



IMMIGRANT
DEFENSE
PROJECT



Operation Palladium FOIA: Briefing Guide

The incoming Trump administration has promised an [extreme agenda](#) of mass detention, deportation, and border exclusion. A key tactic under his previous administration was the weaponization of mass raids by federal law enforcement to target jurisdictions with policies to protect immigrants' rights (so-called Sanctuary Cities). One of these mass raid operations involved the enlistment of heavily armed Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents to assist Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as a "surge force" in multiple major metropolitan areas across the country, including New York City—the agency referred to this as "Operation Palladium."

In response, our organizations filed a FOIA request and engaged in litigation to learn more about Border Patrol deployment and "Operation Palladium," as well as any associated plans targeting immigrants. This briefing guide highlights key documents and findings from this FOIA request and offers guidance to advocates as we prepare for how the new Trump administration—as well as future administrations—may readily weaponize massive surge force operations to achieve their political goals. Documents in this briefing guide were uncovered via [multiple FOIA requests and consolidated litigation](#) pursued by the Immigrant Defense Project, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Surveillance Resistance Lab and LatinoJustice PRLDEF.

KEY FINDINGS

1. [ICE can readily enlist the Border Patrol in raids, including members of BORTAC, the CBP SWAT team](#)
2. [Operation Palladium was a hastily organized attempt to recruit 500 Homeland Security Investigations \(HSI\) agents and 100 CBP agents to aid ERO to target "sanctuary cities"](#)
3. [These ICE "surge force" operations sought to undermine policies that protect people from domestic police collaboration with ICE](#)
4. [Police Chiefs in Major Cities learned of the surge force operation through a NYT Article](#)

For additional context, we have [also included a Timeline](#).

Background: “Operation Palladium”

In early 2020, ICE escalated mass raids at a scale unlike anything before. In January 2020, the Trump Administration doubled down on targeting New York. ICE raids throughout New York City increased [400% during the first 11 weeks of 2020](#) from the previous 11 weeks. After the state legislature passed the [Green Light Law](#), which restricted DMV information-sharing with Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Administration [pressured New York State officials](#) to share this data. On February 11, undercover ICE agents [shot a bystander in the face](#) on the streets of Brooklyn. Three days later, the [New York Times reported that](#) DHS would send Border Patrol tactical units, including [BORTAC troops](#) to New York and other “sanctuary” cities to boost ICE raids units. Further reporting revealed that ICE was conducting a 24/7 surveillance operation named [“Operation Palladium”](#) targeting cities with “sanctuary” policies—in particular—[Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco](#)—with a goal to “arrest as many undocumented immigrants as possible, and ‘flood the streets’” with agents. ICE agents [were seen on the streets and in apartments](#) in the Bronx, [brandishing assault rifles](#). While New York was implementing measures to contain COVID-19 that March, [ICE continued conducting raids in areas already designated as high risk zones](#). This operation was only halted in March 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19.

Palladium in Context:

Since its founding in 2003, ICE has prioritized building up its technical and personnel capacity to [“identify, locate, apprehend, process, and remove”](#) anyone they could deport. In the 20+ years since, the number of ICE and Border Patrol Agents has [grown substantially](#). So has their [surveillance](#) and overall policing mandate and [reach](#). During the Obama administration, after jurisdictions started to pass “sanctuary” policies limiting collaboration with local law enforcement, [ICE started to purposely conflate](#) “national security” with “public safety.” A key part of this included demonizing people with criminal convictions through [public narratives](#) and [ICE raids](#), and ICE became a routine presence in cities and states across the United States. Each [successive presidential administration](#) has increased the number of ICE, Border Patrol and other CBP agents. Operation Palladium provides helpful insight into how the normalization of ICE raid practices, as well as the size of the DHS immigration police force, can be readily weaponized for political purposes through surge force operations.

What is an ICE “surge force” operation

The ICE raids police force is housed within its Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) and includes programs such as [Fugitive Operations](#) and the Criminal Apprehension Program (formerly the Criminal Alien Program).

ICE ERO conducts raids regularly, and since 2011, ICE has been conducting bi-annual [Cross-Check operations](#) in which agents from multiple field offices concentrate forces to target immigrants in cities. These operations are occasionally conducted with agents from ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) serving as force multipliers. In 2017, ICE was planning a massive surge force operation, [Operation Mega](#)—which it canceled after a memo was leaked about the plan. Operation Palladium similarly was a massive Cross Check operation, but this time, ICE enlisted Border Patrol agents along with HSI to support ERO.

KEY FINDINGS

1. ICE can readily enlist the Border Patrol in raids in major U.S. cities, including members of BORTAC, the CBP SWAT team

- In January 2020, ICE ERO enlisted Customs and Border Patrol agents to support ICE field offices to conduct massive arrests for 90 days, with the possibility of extending. ICE and CBP signed a [Memorandum of Agreement \(MOA\)](#) on January 13, 2020, approved by Mark A. Morgan, Acting Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and Matthew T. Albence, Deputy Director and Senior Official Performing the Duties of Director, U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. The MOA cites as authorization provisions of the Homeland Security Act of 2002. There does not appear to be a cap on the number of CBP agents that can be enlisted by ICE.
- As part of the purpose of this interagency cooperation, the [MOA states](#) that this will enhance the “skill set” of CBP personnel as immigration law enforcement officers in urban settings, as well as investigative techniques.
- This operation dubbed “SUB zERO” by CBP (and apparently referred to as “50/50 CBP Assist” by ICE) involved the deployment of 100 total CBP agents into cities across the country to support ICE ERO. The [deployment order](#) states that the ICE ERO offices that would receive support from CBP included Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans, Newark, and San Francisco, but other documents show that [New York](#) was also one of the cities under SUB zERO. [An email](#) states that ICE/ERO unexpectedly expanded the number of locations in a last minute change. This deployment included agents from the Office of Field Operations and the Border Patrol, including members of [BORTAC](#), the Border Patrol Tactical Unit. ICE [canceled](#) both operations on March 18 due to the pandemic.

2. Operation Palladium was a hastily organized attempt to recruit 500 Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) agents to aid ERO to target “sanctuary cities”

- On Wednesday, February 19, 2020, ICE’s National Fugitive Operations Program [announced in a teleconference](#) that Operation Palladium would start on the following Monday, February 24. According to an ERO Associate Legal Advisor, “Op. Palladium’ is just a fancy name for what was originally called ‘[Cross Check](#) 2020.’”
- Palladium was to run from February 24 through the end of 2020. Under Operation Palladium, ERO enlisted HSI agents as a force multiplier, in Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco as [surge sites](#). HSI was required to [provide lists of agents](#) to ERO by 1pm on Friday, February 21, and emails show that HSI and ERO were scrambling for officers [to receive](#) the required 4th Amendment training (August 2023 production from ICE).
- ICE [merged](#) Operation Cross Check and SUB zERO, bringing ICE ERO, HSI, and CBP agents together under Palladium. On February 19, during a Fug Ops teleconference, the [ERO shared](#): “The objective of Operation Palladium is to apply an organized, methodical approach to the identification, location, and arrest of illegal aliens using HSI and CBP agents as a surge force

within seven U.S. ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) Field Offices. The [Op Plan](#) for Operation Palladium was circulated on the Friday before the Operation was set to begin.

3. These “Surge Force” Operations Sought to Undermine Long-standing Policies that Protect People from Domestic Police Collaboration with ICE

- From the start, the Trump administration had taken measures to attempt to undermine so-called sanctuary cities—jurisdictions with local laws that limit police collaboration with ICE. Launched in January, ERO recruited Border Patrol agents as force multipliers in Operation SUB zERO, citing as its purpose [“to the effects of the Gonzalez decision,”](#)—a [class action lawsuit](#) that challenged the legality of ICE issuing detainers based on the DHS database. One month later, under Operation Palladium, ERO-recruited HSI agents were assigned to ERO locations in seven ERO field offices with the “highest at-large lead volumes and known challenges with local law enforcement cooperation: Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco. The remaining seventeen ERO field offices will also receive assistance.” This document includes a table which shows the distribution of HSI agents.

4. Police Chiefs in Major Cities Learned of “Operation Palladium” through a New York Times Article

- [The New York Times](#) was the first to report on ICE’s enlistment of Border Patrol agents to target sanctuary cities on February 14, 2020. Notably, DHS did not appear to inform senior officials in the CBP that they were releasing information about this operation to the media. Internal emails produced by CBP from February 14 state, [“So much for OPSEC...This is getting crazy,”](#) and [“Share this with the guys on the ground for Sub Zero so they have awareness.”](#)
- DHS did not inform police officials in the cities they were targeting for surge force operations, and these police chiefs learned about the operations through the New York Times article. “Several major city police chiefs have expressed concerns about these deployments and have requested a briefing with ICE/CBP.” Four days after the release of the Times article, ICE and CBP held a [conference call](#) with the Major Cities Chiefs Association. Attendees include the Commissioner of the NYPD, the Chief of Police of Atlanta and Houston, the Assistant Chief of the LAPD, and others.
- The CBP messaging evolved over the month since the MOA was signed. On February 13, 2020, the agency [cleared a statement](#) stating: “CBP is deploying 100 officers and agents to supplement ICE Enforcement Removal Operations in order to enhance the integrity of the immigration system, protect public safety, and strengthen our national security.” In [the call](#) with the Major Police Chiefs Association on February 18, the CBP purpose was more refined: “Utilizing CBP resources to supplement ICE will provide greater capability to arrest and remove the aforementioned categories of aliens from the interior of the United States, align the resources and strategic enforcement efforts of intra-departmental and inter-departmental agencies and other law enforcement partners to address public safety deficits within the interior of the United States, and may help deter additional illegal entries by delivering consequences for these immigration violations.”

TIMELINE

January 13, 2020

US CBP and US ICE sign [MOA](#) for CBP personnel to assist ICE ERO with interior enforcement efforts

January 14, 2020

CBP Sector Deputy Chiefs given a warning order on [this deployment](#)

January 19, 2020

ICE/ERO [expands the number of locations](#) from the original request last minute.

February 6, 2020

DHS [suspends](#) the ability of New York residents to apply for or re-enroll in CBP's Trusted Traveler Programs (TTP) after the Green Light law takes effect on December 16, 2019.

February 10, 2020

ICE uses a stun gun on a man they are trying to arrest and shoots his girlfriend's son, who has his arms raised, [in the face](#).

February 14, 2020

The New York Times publishes, "[Border Patrol Will Deploy Tactical Agents to Sanctuary Cities.](#)"

February 18, 2020

CBP/ICE have a [call](#) with the Major Cities Chiefs Association

February 19, 2020

ICE ERO enlists 500 HSI agents [to support in](#) Operation Palladium, a surge force operation to target "sanctuary cities" starting on February 24 2020.

March 4, 2020

ICE agents conduct arrests in the Bronx [brandishing assault rifles](#) in the street

March 6, 2020

The New York Times publishes, "[Flood the Streets" ICE Targets Sanctuary Cities with Increased Surveillance,](#) announcing Operation Palladium to the public.

March 9, 2020

Ten plain-clothes ICE officers arrest a man, in front of his wife and their two young children, after entering their apartment in New Rochelle at 6am. The next day, Governor Cuomo declares a containment area around New Rochelle, tracing the rapid spread of the coronavirus to a local resident.

March 18, 2020 Operation Palladium and 50/50 Assist cancelled

Non-ERO agents [turn in all equipment](#) and return home.