

20 YEARS AFTER 9/11:

WHY CITIES MATTER MORE THAN EVER WHEN IT COMES TO PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

ERIC ROSAND

“Cities and municipalities are well-placed to identify issues of inter-community tension and hatred that might make community members more vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment.”

FAST FACTS

- Many of the threats are locally rooted, with terrorist recruiters often targeting members of historically marginalized or excluded local communities as they seek to exploit political, social, and economic grievances.
- The increasing relevance of local contexts has led to growing recognition of the need for cities (and other local actors) to become involved in a discourse that was traditionally seen as falling.
- The disconnect between global and national level policymaking and local action remains.

Introduction and Context

With the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks upon us there is no shortage of reflections on two decades of global counterterrorism practice.¹ Much of the commentary is focusing on the situation in Afghanistan and the Taliban’s return to power.² While understandable, this potentially obscures some of the important developments that have taken place during the period, including those related to our understanding of the threat and how best to counter and prevent it. Three important ones point to the growing relevance of cities in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

1 Bruce Hoffman, “How Has the Terrorism Threat Changed Twenty Years After 9/11?,” Council on Foreign Relations: In Brief, August 12, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-has-terrorism-threat-changed-twenty-years-after-911>.

2 Tom Nichols, “Afghanistan Is Your Fault,” The Atlantic, August 16, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/afghanistan-your-fault/619769/>.

First, despite the emergence of increasingly global and interconnected terrorist networks over the years, many of the threats are locally rooted, with terrorist recruiters often targeting members of historically marginalized or excluded local communities as they seek to exploit political, social, and economic grievances.³ Second, the increasing relevance of local contexts has led to growing recognition of the need for cities (and other local actors) to become involved in a discourse that was traditionally seen as falling within the exclusive purview of national governments, and national security actors in particular. Third, despite this recognition, the disconnect between global and national level policymaking and local action remains.⁴ Consequently, the unique role that mayors and the cities can play in bridging this gap—including by integrating hyper-local concerns into wider international and national government-driven counterterrorism agenda—and catalyzing local action against extremist- and hate-motivated violence are still too often overlooked. With these developments in mind, cities need to feature much more prominently in the third decade after 9/11 than they did in the first two and the wider international community needs to facilitate this.

Whether urban or rural, cities and other local authorities from Mumbai to Mogadishu, New York to Nice, and Paris to Pittsburgh have typically borne the brunt of the attacks. They are often the first to respond and, in the long-term, suffer from the fallout of intercommunal tensions and economic slowdowns, which can last for years and spread beyond the target city. They also have a range of contributions to make when it comes to preventing violent extremism from taking root in their communities.

Relevance to Policy and Practice

As we have seen in Vilvoorde, Belgium, cities can create open spaces which all citizens have access to, thus building social capital and contact among them and helping reduce the segregation, polarization, and perceptions of isolation and nonbelonging that can be drivers of violent extremism.⁵ The city of Aurora, Colorado, in the United States⁶ has shown they are well-placed to defuse tensions and build trust between local community members and local police and more broadly engage with community leaders, teachers, and youth and social workers. Local authorities, as is being demonstrated in Kenya⁷, can also serve as the connective tissue between national government strategies and plans, and local action to address violent extremism, ensuring the former are informed by local practice and perspectives and the latter is in line with national frameworks.

3 Eric Rosand, “Preparing the Global Counterterrorism Forum for the Next Decade,” United States Institute of Peace: Special Report, August 17, 2021, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/20200817-sr_476-preparing_the_global_counterterrorism_forum_for_the_next_decade-s.pdf.

4 Joe Downy, “Building Cooperation between National and Local: Why Dialogue is Key to P/CVE,” SCN News, December 4, 2019, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/why-dialogue-is-key-to-p-cve/>.

5 Carla Power, “How to Deradicalize Your Town, The Atlantic, September 6, 2021 <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/lesson-belgium-how-deradicalize-your-town/619992/>.

6 “Youth Violence Prevention Program,” Aurora, Colorado, accessed September 9, 2021, https://www.auroragov.org/residents/youth_resources/youth_violence_prevention_program.

7 Michael Jones, “A Template for the Global South? Understanding the Promises and Pitfalls of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya,” Royal United Services Institute: Emerging Insights, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/stop-portraying-islamic-state-as-a-band-of-exotic-globetrotters-87402>.

Cities and municipalities are well-placed to identify issues of inter-community tension and hatred that might make community members vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment. The Municipality of Kumanovo, North Macedonia, for example, recently assessed how disinformation exacerbates existing community tensions and increases polarization.⁸ Cities in countries such as Canada, Finland, Germany, Lebanon, Jordan, and North Macedonia have proven themselves to be adept at developing locally-led approaches for defusing them that can draw upon the range of programs and other resources to which they have access.⁹ This includes those related to housing, education, social welfare, sports, and culture and partnerships with local community-based organizations and the private sector that many cities are using to prevent other forms of violence or promote well-being. In some cases, this involvement has been elaborated in a distinct local action plan for preventing and countering violent extremism, as it has been in Mombasa, in others it has drawn existing local frameworks, as it has in Toronto.

The Strong Cities Network (SCN)—the first global network of cities focused on P/CVE—was launched by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in September 2015 in recognition of not only the important role of cities in and their untapped potential for P/CVE but also the barriers to realizing it.¹⁰ Some relate to a lack of mandate, capacity, expertise, resources, and/or understanding of how they can contribute, and others center on a reluctance of some national governments to relinquish control or resources over what they perceive to be national security concerns, offering few opportunities for city leaders and practitioners to contribute to national P/CVE policy or program formulation.

Six years later SCN has grown into independent global network of over 150 cities and local governments in which local knowledge and practice inform national, regional, and international approaches to P/CVE. The three SCN global mayoral summits¹¹; the multi-actor local prevention networks¹² that have emerged in cities in Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, and North Macedonia, informed by the practice in Denmark and The Netherlands in particular; the North-South city-level partnerships it has facilitated – whether between Dakar and Montreal¹³ or Kristiansand and Mombasa¹⁴; and the P/CVE tool kits it has developed for cities, including ones on how to map hate

8 Simeon Dukic, “COVID-19 Disinformation: Implications for Polarisation in Kumanovo,” SCN News, November 3, 2020, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/covid-19-disinformation-implications-for-polarisation-in-kumanovo/>.

9 For information on multi-actor, city-level programs, see, e.g., Manni Crone and Khadije Nasser, “Preventing Violent Extremism in Lebanon: Experience from a Danish-Lebanese Partnership,” EURMESCO, May 2018, <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/preventing-violent-extremism-in-lebanon-experience-from-a-danish-lebanese-partnership/>; Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: Navigating Challenges and Protecting Human Rights: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe, 2019, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/4/418274.pdf>.

10 Eric Rosand and Rebecca Skellett, “Connecting the Dots: Strengthening National-Local Collaboration in Addressing Violent Extremism,” Lawfare, October 21, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/connecting-dots-strengthening-national-local-collaboration-addressing-violent-extremism>.

11 “What We Do,” Strong Cities Network, accessed September 11, 2021, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/what-we-do/>.

12 Besim Dogani and Nayla Joy-Zein, “SCN’s Local Prevention Network Model expands to the Western Balkans,” Strong Cities Network, October 9, 2019, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/lpn-model-expands-to-the-western-balkans/>.

13 Strong Cities Network, “Top Dakar officials travel to Montreal for first SCN City Exchange,” October 23, 2017, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/top-dakar-officials-travel-montreal-first-strong-cities-network-exchange/>.

14 Strong Cities Network, “Mombasa County delegation travels to Kristiansand for SCN City Exchange,” March 27, 2018, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/mombasa-county-delegation-travels-kristiansand-scn-city-exchange/>.

and extremism or respond to a terrorist incident within a particular city, are just a few examples of the network's successes to date.¹⁵

Although SCN is joined by dozens of other international counterterrorism or P/CVE bodies or initiatives that have emerged since September 2001,¹⁶ it remains the only one with global reach focused on the city level, targeting mayors and local practitioners involved in local planning and service delivery. As a result, it is helping to integrate P/CVE within areas that often fall under the purview of municipalities and other local authorities, such as education, sports and culture, social welfare, urban development, vocational training, and housing.

On a more strategic level, it has shined a spotlight on the need to strengthen, including by identifying and overcoming the barriers to, cooperation between national and local authorities around P/CVE issues. This recognizes that enhanced vertical cooperation is essential if we hope to see more progress in translating the international and national P/CVE frameworks and good practices into local action. These issues featured prominently on the agenda of the 2018 SCN summit¹⁷ and inspired the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) to develop the first set of international good practices on this topic.¹⁸ The GCTF, in cooperation with SCN, is now focusing attention on the implementation of these good practices in specific countries and regions. This will create new opportunities for national and local government policymakers and practitioners to strengthen existing or develop new collaborations around the P/CVE agenda.

Recommendations

These achievements notwithstanding, there is much more work to be done with and by cities as the third post-9/11 decade begins.

→ **More local prevention networks and city-to-city P/CVE exchanges and connections.**

The local prevention network model that SCN has developed merits replication in a tailored fashion in more cities in the SCN. More city leaders and practitioners should have the chance to connect more consistently on P/CVE issues of common concern with their counterparts whether in a regional or thematic context. For example, a growing number of cities are grappling with the complex challenges posed by right-wing extremist violence or returning family members of foreign terrorist fighters, the intersection of disinformation, polarization, and extremism in the age of COVID-19, creating more opportunities for them to learn from each other as they develop policies and programs to address them. The multilateral counterterrorism and P/CVE calendars are littered with workshops and

15 Marta Lopes, "Responding to a Terror Attack: A Strong Cities Toolkit," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 18, 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/responding-to-a-terror-attack-a-strong-cities-toolkit/>.

16 Eric Rosand and Sabin Khan, "Ending the '9/11 Era': Multilateralism and the Future of Effective Counter-Terror," The Coalition to Defeat ISIS, September 9, 2021, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/ending-the-9-11-era/>.

17 "Global Summit 2018," Strong Cities Network, accessed September 11, 2021, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/where-we-work/global-summit-2018/>.

18 Global Counterterrorism Forum, "Memorandum on Good Practices on Strengthening National-Local Cooperation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism," September 2020, <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2020/GCTF%20Memorandum%20on%20Good%20Practices%20on%20Strengthening%20NLC%20in%20PCVE.pdf?ver=2020-09-29-100315-357>.

trainings focused on national level practitioners from police to probation officers and the multilateral library is full of guides and manuals targeting these stakeholders; city-level actors, despite their comparative advantages, continue to too often get overlooked. Multilateral platforms like the GCTF and Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS have purposely created working groups to allow for engagement by national government practitioners on specific thematic issues, which have been generously funded by different donors: these donors should now provide similar opportunities for city-level officials.

- **Expand and deepen SCN cooperation with multilateral bodies to enable more city-level perspectives and priorities to feature in international and regional P/CVE conversations.** Further, despite SCN's work, global and regional conversations about counterterrorism and P/CVE remain dominated by national government officials, with no seat at the table for mayors and local practitioners, despite their being closer to the threat. While not a panacea, expanding and deepening SCN cooperation with multilateral bodies dominated by national governments, such as the United Nations and GCTF and regional fora such as the African Union and OSCE, would allow for the sharing of more city-level perspectives good practices with them and reinforce the importance of their members engaging with local governments on a range of P/CVE. This would be a step in the right direction.

Conclusion

With the events that catalysed the emergence of the global counterterrorism and P/CVE movement—i.e., the September 11, 2001, attacks—receding further into the background, national governments are increasingly prioritizing issues such as COVID-19, migration, climate change, and great power competition. Counterterrorism is not going to be the priority for these governments and multilateral bodies in the way it has been for much of the past two decades. This is despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest the hate, polarization, and extremism that has fueled much of the terrorist violence during this period has subsided. Not only are they on the rise but, with it being more rooted in local ethnic, political, social, and religious strife and grievances, the burden for addressing them will increasingly fall on mayors and the cities they lead. They need to be fully prepared to shoulder this responsibility.

Suggested Further Readings

On city-level P/CVE

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About the Note

Author: Eric Rosand

Eric Rosand is the Director, a.i., of the Strong Cities Network and a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. Among other roles, he served as a senior official at the U.S. Department of State where he played a leading role in the development and launch of a range of multilateral counterterrorism and P/CVE institutions and platforms including the Global Counterterrorism Forum and its inspired institutions as well as the Strong Cities Network. He has also served as lawyer at the Department of State, a counterterrorism adviser at the U.S. Mission to the UN in New York, and the Co-Director of the Global Center on Cooperative Security. His numerous writings have appeared in a range of publications including the American Journal of International Law, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, Just Security, Lawfare, The Hill, and Time.

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