

Austria: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

In March 2020, Austrian authorities began trial proceedings against a Hezbollah commander who had lived in the country for 13 years while sending money to the terror group in Lebanon. In response to the start of the trial, all of Austria's political parties passed a joint resolution in the federal parliament entitled "Effective action against Hezbollah." The resolution called on Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to "to take suitable and effective measures to continue to take decisive action against terrorist and criminal activities by Hezbollah supporters in Austria using the entire rule of law; to prevent Hezbollah from being financed through money laundering activities; to re-assess the question of how to deal with Hezbollah within the European Union." Nonetheless, the resolution did not call on Kurz's government to recognize Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization. On May 29, members of the governing coalition in parliament issued a resolution calling on Kurz's government to press the European Union to designate Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization. (Sources: [Jerusalem Post](#) [1], [Jerusalem Post](#) [2], [Jerusalem Post](#) [3])

Overview

Austria's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung* or BVT) warned in its 2018 annual report that "Islamist extremism—and Jihadist terrorism in particular—has been a permanent and currently the largest threat potential for liberal-democratic societies." Austrian authorities prioritized countermeasures against terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, as well as smaller groups affiliated with or inspired by them. Recent attacks in Europe have also demonstrated the critical threat posed by so-called lone wolves. (Source: [BVT](#) [4])

As of October 2017, approximately 313 Austrian citizens actively participated or attempted to participate in fighting alongside extremists in Iraq and Syria. An estimated 94 of those are believed to have returned to Austria, while 55 are suspected to be dead. Authorities also successfully prevented 59 individuals from leaving the country, including 22 women. As of August 2017, Austria imprisoned 64 foreign fighters—20 percent of whom are between the ages of 16 and 21. Austria's foreign fighters were predominantly second-generation immigrants from Chechnya, Turkey, and the Balkans. The BVT registered no travel attempts in late-2017 due to various factors, including ISIS's loss of territory and reputational damage, as well as Austria's intensified efforts to interdict attempted foreign fighters. Rather, the BVT has expressed concern about the threat of returnees and individuals who were prevented from leaving Austria. (Sources: [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#) [5], [BVT](#) [6], [BVT](#) [4], [U.S. Department of State](#) [7])

In March 2015, an Austrian court charged Merkan G., a 14-year-old Austrian boy, with terror offenses, including attempted bomb-making and contact with ISIS militants. In December 2014, Austrian police arrested Bosnian-Austrian [Mirsad Omerovic](#) [8] (a.k.a. Ebu Tejma) on the grounds that he had recruited over a hundred European youth to join ISIS and helped to fundraise for the terror group. Local newspapers in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported that Tejma had led a so-called "Bosnian [terror] cell" in Vienna that was "one of the most important logistic and financial support centers for jihadist activities in Europe." Tejma had allegedly maintained a direct line of communication with ISIS caliph [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) [9]. In July 2016, Tejma was convicted of membership in a terrorist organization and promoting terrorist activities, and handed a 20-year prison sentence. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [10], [The Local](#) [11], [Daily Mail](#) [12], [The Local](#) [13], [NY Daily News](#) [14], [The Mirror](#) [15], [Deutsche Welle](#) [16])

In 2017, Austria registered a total of 1,063 right-wing extremist, xenophobic, racist, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic criminal acts. The figure represents a decrease by 19 percent compared to 2016. However, attacks directed against Muslims, asylum seekers, and associated institutions persisted. New far-right groups like the Identitarian Movement Austria (*Identitäre Bewegung Österreich* or IB), whose rhetoric focuses on the perceived fear of the "Islamization" of Western societies, increased in popularity. Additionally, Austria recorded a total of 211 criminal acts with proven or suspected left-wing extremist motivation—a decrease of 45 percent compared to 2016. Autonomous anarchist groups were most active and violent. The far-left primarily targeted extreme right gatherings and events. (Sources: [Europol](#) [17], [BVT](#) [4])

In the wake of the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, the Austrian government announced the allocation of \$335 million to fight terrorism over the next four years. On February 25, 2015, Austria's parliament passed revisions to the country's century-old "Islam law." The revisions banned the foreign funding of Muslim organizations and required each Austrian Muslim organization to "have a positive attitude toward society and state." In 2017, Austria launched the National

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Network for Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation (*Bundesweites Netzwerk Extremismusprävention und Deradikalisierung* or BNED), which brings together federal ministries, civil organizations and the federal provinces to combat extremism. The Federal Ministry of Interior also established an exit program for violent extremist that year. (Sources: [The Local](#) [18], [New York Times](#) [19], [BBC News](#) [20], [Österreichisches Parlament](#) [21], [BNED](#) [22], [BVT](#) [4])

Austria is a member of the Global Coalition against Daesh, and an active contributor to the foreign terrorist fighters and Iraq reconstruction working groups. Austria joined the U.S.-led coalition in September 2014 in a strictly humanitarian capacity, providing humanitarian assistance worth €104 million to Iraq, Syria, and neighboring countries. (Sources: [Global Coalition](#) [23])

According to the European Commission's public opinion survey, in March 2018, only 7 percent of Austrians were concerned about terrorism. By comparison, Austrians considered immigration the most important issue facing the country (29 percent), followed by health and social security (22 percent). (Sources: [European Commission](#) [24], [European Commission](#) [25], [European Commission](#) [26])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Islamist Extremism

According to Europol's 2018 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, EU Member States reported 33 jihadist terrorist attacks in 2017, more than double the figure of 2016. Most attacks occurred in the United Kingdom and France. As in recent years, Austria has been spared by jihadist terrorist attacks. However, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung* or BVT) reiterated in its 2018 annual report that "Islamist extremism—and Jihadist terrorism in particular—has been a permanent and currently the largest threat potential for liberal-democratic societies." Austria has focused its counterterrorism and counter-extremism efforts on terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, as well as smaller groups affiliated with or inspired by them. Recent attacks in Europe have also demonstrated the critical threat posed by so-called lone wolves, individuals who only ideologically identify with jihadist groups without being directly associated with them. (Sources: [BVT](#) [4], [Europol](#) [17])

While there is no prominent homegrown Islamist group in Austria, international groups such as ISIS and Hamas have received support from some Austrian Muslims. In June 2014, several Austrian ISIS sympathizers posted photos of messages of support to social media. One message reportedly read, "one billion Muslims support the Islamic State." In August 2014, Austrian news sources reported that a group of Austrian Muslims had set up an ISIS "fan club" that was likely operating out of a Viennese apartment. The fan club consisted of youth from the Viennese districts of Floridsdorf and Donaustadt and also had an online presence. The fan club's Facebook page had 288 "friends" with some members from Chechnya or Afghanistan. The club offered T-shirts with "terrorist messages" in Arabic, as well as camouflage hats embellished with ISIS's logo. (Sources: [The Local](#) [27], [Gatestone Institute](#) [28], [Kurier](#) [29], [Heute](#) [30], [Profil](#) [31])

According to its 2018 annual report, the BVT remained concerned about jihadist extremist networks in the Western Balkans. Such networks could potentially pose a threat to Austria's national security due to their geographic proximity and the substantial number of Bosnian and Serbian minorities living in Austria. (Source: [BVT](#) [4])

Until his arrest in December 2014 by Austrian authorities, the Bosnian-Austrian terrorist [Mirsad Omerovic](#) [8] (a.k.a. Ebu Tejma) reportedly kept a direct line of communication with ISIS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Within Austria, Tejma reportedly led what Bosnian newspapers described as a "Bosnian [terror] cell" in Vienna that was one of the most important logistic and financial support centers for jihadist activities in Europe." Through the cell, Tejma is believed to have raised money for ISIS and radicalized and recruited at least 166 youth who left Austria to fight in Syria. On July 14, 2016, Tejma was convicted of being a member of a terrorist organization and recruiting young volunteers for ISIS. He denied all charges but was found guilty and sentenced to 20 years in prison. In February 2018, the Higher Regional Court in Graz dismissed his appeal. (Sources: [The Local](#) [13], [NY Daily News](#) [14], [The Mirror](#) [15], [Balkan Insight](#) [32], [Kosmo](#) [33])

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Like much of the rest of the European Union, Austria has designated only Hezbollah's so-called military wing as a terrorist organization, though Hezbollah itself admits there is no difference between its military and political wings. In March 2020, authorities in the Austrian state of Carinthia began legal proceedings against a Hezbollah commander who had lived in Austria for 13 years while providing financial aid to the terror group, which is based in Lebanon. According to the indictment against him, the commander was a member of a terrorist organization and had engaged in terrorism financing. The commander's identity was not publicly released, but Austrian media reported that he was not being held in custody while awaiting the start of his trial. In response to the start of the trial, all of Austria's political parties passed a joint resolution in the federal parliament entitled "Effective action against Hezbollah." The resolution called on Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to "to take suitable and effective measures to continue to take decisive action against terrorist and criminal activities by Hezbollah supporters in Austria using the entire rule of law; to prevent Hezbollah from being financed through money laundering activities; to re-assess the question of how to deal with Hezbollah within the European Union." (Sources: [Jerusalem Post](#) [1], [Jerusalem Post](#) [2])

Nonetheless, the resolution did not call on Kurz's government to recognize Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization. On March 10, 2020, the parliament rejected a call from the NEOS party to consider a full ban of Hezbollah. On May 29, 2020, members of the governing coalition in parliament issued a resolution calling Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's administration to advocate for the European Union to designate Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization. The resolution received unanimous support in the parliament, though the opposition party NEOS (The New Austria and Liberal Forum) issued its own resolution criticizing the Austrian government for not following Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom in designating Hezbollah as a whole. (Sources: [Jerusalem Post](#) [1], [Jerusalem Post](#) [2], [Jerusalem Post](#) [3])

Recruitment

Jihadist organizations—particularly ISIS and al-Qaeda—have been able to spread their ideologies in Austria, a process largely facilitated by social media and migration towards Europe. Austrian authorities are also concerned about informal Islamic groups, in particular those that subscribe to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam or promote Salafist principles, that are isolated from typical mosque activities. In 2017, the BVT also observed that a growing number of asylum seekers joined Salafist groups in Austria. (Source: [BVT](#) [4])

The True Religion (*Die Wahre Religion* or DWR), an Islamist Salafi organization founded by [Ibrahim Abou Nagie](#) [34], has disseminated propaganda and proselytized in Austrian cities as part of their missionary work or "street dawa." The group is comprised of a network of mainly German Salafist preachers, who launched the "Lies! Read!" initiative in 2011, in which DWR members set up booths and handed out Qurans in Muslim-majority areas in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Following Germany's decision to ban DWR in October 2016, Austria's far-right Freedom Party pushed for similar legislation, but the Austrian Parliament rejected the motion to ban the "Lies! Read!" campaign. Ultimately, in March 2017, Austria adopted a ban on the distribution of Qurans in public spaces and, in May 2017, amended its road traffic regulations to require official permits for public demonstrations and promotional activities. (Sources: [Austrian Parliament](#) [35], [Die Freie Welt](#) [36], [Wiener Zeitung](#) [37], [Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz](#) [38], [Wiener Zeitung](#) [39], [BVT](#) [4])

DWR did not make any public appearances or demonstrations in Austria in 2017, but new Salafist organizations like "Imam" in Vienna and "Fitrah" in Graz have surfaced. Both groups engage in "street dawa" and disseminate videos, pictures, and articles about their activities on social media to expand their reach to those located outside the cities of Vienna and Graz, respectively. "Imam" and "Fitrah" publicly renounce violence, but the BVT is concerned that both groups "provide the breeding ground for radicalization and recruitment of new followers through systematic indoctrination." In fact, the BVT believes that these groups' public denunciation of violence is part of their strategy to avoid government surveillance or criminal prosecution. (Source: [BVT](#) [4])

Foreign Fighters

As of 2017, approximately 313 Austrian citizens actively participated or attempted to participate in fighting alongside extremists in Iraq and Syria. An estimated 94 of those are believed to have returned to Austria, while 55 are suspected to be dead. Authorities also successfully prevented 59 individuals from leaving the country, including 22 women. As of August 2017, Austria imprisoned 64 foreign fighters—20 percent of whom are between the ages of 16 and 21. Austria's foreign

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fighters were predominantly second-generation immigrants from Chechnya, Turkey, and the Balkans with ages ranging between 18 and 35. The BVT registered no travel attempts in late-2017 due to various factors, including ISIS's loss of territory and reputational damage, as well as Austria's intensified efforts to interdict attempted foreign fighters. Rather, in its 2018 annual report, the BVT expressed concern about the threat of returnees and individuals who were prevented from leaving Austria. (Sources: [BVT](#) [4], [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#) [5], [U.S. Department of State](#) [7])

One of Austria's most notorious jihadists, Firas Houidi (a.k.a. Firas Abdullah II), left for Syria in early 2014. Before departing, the 19-year old Tunisian-Austrian wrote on his Facebook profile: "To the intelligence agent who may be reading this: Either you kill us or we continue, until the heads fly." After joining ISIS, Houidi posted on Facebook a photo of an artillery shell in a box ready to be shipped to the Austrian secret service. In another online post, Houidi wrote that Austrian Muslims should "wage jihad" in Austria if they are unable to come to Syria to fight. Numerous Austrian media outlets reported that Interpol had issued an international arrest warrant for Houidi. However, the listing later appeared defunct. Houidi was reportedly killed in Syria in February 2015, but Austrian authorities did not confirm. (Sources: [The Local](#) [40], [Heute](#) [41], [Gatestone](#) [28] Institute, [The Local](#) [42])

In April 2014, Austrian teenagers Sabina Selimovic, 15, and Samra Kesinovic, 16, traveled to Syria to join and marry ISIS fighters. Both of Bosnian descent, the girls were recruited through a cell in Austria led by Ebu Tejma. After joining ISIS, the girls posted photos of themselves holding Kalashnikov rifles. In some photos, the girls are surrounded by armed men. Rumors surfaced that they were pregnant. [Reports](#) [43] in December 2015 alleged that Kesinovic was forced into sexual slavery before being beaten to death for attempting to leave ISIS. The girls were dubbed "ISIS poster girls" as they had previously used social media to advertise enrollment in the terror group. (Sources: [International Business Times](#) [44], [Daily Mail](#) [45])

Sabina Selimovic conducted an interview via text message with French magazine *Paris Match* in October 2014. Sabina told *Paris Match* that she felt "free" in the so-called Islamic State. "[Here] I can practice my religion... In Vienna I couldn't." Austrian authorities believe Sabina was held at gun-point throughout the interview. Sabina was reportedly killed during fighting in Raqqa in late-2014. In December 2018, Sabina's mother filed a lawsuit against the Austrian government, accusing Austria's border guards of failing to stop the girls from leaving. (Sources: [Daily News](#) [46], [Daily News](#) [47], [Mirror UK](#) [15], [International Business Times](#) [48], [Daily News](#) [14], [Mirror UK](#) [49], [Al Arabiya](#) [50], [Haaretz](#) [51], [Modern Diplomacy](#) [52], [News.co.au](#) [53])

Austrian jihadist [Mohamed Mahmoud](#) [54] (a.k.a. Abu Usama al-Gharib) was jailed in Austria between 2007 and 2011 for his membership in the Global Islamic Media Forum (GIMF), a propaganda arm that disseminates [al-Qaeda](#) [55] multimedia content. He was arrested in Turkey in March 2014, most likely on his way to Syria. Mahmoud was eventually released, a move that German jihadism pundit Guido Steinberg called "completely irresponsible." In November 2014, Mahmoud appeared in a photograph posing in front of decapitated, half-naked corpses. The photo was purportedly taken in Raqqa, Syria. He reportedly married ISIS propagandist Ahlam al-Nasr known as the "poetess of the Islamic State." On November 28, 2018, Mahmoud was reportedly killed in a coalition airstrike in Syria. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [56], [The Local](#) [57], [BBC Monitoring](#) [58], [Heute](#) [59], [Business Insider](#) [60])

Far-Right Extremism

In 2017, Austria registered a total of 1,063 right-wing extremist, xenophobic, racist, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic criminal acts. The figure represents a decrease by 19 percent compared to 2016. However, attacks directed against Muslims, asylum seekers, and associated institutions persisted. The migration influx into Europe has resulted in increased xenophobic sentiments, which have gradually fueled far-right extremism in Austria. The anti-Islamophobia organization Dokustelle recorded 540 Islamophobic attacks in Austria in 2018, a 74 percent increase from the 309 attacks in 2017. Approximately 53 percent of the incidents were online, according to the group's Anti-Muslim Racism Report 2018. (Sources: [Europol](#) [17], [BVT](#) [4], [Anadolu Agency](#) [61])

The Austrian government has struggled to address far-right movements since the ascent of the far-right Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ) in October 2017's parliamentary elections. The Freedom Party took control of the country's Interior Ministry, reportedly hindering government efforts to monitor far-right extremists. In June 2018, the government announced plans to close seven mosques and expel 60 imams on what it called national security concerns. The government cited a 2015 law banning foreign funding of religious institutions and requiring Muslim organizations to hold "positive fundamental view

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towards” Austrian “state and society.” Critics condemned the ruling as Islamophobic. In September 2019 elections, the Freedom Party shrank from being Austria’s second largest party to the country’s third largest after party leader Heinz-Christian Strache was filmed offering to fix government contracts at a dinner party. The FPÖ expelled Strache in December 2019. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [62], [Slate](#) [63], [Vox](#) [64], [Reuters](#) [65], [Reuters](#) [66], [Reuters](#) [67])

New far-right groups like the Identitarian Movement Austria (*Identitäre Bewegung Österreich* or IB), whose rhetoric focuses on the perceived fear of the “Islamization” of Western societies, have increased in popularity. While the far-right scene has traditionally been dominated by men, the IB and other similar groups have increasing appeal to women. These women participate in protest and outreach activities in order to help mainstream the group’s right-wing attitudes. Social media remains the most important propaganda, networking, and recruitment tool for the far-right. Notably, IB leader Martin Sellner maintains active YouTube and Twitter channels. Sellner’s YouTube channel has more than 89,000 subscribers and his Twitter account more than 30,000 followers as of March 2019. (Sources: [Europol](#) [17], [YouTube](#) [68], [BVT](#) [4], [Twitter](#) [69])

The IB has organized multinational campaigns. In 2017, IB members from Austria, Italy, France, and Germany participated in the Defend Europe campaign in the Mediterranean Sea. The far-right activists chartered a boat and attempted to block search and rescue vessels from rescuing refugees. The campaign was financed via crowdfunding sites and donations. The IB ended its mission after a week and promoted it as a success on their social media platforms despite significant logistical and technical setbacks. (Sources: [Europol](#) [17], [BVT](#) [4], [Independent](#) [70])

However, an Austrian counter-extremism counseling center assessed in December 2018 that although far-right extremism is a popular topic in youth social services, the IB does not appear to be particularly relevant. According to their survey, only nine out of 204 youth services organizations noted that young people sympathize with the IB. (Source: [Beratungsstelle Extremismus](#) [71])

Reich Citizen Movement

Austria’s Reich Citizens fundamentally reject the legitimacy and sovereignty of the established government [72] and its existing legal system. Reich Citizen groups have different organizational structures and public outreach strategies, but share the common objective of building state-like parallel structures to end what they perceive as oppression by the Austrian government. (Sources: [Zeit Online](#) [72], [BVT](#) [4])

Austrian Reich Citizen group, the Federation of States of Austria (*Staatenbund Österreich*), was founded in 2015 by its self-proclaimed president Monika Unger. The group reportedly has approximately 3,600 registered members. The group indoctrinates and recruits members through so-called “legal expertise” seminars where participants discuss the illegitimacy of the Austrian Constitution, the rejection of government authorities, and the opportunity to evade taxes and other civic duties. In addition to pay membership and participation fees, members also pay several hundred euros for new identification and legal documents, including license plates, business trading licenses, property registry, and diplomatic passports. According to the BVT’s assessment, the Federation of States of Austria has established a profitable business model through this payment and services structure. (Sources: [Zeit Online](#) [72], [BVT](#) [4], [Steiermark ORF](#) [73], [Profil](#) [74])

On January 25, 2019, an Austrian court sentenced Unger and her deputy—a retired police officer—to 14 and 10 years in prison, respectively, for inciting high treason. Twelve other members received prison sentences between nine months and three years for serious fraud and coercion. Unger and her co-conspirators were arrested in April 2017 after attempting to overthrow the government. (Sources: [Zeit Online](#) [72], [BVT](#) [4], [Steiermark ORF](#) [73], [Profil](#) [74], [Wiener Zeitung](#) [75], [Deutsche Welle](#) [76])

Far-Left Extremism

According to the BVT’s 2018 annual report, Austria recorded a total of 211 criminal acts with proven or suspected left-wing extremist motivation, a decrease of 45 percent compared to 2016. Autonomous anarchist groups are most active among Austria’s far-left extremists. Their anti-fascist activities, rallies, and protests repeatedly result in vandalism and violent riots. Primary targets are typically events organized by right-wing groups as well as the annual Wiener Akademiker Ball, a ball in Vienna for right-wing fraternities. Nonetheless, Austria’s leftist extremist networks are based on contacts between individual persons and not considered stable or structured connections. (Source: [BVT](#) [4])

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Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Compared to other European countries such as France and Britain, Austria has experienced relatively few extremist or terrorist attacks. Recent extremist incidents inside Austria have been carried out by individuals with connections to ISIS.

On March 31, 2015, an Austrian court charged Merkan G., a 14-year-old Austrian boy with terror offenses. Merkan had reportedly researched how to build a bomb and had made contact with Syrian-based ISIS militants. According to a report in *The Local*, ISIS militants had offered Merkan \$25,000 to detonate a series of bombs in Vienna. Austrian authorities charged Merkan with evidence pulled from his PlayStation game console which included bomb-building instructions. In May 2015, he received an eight months prison sentence and was given an additional 16-month suspended sentence for terrorist offences. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [10], [The Local](#) [11], [Telegraph](#) [77])

- **January 25, 2019:**An Austrian court sentences Monika Unger—the self-proclaimed president of the Federation of States of Austria (Staatenbund Österreich)—to 14 years in prison for inciting high treason after attempting to overthrow the government.
Sources: [Zeit Online](#) [72], [BVT](#) [4], [Wiener Zeitung](#) [75], [Deutsche Welle](#) [76]
- **July 25, 2017:**Austria’s Supreme Court sentences a 27-year-old Palestinian asylum seeker and member of Hamas to life in prison for membership in a terrorist organization and attempted incitement to murder as a terrorist crime. He has allegedly used social media to call on others to kill Jews in Jerusalem. Sources: [Europol](#) [17], [Jerusalem Post](#) [78]
- **June 2, 2017:**An Austrian court sentences two couples to up to ten years in prison for belonging to a terrorist organization and neglecting and mistreating children. They traveled to Syria in 2014 with their eight children, but in 2016, fled to Turkey where they were extradited to Austria. Source: [Guardian](#) [79]
- **January 26, 2017:**Austrian authorities arrest 14 suspects with purported links to ISIS in a series of counterterrorism raids in Vienna and Graz. According to media reports, the raids focused on the network of Islamic extremist preacher Mirsad Omerovic, a.k.a. Ebu Tejma, who was convicted of recruiting young people to ISIS. In February 2019, the Austrian newspaper *Kurier* reported that all 14 suspects have been released from pretrial detention, because the prosecution was unable to press charges due to the amount and complexity of evidence. Source: [Newsweek](#) [80], [The Local](#) [81], [Kurier](#) [82]
- **January 20, 2017:**Austrian police arrest ISIS sympathizer Lorenz K., who allegedly incited a 12-year old German boy to commit a suicide attack at a German Christmas market in December 2016. In April 2018, he is sentenced to nine years in prison for incitement to murder as a terrorist crime. Sources: [Kurier](#) [83], [Süddeutsche Zeitung](#) [84]
- **December 16, 2015:**Austrian police arrest two men at a refugee shelter in Salzburg on suspicion of belonging to a terrorist organization. The men are suspected by Austrian authorities to have links to the November 13 ISIS attacks in Paris. Source: [BBC News](#) [85]
- **December 10, 2014:**Austrian police arrested Mirsad Omerovic (a.k.a. Ebu Tejma), stating that he had recruited 166 European youth to join ISIS and helped to fundraise for the terror group. Sources: [Daily Mail](#) [12], [The Local](#) [13], [NY Daily News](#) [14], [The Mirror](#) [15]
- **November 28, 2014:**Reports allege that between 500 and 900 Austrian police raided mosques and homes in Vienna, Graz, and Linz after a two-year investigation. The police arrested 13 people suspected of recruiting for extremist groups in the Middle East. Austrian media suggested that a Vienna-based Bosnian-Serb preacher was the main suspect. The police reportedly seized “terroristic propaganda material,” an undisclosed amount of cash, stored computer data, and “a set of brass-knuckles.” Sources: [Daily Mail](#) [86], [Vice News](#) [87], [The Local](#) [88]
- **October 29, 2014:**Austrian police arrested a 14-year-old boy on suspicion of planning a bomb attack in a Viennese train station. The suspect was identified as an Austrian citizen with Turkish roots who had been living in Austria for eight years. The suspect reportedly told Austrian police that he wanted to fight with Islamic extremists and had researched bomb-making on the Internet. He told police that he had planned to target Vienna’s Westbahnhof train station. In May 2015, he received an eight months prison sentence and was given a further 16-month suspended sentence for terrorist offences. Sources: [New York Times](#) [89], [Kurier](#) [90]
- **August 21, 2014:**Austrian police arrested nine Chechens (eight men and one woman) suspected of terrorism. The individuals were all in the country as legal refugees, and were reportedly making their way to Syria to fight alongside ISIS. Sources: [The XX Committee](#) [91], [Der Standard](#) [92], [Gatestone Institute](#) [28]
- **September 12, 2007:**Austrian anti-terror forces arrested three people in Vienna for the production of an online video that demanded “German and Austrian soldiers leave Afghanistan.” The trio had reportedly been under police surveillance for months, and while in custody confessed to “having links” with al-Qaeda. The three were second-generation Austrian citizens with Arab backgrounds. Source: [Deutsche Welle](#)

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- **December 27, 1985:**Three Palestinianmen attacked the Israeli airline El Al’s ticket counters at Vienna International Airport, killing three and wounding 44. At the same time, perpetrators carried out a twin attack at the Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport in Rome, killing 13 and wounding 76. The Palestinian terror group Abu Nidal Organization took responsibility for the attacks. Later reports alleged that the attackers had intended to take Israeli hostages and hijack an El Al airplane. Sources: [Shabak](#) [94], [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [95], [Los Angeles Times](#) [96]
- **August 29, 1981:**Two Palestinian men, armed with machine guns and grenades, attacked a crowd leaving a Bar Mitzvah in downtown Vienna. The men killed two and wounded 30. The Palestinian Abu Nidal Organization took responsibility. Sources: [New York Times](#) [97], [Los Angeles Times](#) [98]
- **May 1, 1981:**An Abu Nidal Organization militant murdered Heinz Nittel, the then-Austrian transport minister and head of the Austrian-Israel society. Sources: [New York Times](#) [97], [Los Angeles Times](#) [98]
- **December 21, 1975:**The notorious Venezuelan terrorist Carlos the Jackal attacked an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) meeting in Vienna, killing three and taking more than 60 hostages. Carlos introduced his group as the “Arm of the Arab Revolution.” He demanded that the Austrian media broadcast anti-Israel propaganda as well as supply the terrorists and the hostages with an aircraft. Austrian authorities complied, and the hostages landed in Algeria where they were set free. Sources: [History Channel](#) [99], [Telegraph](#) [100]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

In the wake of the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, the Austrian government announced the allocation of \$335 million to combat terrorism over the next four years. The funding was used to hire new personnel trained in cyber security, crime fighting, and forensics, as well as purchase equipment such as helmets, weapons, body armor, and armored vehicles for special forces. Some funding was used to purchase IT upgrades, “evidence collection software,” and possible helicopter upgrades. A portion of the funding was spent on de-radicalization efforts. However, former head of the BVT Gert-René Polli stated that the funding was “mainly designed for the furnishing of special forces and less on the prevention of terrorism.” (Source: [The Local](#) [18])

Legislation

Austria’s legal counterterrorism framework is broad and comprehensive. In July 2013, the Austrian parliament passed revisions to the National Security Strategy (*Österreichische Sicherheitsstrategie* or ÖSS), which emphasized international cooperation in the areas of counterterrorism and the fight against cybercrime. The strategy also included the “successful integration of immigrants” as a necessary requirement to prevent radicalization and extremism. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [101], [Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior](#) [102])

On December 10, 2014, Austria’s parliament passed an anti-terrorism law banning the symbols of ISIS and al-Qaeda. The law allowed the government to issue travel bans on minors suspected of planning to fight alongside extremist groups in the Middle East. It also authorized the government to strip dual-nationality Austrians of their citizenship if they joined foreign conflicts. (Sources: [The Local](#) [103], [Associated Press](#) [104])

In October 2017, the government banned full face coverings in public places, including the niqab, the Islamic partial face covering, and the burqa, the full face and body covering. Under the law, a person’s face must be visible from the hairline to the chin when in public places. The Austrian government defended the law as necessary to protect Austrian values, while Muslim groups said it unfairly targeted their religion. According to media reports, only 150 Austrian Muslim women wear the full face veil, or burqa. However, Austrian police reported in March 2018 that they had issued only 29 citations since the passage of the ban, only four of which were related to an Islamic face veil—and all in relation to the same woman. The other charges were for animal costumes, ski masks, and smog masks. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [105], [BBC News](#) [106])

In 2017 and 2018, Austria amended Section 278(c) of the Criminal Code to include bodily harm—not only aggravated bodily harm—as a potential criminal and terrorist offense. The amendments also allow authorities to consider a broader scope of serious damage to property and data as a terrorist offense. (Sources: [Europol](#) [17], [Austrian Criminal Code](#) [107])

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Austria's "Islam Law"

On February 25, 2015, Austria's parliament passed revisions to the country's "Islam law" (*Islamgesetz*), originally implemented in 1912. The 1912 law made Islam an official religion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as it sought to assimilate thousands of Muslims in the recently annexed territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also lent state protection to Islamic institutions, doctrines, and customs. In February 2015, after years of lobbying by Muslim activists, the parliament passed new legislation granting Austrian Muslims time off from work for Islamic holidays, as well as halal meals in the army, prisons, and hospitals. The law also re-confirmed Islam as an official state religion. (Sources: [Österreichische Gesellschaft für Politikberatung und Politikentwicklung](#) [108], [Bundesministerium Europa, Integration und Äußeres](#) [109])

The "Islam law" also tackles issues related to extremism. In an attempt to curb Islamic extremism, the law bans the foreign funding of Muslim organizations and requires that all imams are able to speak German, "[barring] foreign clerics from leadership positions in Austrian mosques." The law also requires that Muslim clergy prove "professional suitability" by completing either a theological program at the University of Vienna (which espouses "European social values"), a program of equal merit, or by demonstrating similar training. The Austrian government noted that the law could serve as a model for the rest of Europe. (Sources: [Bundesministerium Europa, Integration und Äußeres](#) [109], [New York Times](#) [110])

The law imposed an employment ban on foreign clerics starting in March 2016. The ban affected the 60 Turkish civil servants working as clerics who are paid by the Turkish government's religious affairs directorate. (Source: [New York Times](#) [110])

The law also states that Austrian Muslim Organizations will be shut down if they do not "have a positive attitude toward society and state." The law does not define a "positive attitude" nor how the government intends to measure it. Many Muslim groups inside Austria reportedly find the law unfair, claiming that it casts a shadow of suspicion over the entire Muslim community. (Source: [New York Times](#) [110])

The ban on foreign funding to Austrian Islamic organizations is reportedly intended to curb the political and religious influence from countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Austria's then integration minister, Sebastian Kurz, argued that the law would prevent certain Muslim countries from exporting their "political influence" to Austria. Kurz said, "What we want is to reduce the political influence and control from abroad and we want to give Islam the chance to develop freely within our society and in line with our common European values." In contrast, Turkish head of religious affairs Mehmet Gormez told Turkey's state-owned Anadolu news agency, "Austria will go back 100 years in freedom with its Islam bill," and that "Countries cannot have their own version of Islam. Islam is universal and its sources are clear." (Sources: [New York Times](#) [19], [BBC News](#) [20], [Reuters](#) [111], [Gatestone Institute](#) [112], [Austrian Parliament](#) [21], [Newsweek](#) [113])

In June 2018, the Austrian government announced plans to close seven mosques suspected of promoting radical Islam, and potentially deport up to 60 Turkish imams accused of accepting funding from abroad in violation of the Islam law. The groups targeted include an organization called the Arab Cultural and Religious Community and the six mosques the group maintains across the country. Austrian Islamic authorities had previously declared the seventh mosque, operated by a group called the Grey Wolves, to be illegal. Approximately 150 people faced the prospect of losing their Austrian citizenship, as the expulsions would include the imams' families as well. In announcing the closings and expulsions, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said the country could no longer tolerate "parallel societies, political Islam and" radicalization. Turkey condemned the decision as racist and discriminatory. (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [114], [Guardian](#) [115], [New York Times](#) [116], [Wall Street Journal](#) [117])

In May 2019, Austria passed a ban in Austrian primary schools on "ideologically or religiously influenced clothing which is associated with the covering of the head." Freedom Party education spokesman Wendelin Mölzer called the law "a signal against political Islam." The government confirmed the law targeted the Islamic headscarf worn by women and girls and would not apply to Jewish or Sikh head coverings. Austrian Muslim groups condemned the law as an assault on religious freedom. The government extended the ban in January 2020. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [118], [Guardian](#) [119])

Prosecution of Terrorist Acts

According to Europol's 2018 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Austrian authorities arrested 46 suspects for jihadist terrorism and two individuals suspected for ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism. A 27-year-old member of Hamas

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was sentenced to life in prison for membership in a terrorist organization and attempted incitement to murder as a terrorist crime. In total, Austria reported 18 concluded court proceedings—17 convictions and one acquittal—for terrorist offenses in 2017, all of them related to jihadist terrorism. The average prison sentence for terrorist offenders is five years in the European Union, Austria is slightly above with six-year sentences on average. (Source: [Europol](#) [17])

Security Agencies

Established in 2002, the Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung* or BVT) is Austria's domestic intelligence agency, located within the Federal Ministry of the Interior. The BVT is responsible for "combating extremist and terrorist phenomena, illegal traffic in arms, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and organised crime operating in these areas, as well as counter espionage," inside Austria. The BVT partners with Interpol, Europol, and the EU Joint Situation Centre (SITCEN). Additionally, in each of Austria's nine federal provinces, there is a Provincial Agency for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (*Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung*). (Source: [Europol](#) [120])

Austria's leading counterterrorism special operations unit (*Einsatzkommando Cobra* or EKO Cobra) has operated in its current form since 2002. In 2013, the Federal Ministry of the Interior reformed EKO Cobra's organizational structure to pool expertise from several federal agencies and optimize operational resources. (Sources: [BMI](#) [121], [BMI](#) [122])

Government Programs

In 2013, the Austrian Interior Ministry disseminated an "education handbook" (*Wertefibel*) to new immigrants, which introduced the tenets of Austrian society including "social, political, and humanitarian values." In 2015, the Integration Office within the Foreign Ministry developed an educational program to teach new refugees the German language and Austrian "values" such as gender equality and democracy. Austria also maintained a counseling center and a de-radicalization hotline aimed to support and provide resources to friends and family members of potential violent extremists. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also worked with the Islamic Faith Community to develop information and outreach campaigns in mosques, Islamic organizations, and community centers. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [101], [U.S. Department of State](#) [123], [Zeit Online](#) [124])

In March 2015, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior launched an initiative to allow its citizens to report Islamist content on the Internet to the Austrian authorities via email. (Source: [BMI](#) [125])

In 2017, Austria established the National Network for Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation (*Bundesweites Netzwerk Extremismusprävention und Deradikalisierung* or BNED). Coordinated by the BVT, the BNED provides strategic advice, and combines the competences of those working in the field of extremism prevention and de-radicalization in Austria's federal ministries, civil organizations, and the federal provinces. The Federal Ministry of Interior also established an exit program for violent extremists in 2017 (*Österreichisches Ausstiegsprogramm aus dem gewaltbereiten Extremismus*), which is now administered by civil society organizations. (Sources: [BNED](#) [22], [BVT](#) [4])

The BVT also coordinates EXIT Europe, a two-year initiative that commenced on January 1, 2019. EXIT Europe aims to develop grassroots exit programs for radicalized individuals across a range of forms of extremism. The project focuses on extremist movements in eastern and southern Europe, including Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. EXIT Europe pursues an integrated multi-agency approach providing both de-radicalization and social re-integration measures. Local teams of practitioners, civil society mentors, and public sector experts assume all monitoring activities, while local security and law enforcement agents consult and advise as needed. EXIT Europe seeks to build a locally-based Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) networks that incorporates a whole-of-society approach. EXIT Europe is funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund. (Source: [BMI](#) [126])

Combatting Terrorist Financing

Since 1990, Austria is a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental organization that works to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism. FATF has recommended the adoption of various measures including the criminalization of terrorist financing, the freezing of terrorist assets, and policies designed to ensure that

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terrorists cannot exploit non-governmental organizations. (Source: [FATF \[127\]](#), [FATF \[128\]](#))

Austria passed the “Sanctions Act” in July 2010, which “facilitates asset seizure, forfeiture, and other counterterrorism measures; and asset freezes pursuant to UN and EU sanctions.” The new law also expanded and improved financial sanctions on terrorists, provided for travel bans, and established administrative and criminal penalties for violations. (Source: [FATF \[129\]](#), [U.S. Department of State \[130\]](#))

According to FATF’s 2016 evaluation report, Austria has a strong legal and institutional framework for combating money laundering and terrorism financing, as well as a robust technical compliance structure. However, improvements are still needed in national anti-money laundering/combating the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) policy coordination, risk assessments, and targeted financial sanctions. The FATF’s 2018 enhanced follow-up report concluded that Austria has made good progress in strengthening its measures and addressing most of the technical compliance deficiencies identified in 2016. (Sources: [FATF \[131\]](#), [FATF \[132\]](#))

Austria’s Financial Intelligence Unit (A-FIU) is a police unit within the Federal Office of Criminal Investigation and responsible for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating reports on money laundering-related suspicious financial activities. However, all terrorism financing cases fall under the purview of the BVT which investigates each case with local authorities. According to a 2009 report by the International Monetary Fund, “BVT [terrorism financing] investigations can be initiated on the basis of information received from the private sector...other national or foreign security authorities, or internal sources.” All terrorism financing concerns are automatically forwarded to the BVT. (Sources: [IMF \[133\]](#), [International Bar Association \[134\]](#))

In July 2013, the government amended Article 278(d) of the Austrian Criminal Code concerning the financing of terrorism. The amendment included punishable actions against supporters of terrorism financing and introduced higher penalties for offenses. (Sources: [Europol \[135\]](#), [Austrian Criminal Code \[136\]](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Foreign Military Engagements

The Austrian Armed Forces have taken part in multiple peace operations around the globe, including the U.N.’s peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights, the NATO-led mission in Kosovo, and the European Union Force (EUFOR) Operation Althea that supports the armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In March 2018, Major General Martin Dorfer from the Austrian Armed Forces was appointed Commander of the EUFOR BiH. (Sources: [Bundesheer \[137\]](#), [EUFOR BiH \[138\]](#), [EUFOR BiH \[139\]](#), [Bundesheer \[140\]](#))

Since 1960, more than 100,000 Austrian troops and civilian aids participated in more than 50 international peace support and humanitarian missions. As of February 2019, the Austrian Armed Forces deployed a total of 429 troops in Kosovo, 289 in Bosnia, and 185 troops with the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL). Smaller deployments included Croatia, Georgia, Cyprus, Afghanistan, the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East, Moldova, Ukraine, Mali, and Western Sahara. Many of these deployments were U.N., EU, or regional missions. (Sources: [Bundesheer \[140\]](#), [Bundesheer \[141\]](#))

Diplomatic Endeavors

Austria is a member of the Global Coalition against Daesh and a member of the Defeat-ISIS foreign terrorist fighters and stabilization working groups. Austria joined the U.S.-led coalition in September 2014 in a strictly humanitarian capacity, providing humanitarian assistance worth €104 million in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring countries since then. Austria also contributed €6 million to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Funding Facility for Stabilisation in Iraq. (Source: [Global Coalition \[23\]](#))

In June 2015, an Austrian delegation including then foreign minister Sebastian Kurz visited the Kurdistan region in Iraq and reaffirmed Austria’s commitment to humanitarian aid. The delegation announced it would establish an honorary consulate in the region. (Source: [Shafaq News \[142\]](#))

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Austria also partakes in a number of regional security initiatives, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Salzburg Forum. Vienna is the Secretariat of the OSCE, an initiative that seeks to combat terrorism through conflict prevention, early warning, and crisis management. It also helps to train police and monitor borders. In May 2015, Vienna hosted an OSCE forum on preventing radicalization and violent extremism. In 2017, Austria made the fight against terrorism a key priority for its OSCE chairmanship. (Sources: [OSCE](#) [143], [U.S. Department of State](#) [144], [U.S. Department of State](#) [101])

In 2000, the Salzburg Forum was founded as a Central European security partnership at the initiative of the Austrian government. As of February 2019, the Salzburg Forum is comprised of nine member states, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The Forum's initial objectives were to strengthen regional cooperation in the field of internal security and support members in their preparations to join the European Union. The Salzburg Forum currently focuses on EU cooperation and lobbying efforts, as well as regional cooperation on several issues—including terrorism prevention, police cooperation, border management, and crisis management. The Forum meets biannually, but Austria often organizes additional ministerial meetings to increase cooperation on internal security issues. (Sources: [Salzburg Forum](#) [145], [Salzburg Forum](#) [146])

Public Opinion

According to the European Commission's public opinion survey, in March 2018, only 7 percent of Austrians were concerned about terrorism. By comparison, Austrians considered immigration the most important issue facing the country (29 percent), followed by health and social security (22 percent). (Sources: [European Commission](#) [24], [European Commission](#) [25], [European Commission](#) [26])

Another European Commission survey confirmed the trend that Austrians were concerned about immigration. When asked if immigration of people from outside the EU evokes positive or negative feelings, 57 percent of Austrians answered "fairly negative" or "very negative." Only 37 percent responded "very positive" or "fairly positive." (Source: [European Commission](#) [147])

The 2017 "Integration barometer" report, published by the Austrian Integration Fund (*Österreichischer Integrations Fonds* or ÖIF), concluded that coexistence between native Austrians and immigrants is generally perceived critically. In particular, 61 percent of Austrians rated the coexistence between non-Muslims and Muslims negatively. More than 80 percent of Austrians endorsed stricter controls in mosques to counter possible radicalization, on foreign financing of Islamic institutions, and on Islamic kindergartens. A majority of those surveyed (73 percent) also disagreed with the statement that Islam belongs in Austria. (Source: [ÖIF](#) [148])

According to a Special Eurobarometer survey from June 2017, Austrian law enforcement authorities were well perceived in their fight against specific threats. Sixty-five percent of Austrians agreed that national law enforcement was doing enough to fight terrorism, while 33 percent disagreed. (Source: [European Commission](#) [149])