Police carry out mass anti-Muslim raids in Hesse, Germany

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Large-scale raids ordered by the interior ministry in the central German state of Hesse early last Wednesday morning represent a major act of intimidation against Muslims throughout the country. At 4 a.m., 1,100 police officers entered several apartments, businesses and two mosques. Locations affected included Frankfurt, Offenbach, Darmstadt, Limburg, Wiesbaden and the Groß-Gerau, Marburg-Biedenkopf and Main Taunus areas.

Overall, 56 locations were searched, 33 of which were in Frankfurt. As the operator of the Bilal mosque in Frankfurt-Griesheim reported to the media, twelve police vehicles surrounded the building and militarily-armed police kicked down all the doors even though an imam was standing there with a key. They demolished the fence surrounding the plot of land, broke glass windows and overturned everything in the library.

Hesse Interior Minister Peter Beuth (Christian Democrats, CDU) said on Wednesday morning at a press conference that the raids were “a clear message to the radical Islamists in Hesse: we are firmly focused on this scene.”

The action was part of investigations against 16 suspects aged between 16 and 46. These people were under “the suspicion of support for a foreign terrorist organisation and the preparation of a serious act of violence endangering the state,” the web page of the State Criminal Office (LKA) in Hesse stated.

One person, a 36-year-old Tunisian, was arrested and did not put up any resistance. He was already known to the police, having spent 83 days in custody last year. He lived in Hesse between 2003 and 2013 and travelled to Germany a second time in the summer of 2015. According to police information, from August 2015 he was active as “a smuggler and promoter of IS.” He was arrested on August 15, 2016.

An application for extradition from the Tunisian authorities is also under way against him because he is a joint suspect in the attacks on the Bardo museum in Tunis in March 2015 and the border town of Ben Guerdane in March 2016.

He was first taken into custody in 2008 due to a charge of grievous bodily harm. He then spent another 40 days in extradition detention. The Tunisian authorities allegedly did not supply the required paperwork in time. He was released from custody based on this justification on November 4, 2016.

This entire episode strongly recalls the circumstances surrounding the attack in Berlin, where suspect Anis Amri directed a lorry into a Christmas market. Amri, as it later emerged, had previously been in custody and under constant state surveillance. After his attack, which killed 12 people, the media and authorities exploited public horror to create a favourable atmosphere for the strengthening of the domestic state apparatus and mass deportations.

The operation in Hesse raises several questions.

According to the press statement from the LKA in Hesse, the federal state prosecutor handed the investigation of the 36-year-old to the Frankfurt state prosecutor on October 25, 2016. The man was accused of actively supporting the terrorist organisation Islamic State. In Tunisia, proceedings were also ongoing into the two attacks he was accused of participating in, in which 30 people died.

However, the same man was freed ten days later, on November 4, 2016.

At this time, preparations for the raids were already far advanced. The operations were, as LKA spokesman Max Weiss noted, prepared over an extended period. A group of 150 officers prepared the raids for four months. The group included the general state

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prosecutor and the Frankfurt state prosecutor, the LKA and the police.

The question is posed: did the authorities set the Tunisian free to use him as a decoy? According to the general state prosecutor, he has been under round-the-clock surveillance by LKA officers.

The accusations against the other suspects also raise questions. They stand in stark contrast to the scale of the raids and can only be described as flimsy: over 100 memory cards and data storage devices were confiscated, along with "stabbing weapons" and €28,000. But mobile phones, computers, money and even knives are objects that could be found in practically every house. Neither firearms nor explosive chemicals were detected.

Senior state prosecutor Alexander Badle said at the press conference that the organisation had no clear plan for a targeted attack and therefore "no concrete terrorist danger" exists.

Those accused were taken unawares while sleeping and checked for identification. The press statement declared that the "usual standard measures" against these people had been used and had been "comprehensively and operationally enforced." Only one, a 16-year-old German-Afghan, was abroad. The state prosecutor is investigating into him because he had allegedly expressed the desire to travel to Syria to join Islamist groups. But last September, he left for Afghanistan.

In the end, what remained were 14 people accused of a "serious act of violence against the state" in general, but with no evidence of a plan of action or target, let alone weapons or explosives. And secondly, a "suspect in chief" who was deliberately and knowingly set free on November 4, at the beginning of the preparations for the raids, placed under 24-hour surveillance, and re-arrested on February 1.

The raids are part of a nationwide campaign to implement police state measures. At the same time, they are aimed at dividing the population and whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment. In Berlin, North Rhein-Westphalia and other states have seen similar raids recently. On January 31, the eve of the Hesse raids, police searched several apartments, mosques and arrested three men.

On the same day, the federal government adopted a measure allowing the use of ankle tags for "extremist threats," which is itself a highly questionable legal definition. In an obvious breach of the presumption of innocence, the ankle tags, which could previously only be ordered by a judge, can now be used by officers from the state criminal offices, "if certain facts justify the assumption that an individual could carry out an attack or his behaviour indicates this."

Hesse's CDU-Green government is playing a leading role in such police-state policies. Hesse's Minister President Volker Bouffier (CDU), likes to boast that his police force the "best trained, best armed and best paid police force in Germany."

As Interior Minister under Roland Koch, Bouffier introduced video surveillance early on, as well as stop-and-search, automatic reading devices for vehicle number plates and the location of mobile phones. Bouffier also supports the policy of sealing the borders to refugees and recently suggested taking those rescued in the Mediterranean to Egypt and Tunisia, and to construct special detention centers.

The Greens are also responsible for the state build-up. They are the junior partner in the coalition and are led by Tarek al-Wazeer. Al-Wazeer is economics and transport minister, as well as the deputy to Bouffier. The Hesse Greens support the militarist actions of the police. Recently, its members in the Hesse government agreed a joint statement with Green parties from ten states which explicitly calls for deportations to Afghanistan to no longer be blocked.

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