Strong Cities member cities, Greater Manchester (UK) and Strasbourg (France), shared their experiences in responding to crisis and terrorist incidents. The former spoke about its approach to and experiences from its response to the [terrorist attack](#) at Manchester Arena in 2017. The latter discussed its innovative approaches to crisis preparedness and response, with a particular focus on the steps Strasbourg took following the 2018 [terrorist attack](#) there to enhance its PVE efforts, offering valuable insights into effective urban crisis response, multi-actor collaboration and long-term resilience building.

This training revealed that GAM has been handling emergencies on an ad hoc basis without formal crisis response/management procedures or documentation. Recognising this need, the Hub has started work on practical crisis response guide tailored to GAM's needs, capacities and local context – a solution that emerged directly from the assessment and recommendations during training. The guide, now under development through consultation with GAM officials, will elaborate clear operational procedures, documentation templates and coordination protocols where none previously existed. Strong Cities' [Guide for City-Led Response](#) will serve as key resource in this process, offering guidance on understanding, developing and implementing a tailored crisis response plan.

**"I benefited a lot from this training, and I look forward to next steps. I realise that today we are in a dire need for a plan for crisis management and I would recommend that together with Strong Cities, we develop a guide or a manual to prepare and pre-empt any crisis that the City may face."**

City Official from Greater Amman Municipality (Jordan)

During the Regional Hub's [second regional workshop](#) in January 2024, cities from across the region identified youth engagement as a key priority for city-led local action to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation. One of the key recommendations from the event was for local governments to create platforms and spaces for meaningful city-youth engagement. This enables local governments to better understand the needs and priorities of young people and allows them to play an active role in decision-making processes at the city level and helps to address feelings of social, economic and/or political exclusion, which can serve as a driver of hate and violent extremism.

- Following the City of Miqdadiyah's (Iraq) participation in the regional workshop, the Mayor requested support from the Regional Hub to enhance the City's PVE-related engagement with young people. The Hub has since facilitated three virtual sessions with local officials from Karak (Jordan), Saida (Lebanon) and Tetouan (Morocco), who were able to share their approaches to, as well as lessons learned from, engaging with young people in their cities. As a result, Miqdadiyah is designing a programme to engage with "at-risk" youth and provide them with skills and knowledge to resist radicalisation to violence and contribute positively to their communities. The programme will include seed funding for the youth-led initiatives on hate and extremism prevention that were designed during the training sessions.



**“I was glad to learn from the good practices of other cities. This enabled me to be exposed to new experiences and lessons learned that can inform my strategy of designing a youth council that responds to the needs of youth in my city. Some of these practices can be adapted to the local context and included in the strategy of implementation.”**

Zaid Hassan, Mayor of Miqdadiyah (Iraq)

- Inspired by what their counterparts from the region shared on the importance of engaging youth in PVE during the January 2024 regional workshop and November 2023 [national roundtable](#) for Moroccan cities, the City of Fes requested technical support from Strong Cities and AMPCC to develop a youth engagement framework that would include the establishment of a local youth advisory council. In September 2024, as part of this initiative, the Regional Hub worked with the City to organise nine consultative sessions gathering more than 90 representatives of youth and community-based organisations to map the challenges, as well as the needs and priorities of young people across Fes. Youth representatives actively participated throughout the process, while other cities from the region contributed by sharing experiences, best practices and lessons learned from their youth council initiatives. Based on the outcomes of the consultative sessions and the peer-to-peer learning exchange, and drawing on Strong Cities’ [Young Cities Practical Guide to Youth Capacity Building for Countering Hate and Extremism](#), a comprehensive youth engagement framework was developed, which served as a basis for the establishment of the youth council.
- The Communal Youth Council, comprising 91 members and an elected president, was officially adopted on 17 February 2025. It will serve as an advisory and consultative body, providing a platform for youth to present their visions and demands and propose youth-led projects, contributing to the prevention of hate, polarisation and violent extremism.
- The Moroccan Association of Mayors (AMPCC) has committed to sharing the lessons from this initiative with other Moroccan cities, creating opportunities for scaling youth engagement approaches across the country.

**“We are happy to partner with Strong Cities and AMPCC as part of this project in order to give a platform for youth to provide their recommendations and suggestions. We did not want to force our strategy, but we wanted to hear from them through consultation to inform our strategy for establishing a Youth Council.”**

Hakima El Hatri, Deputy Mayor of the City of Fes (Morocco)

## Scaling Impact through Partnerships

Since its launch, the Regional Hub built trusted relationships with local and national actors, which has enabled the Hub, and the Strong Cities Network more broadly, to maximise its engagement in the region. This has further led to partnerships that provide opportunities for scaling up city-led action against hate and extremism, including by drawing on the expertise and experiences from across Strong Cities’ global membership. Examples include:

- The Regional Hub’s engagement in Morocco led to an MoU with the AMPCC, through which Strong Cities’ learnings and resources are being shared nationally, including replicating successful prevention initiatives, such as development of the youth engagement framework for the City of Fes and others.
- The national roundtable in Iraq and MENA Regional Hub’s relationship with NCCVE led to a Strong Cities – IOM partnership on the implementation of local PVE action plans (LPoAs) in seven Iraqi local authorities. Under this partnership, the Regional Hub is strengthening the capacities of the local PVE sub-committees, including by empowering them through training and mentorship to translate the recommendations within the LPoAs into practical initiatives that have a tangible impact in the targeted localities, thus, contributing to the localisation of Iraq’s national strategy.



**“We have the pleasure of building a strategic partnership with Strong Cities, enabling Iraqi cities to take part in their events and network. We are happy to support them in their technical support for Iraqi cities, coming from different regions of the country to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation.”**

Ali Abdullah, Chair of the NCCVE (Iraq)

- In Tunisia, the MENA Regional Hub has established a strategic partnership with [Tunisia's National Counter-Terrorism Commission](#) (CNLCT), which has resulted in a collaborative framework to enhance NLC in PVE.

These are a selection of examples of how Strong Cities – through its MENA Regional Hub – is inspiring and scaling city-led action against hate, extremism and polarisation across the region. These examples highlight the practical benefits of investing in local governments as vital actors in prevention. Moreover, they demonstrate that mayors and other city leaders want to get involved in addressing a set of threats where their role has far too often been overlooked, as evidenced in the action and city-city partnerships that are resulting from Strong Cities activities. Moreover, national governments are increasingly recognising that helping their local counterparts activate this role contributes to more effective and sustainable approaches to addressing violent extremism and related threats across the country.

## About Strong Cities

Strong Cities is an independent global network of more than 270 cities and other local governments dedicated to addressing all forms of hate, extremism and polarisation, while promoting a human rights-based prevention framework. Through in-person and online convenings, exchanges and trainings, Strong Cities facilitates sharing and learning among mayors, other local leaders and municipal-level practitioners. By doing so, it helps local authorities leverage their full potential in prevention, while complementing national, regional and global efforts. Learn more: [www.strongcitiesnetwork.org](http://www.strongcitiesnetwork.org)

For more information about the Strong Cities MENA Regional Hub, or to connect with the Hub team, email: [menaregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:menaregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org).

## Partners



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