

OPERATION LUXOR

IMPACT: Operation Luxor was a large-scale police operation involving 940 officers targeting dozens of individuals and businesses that took place on November 9, 2020, in Austria. The government claimed the action aimed to “cut off the roots of political Islam.” In 2021, an Austrian court ruled that the raids were unlawful. In the three years since the raids, not a single person has been arrested or convicted. This “textbook example of governing with crime and fear” was conducted under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who was known for his anti-Muslim policies.

- On **November 9, 2020, Austrian authorities raided the homes and residences of 70 individuals and institutions simultaneously at five o'clock in the morning in the provinces of Vienna, Styria, and Carinthia.** The raids were part of a government investigation focusing on the crimes of being a terrorist organization, criminal organization, anti-state association, and for terrorist financing, and money laundering. The suspicion of terrorism was not directed against activities in Austria, but abroad. The **Austrian authorities accused those targeted of engaging in terrorist crimes (murder, kidnapping, explosive attacks, etc.), terrorist financing, and engaging in money laundering** with the aims being to establish Islamic enclaves in Europe, to overthrow the regime of Egyptian President, and military General Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi, to regain power in Egypt, to destroy Israel and to establish a worldwide caliphate with Jerusalem as its capital. The raids occurred a week after a violent attack by a former ISIS-sympathizer in Vienna. Despite its proximity in timing to the shooting event, the raids were unrelated to this criminal act.
- The **Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)**, under the then-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and the then-Minister of the Interior Karl Nehammer, **portrayed the raid as a “strike against political Islam,” which had been an important election campaign issue for Kurz. Despite ultimately proving to be inconclusive, the investigation was expanded to include around 114 defendants and developed into one of the largest judicial proceedings in Austria's post-war history.** Operation Luxor was the largest criminal police operation in modern-day Austria after Operation Spring, which targeted black people in 1999 and 2000.
- The **search warrant legitimizing the raid was largely based on one written expert opinion following the publication of one report. The expert opinion was authored by Heiko Heinisch and Nina Scholz, and the report was written by Lorenzo Vidino.** In his analysis of the expert report by Heinisch and Scholz, Austrian political scientist Thomas Schmidinger argued that both “had neither the technical nor the linguistic knowledge to answer the questions posed by the public prosecutor in a technically competent, objective and unbiased manner.” He noted that **instead of reputable sources, the authors resorted to “tendentious websites or media critical of Islam,” which led to serious errors in that “in some cases, false attributions are made and connections to terrorist organizations are claimed that cannot be proven.”** In July 2022, Heinisch and Scholz were dismissed by the Appellate Court on suspicion of bias.
- Vidino's report was mentioned 14 times in the search warrant. In a **September 2022 piece for Der Standard, journalist Hans Rauscher explained that the investigation against the former president of the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, Anas Schakfeh, was opened based on “completely fictitious” allegations by Vidino in this report.** In July 2023, Vidino was criticized by the German newspaper Der Spiegel for his close involvement in a smear campaign paid for by the United Arab Emirates against Muslim associations. This campaign was reported by The New Yorker in March 2023. **Along with Vidino's research being used by the Austrian authorities to support the raids, Vidino also served twice as a witness for the Austrian government during Operation Luxor.**
- In an April 2022 Der Standard piece, Jan Michael Marchart noted that “For months in the run-up to the raids, the phones of the accused were monitored on a large scale and conversations were listened to,” by the Austrian authorities. Marchart reported that a “considerable amount of money went into the wiretapping operations in question,” and found that the wiretapping cost taxpayers €529,552.

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- In June 2021, the Graz Higher Regional Court ruled that there was no initial suspicion. **As of summer 2023, the preliminary proceedings against more than 40 people have been dropped.** The senior public prosecutor in Graz, Johannes Winklhofer, nevertheless tried to extend the proceedings against 49 people, including people who were acquitted, for another two years.
- The **operation particularly affected aid organizations that care for the welfare of Palestinian children**. Osama Abu El Hosna, who saved the life of a police officer on the night of the terrorist attack on November 2, 2020, was also subsequently investigated in the course of Operation Luxor because he was active in an aid organization. Despite his acquittal, the stateless Abu El Hosna was denied citizenship because of the Operation Luxor investigation.
- As Operation Luxor also affected aid organizations, it effectively blocked their abilities to distribute humanitarian aid due to their accounts being frozen during the investigation. Additionally, teachers were released from duty and thus could not pursue their work for several years. **On the International Day Against Islamophobia in 2023, Muslim MP Faika El-Nagashi (Greens) stated: “Operation Luxor in particular has left a dramatic mark within Muslim communities.”**
- **One of the most high-profile individuals affected by Operation Luxor is the Austrian political scientist Farid Hafez, who had published critical research highlighting ÖVP’s and FPÖ’s Islamophobic policies before and after the raid.** Due to his targeting by the Austrian government, he was **forced to resettle to the United States, where he is now a Professor of International Studies at Williams College**. The Regional Court (that had allowed the initial unlawful raid) had originally issued a decision that upheld the investigation against Professor Hafez, citing his academic work. According to the Regional Court (Landesgericht Graz), Hafez’s “activities in the preparation of the so-called Islamophobia Report and his activity with the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University is intended to disseminate the fighting term “Islamophobia” with the goal of preventing any critical engagement with Islam as a religion [...] in order to establish an Islamic state [...]” This was rescinded by the Appellate Court in January 2023.
- Following the raids, a collective of 16 civil society organizations released an open letter expressing their fear regarding potential "massive restrictions on the fundamental rights and freedoms of all people in Austria" as a result of Operation Luxor. Several civil society associations organized events to raise awareness about Operation Luxor (i.e. ZARA together with SOS-Mitmensch as well as Dokustelle Islamfeindlichkeit und anti-Muslimischer Rassismus together with Muslimische Jugend Österreich). The anti-racist civil rights movement Black Voices Volksbegehren published an educational video on Operation Luxor, and a team of artists organized an exhibition on Operation Luxor on the first anniversary of the raids as part of the art event Muslim*Contemporary.
- **Operation Luxor came under heavy criticism by investigative journalists, scholars, lawyers, politicians, and international organizations.** In 2021, journalist Anna Thalhammer from Die Presse wrote of "crumbling investigations." In 2022, Der Standard editor Hans Rauscher described the raids as a "classic turquoise (Austrian People’s Party) show operation with zero criminal result so far," as well as a "gigantic flop." In 2022, Der Standard journalist Jan Michael Marchart spoke of the "currently largest and probably most controversial trial in Austria" and in 2023 of an "unsuccessful Operation Luxor." In 2023, Anna Thalhammer, as editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine Profil, described the operation as "Nehammer's debacle". The public prosecutor Johannes Winklhofer was described by the editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine Falter, as the "public prosecutor out of control" because he opened an investigation to "prosecute three respected Muslims [...] for coercion" because "they defend themselves against terror allegations, in part successfully, with lawsuits."
- Following The New Yorker’s March 2023 piece revealing a UAE-funded campaign to smear Muslim individuals and organizations in Europe, a number of newspapers carried out their own investigations into this matter. In a September 2023 investigative piece for Profil, Stefan Melichar and the establishment’s editor-in-chief Anna Thalhammer, found that the “Emirate’s networks reach well into Austria.” They also revealed that **on August 24th 2020, a representative of Alp Services informed**

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his contact in the UAE about Operation Luxor, writing: “Confidential, Austria is planning to be more aggressive in the coming months with the local MB,” following up with the words on November 9th, when the raid happened: “As you may have seen and as we wrote on August 24th, the Austrian authorities are? is currently conducting a massive anti-terror counterterrorism against the MB,” using the old covert name of the raid, Operation Ramses that was changed a few days prior to the raid. Former Austrian MP (The Greens) and now investigative journalist Peter Pilz wrote: “In the most elaborate action in the history of the Austrian intelligence service, the judiciary and the police tried to support Israeli and Egyptian authorities in their fight against the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. At no moment in the more than year-long operation was it about a terrorist threat against Austria.”

- In 2021, the U.S. State Department mentioned Operation Luxor in its annual International Religious Freedom Report. In its report on Islamophobia in Europe, Amnesty International mentioned Operation Luxor as an action that “struck scholars and aid workers.”
- In May 2022, Al Jazeera aired the documentary “Austria’s Operation Luxor: Anti-terror or Islamophobia?”. In May 2023, Al Jazeera Arabic also aired a 60-minute interview with a former defendant. Numerous international media outlets such as Open Democracy, Middle East Eye, TRT World, The New Yorker, and Al Jazeera reported on the raid.
- In their criticism of the 2020 report on the protection of the constitution, Georg Bürstmayr and Faika El-Nagashi, members of the ÖVP’s government partner, the Greens, said: “Neither was there any mention of the mistakes made by the BVT in the run-up to the terrorist attack, nor of the fact that Operation Luxor has since come under heavy criticism by the courts.”
- **After the verdict, which classified Operation Luxor as illegal, Reinhold Einwallner, the SPÖ division spokesman for internal security, said: “Operation Luxor was Nehammer’s excuse for failure in the terrible terrorist attack in Vienna. Now it turns out that the operation probably had no legal basis ... The Ministry of the Interior must not continue to be the show stage of the ÖVP. Nehammer endangers thereby the security of Austria!”** On December 2, 2022, **the Viennese party, SÖZ, stated that as a result of the raids, “Good citizens of this country were treated like terrorists, their children were traumatized and their private accounts were blocked,”** noting that the government’s actions were driven by “anti-Muslim sentiment,” and called for the “immediate resignation of those responsible.”
- MPs Stefanie Krisper (NEOS) and David Stögmüller (Greens) have discussed Operation Luxor critically in parliament and have raised parliamentary inquiries. **The lawyer Richard Soyer criticized the raid and spoke of the “presumption of innocence being grossly violated.” Criminologist Reinhard Kreissl said Operation Luxor is a “textbook example of governing with crime and fear.”** Criminal Law Professor at the University of Vienna, Ingeborg Zerbes, said that Operation Luxor had “major problems with the rule of law and that includes freedom of opinion. And opinions and religious orientations are interpreted as willingness to brutality, which have not been expressed in any of this evidence that has been cited. On the contrary, rather rejecting violence.” NGO activist and political scientist Nehal Abdalla wrote in a piece for Open Democracy that “Operation Luxor was meant to signal to the Austrian public that action was being taken following the attack, while at the same time criminalizing Muslim activism and political action in an effort to silence Muslim opposition in Austria.”
- Hannes Amesbauer, a member of parliament for the far-right FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria), submitted a parliamentary question to make life more difficult for teachers affected by Operation Luxor. In July 2022, it was announced that Operation Luxor was to become a topic of discussion in the National Council’s investigative committee, which ultimately never happened. The President of the National Council and former Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka (ÖVP) claimed he no longer knows how Operation Luxor came during an investigation committee dedicated to his own party’s corruption

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scandals.

- The British civil rights organization CAGE and Act-P produced a report one year after the operation that specifically addressed violations of children's rights. Professor of International Studies at Williams College, Farid Hafez, published a German anthology in November 2023.

Bridge Initiative Factsheet