

Der Spiegel asks: “Is the CIA hunting Assange’s supporters?”

Oscar Grenfell, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
27 February 2023

In a feature article published last Thursday, the well-known German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* pointedly asked whether the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was “hunting” associates and supporters of Julian Assange.

The persecuted WikiLeaks publisher remains in Britain’s maximum-security Belmarsh Prison while the UK authorities seek to facilitate his extradition to the US. There, Assange faces 175 years’ imprisonment for exposing the war crimes committed by American imperialism and its allies in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Over recent years, a wealth of material has been published laying bare the scope of the US campaign against Assange and its gross illegality. In October 2021, *Yahoo! News* issued an article, based on the statements of 30 former and current US officials. It asserted that the CIA and the Trump administration had plotted to kidnap or assassinate Assange while he was an internationally-recognised political refugee in Ecuador’s London embassy.

There are well-documented allegations that UC Global, the security company contracted by the Ecuadorian authorities to provide security to the embassy, was secretly collaborating with the US authorities. UC Global whistleblowers have attested to this, and the unlawful surveillance material, including videos of Assange’s privileged discussions with his lawyers, has been publicly released.

The *Der Spiegel* article provides additional information. It paints a picture of a global dragnet established by the US government and its agencies to target not only Assange, but also his collaborators. Much of the material is anecdotal, but the standing of those providing it, together with the context of established US state operations against WikiLeaks, makes for a persuasive case.

Summarising the material it collected, *Der Spiegel* writes: “At one point, a lawyer in London lost her laptop; at another, a journalist researching Assange’s case had medical data stolen. The office of Assange’s Spanish defence lawyers was broken into in a bizarre way. In Ecuador, a Swedish software developer has been held in the country for nearly four years on flimsy grounds. Elsewhere, Assange supporters who prefer to remain anonymous reported similar spooky incidents.

“That they are connected cannot be proven. Nor has it been possible to determine the authors beyond doubt in any case so far. It could be a matter of coincidences. ‘But who is to believe that?’ asks Assange’s lawyer Aitor Martínez, who is certain that it is a concerted campaign by U.S. authorities, whose often dubious methods WikiLeaks has exposed quite a few times. ‘It’s a vendetta against Julian Assange,’ says the Spaniard. And the focus is not only on companions and family members of Assange, but also on lawyers and journalists, who by law should be particularly protected from wiretapping.”

Several case studies are provided.

One concerns Andy Müller-Maguhn, a German collaborator of Assange and a computer expert. In addition to having met frequently with Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy, Müller-Maguhn plays a pivotal role in WikiLeaks’ operations by managing funds for the organisation donated through the German Wau Holland Foundation.

The *Der Spiegel* report recounts that Müller-Maguhn discovered in March 2018 a high-powered spying device in a Southeast Asian apartment where he sometimes resides. The small surveillance implant had been expertly soldered into one of Müller-Maguhn’s secure mobile phones. *Der Spiegel* commented: “It is equipped with U.S. made chips and cannot be detected with a normal frequency locator.”

Other incidents followed, with Müller-Maguhn describing the situation as the “edge of surreality.” In one instance, “in June 2019, he was waiting for his wife in Milan when he spotted an ‘unkempt guy’ across the street pointing a telephoto lens at him through a plastic bag. ‘When he sees me looking at him,’ he takes off.”

In another, his telephone provider revealed that one of Müller-Maguhn’s crypto phones was using an unusually high amount of data. It was one, however, that he almost never used. On inspection, it was clear that the phone had been connecting to unfamiliar IP addresses. There were also signs that his mail had been tampered with.

In the most sinister incident, the article relates that Müller-Maguhn had left “his Berlin apartment to go shopping; when he returns, there is an object stuck in his door lock that can no longer be opened. The police suspect an attempted burglary. It’s Nov. 3, 2020, the day of the U.S. presidential election. ‘Funny coincidence,’ says Müller-Maguhn.”

The German citizen has filed a legal case against the spying in the German federal courts. His account is lent substantial credence by the fact that the US government has openly admitted to targeting him.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigations named Müller-Maguhn as a potential WikiLeaks courier in the 2016 Mueller report. The document provides no evidence for this, other than Müller-Maguhn’s visits to the Ecuadorian embassy, just as it did not substantiate its broader, baseless charges that WikiLeaks’ 2016 publications were part of a “Russian interference” campaign in that year’s American election. Leaked material has also shown that UC Global took a particular interest in Müller-Maguhn while it was allegedly collaborating with the CIA.

Lawyer targeted

Aitor Martínez, one of Assange’s Spanish lawyers, also appears to have been targeted. *Der Spiegel* pointedly notes: “For him, too, the series of oddities apparently began in the spring of 2017, when CIA chief Pompeo declared WikiLeaks an enemy intelligence agency.”

Pompeo made that declaration in response to WikiLeaks' publication of Vault 7, a trove of CIA documents proving that the agency was running a global hacking operation aimed at gaining access to smartphones, televisions and even electric vehicles. The agency was also developing technologies to falsely ascribe its own illegal actions to other nations, such as Russia and Iran. The clear implication of Pompeo's assertion was that WikiLeaks would be treated as an enemy state or a terrorist organisation.

Der Spiegel reports that in the wake of Pompeo's speech: "Martínez and his wife were in Paraguay on business at the time. On a street in Asunción, he said, a stranger grabbed his wife's arm and whispered to her in English, 'Watch your cell phone!' At the hotel, 230 screenshots of private emails, text messages and pictures suddenly popped up on her cell phone, allegedly sent from Martínez's phone, which he said he hadn't even touched. 'Then, when we left in a hurry, a man with a plug in his ear followed us at the airport, waving a friendly goodbye.'"

In the most serious attack, masked men broke into Martínez's Spanish legal office on the night of December 16, 2017. They appeared to be looking for something, which the lawyer suspects was a computer server that they did not find.

The timing suggests coordination with UC Global, along with the US authorities. In the days prior to the break-in, Assange had been involved in detailed discussions with Ecuadorian officials on a plan for him to flee the embassy and seek asylum in a third state. The meetings were allegedly surveilled by UC Global and transmitted to US agencies. Days after the break-in, the US government issued an international arrest warrant for Assange on December 21, clearly aimed at scuttling the plans for his liberty.

That warrant was issued by the US Justice Department. If the break-in was connected to the activities of the US government, as seems almost certain, it would have been overseen by the CIA or its proxy. In other words, the Justice Department, which is now overseeing Assange's attempted extradition, was potentially tag-teaming with spying agencies in criminal operations such as attempted burglaries.

Significantly, Martinez stated that his apartment was broken into last year, but nothing was stolen. That would suggest that this gangster campaign against Assange's associates continues, despite his imprisonment and the extradition proceedings.

Another individual whose story is recounted by *Der Spiegel* is Ola Bini, a Swedish computer expert. He was arrested in Ecuador, where he was working, almost simultaneously with the Ecuadorian government's expulsion of Assange from its London embassy on April 11, 2019. Bini, who says he has never worked for WikiLeaks, but did meet with Assange at the embassy, was accused of hacking into Ecuadorian government communications and attempting to destabilise its government.

Bini has been subjected to a years-long legal ordeal. While an Ecuadorian court acquitted him in January, prosecutors have filed an appeal, so he cannot leave the country.

Der Spiegel recounted some of his experiences with surveillance: "Ola Bini says he often saw these men in the park while jogging, dressed like normal walkers but with well-toned bodies and walkie-talkies. He says there was often a police car parked outside his front door; once he photographed a car with an antenna sticking out of the back window, pointed at his apartment.

"I don't know what my opponents are capable of,' Bini says as he rides his bicycle to a café in Quito one Sunday morning to talk. Bodyguards accompany him; they had been provided for him by a

human rights organization. Ola Bini is probably one of the best-monitored people in Ecuador. Three or four security services are on his heels, says the 40-year-old. Yet even without the constant surveillance, he would have little chance of escaping: Every Friday, he has to report to the public prosecutor's office and is not allowed to leave the country. 'This situation is destroying me psychologically,' he says."

Reports since 2019 have indicated that the Ecuadorian campaign against Bini has been coordinated with US officials.

The spying and dirty tricks perpetrated against WikiLeaks' associates, including lawyers, underscores the fact that the persecution of Assange is the spearhead of a broader assault on democratic rights, with global implications.

This campaign is inextricably tied to war. Assange is being persecuted for exposing war crimes, under conditions where the US and its allies are preparing even greater horrors through their proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and their confrontation with China. As in the 20th century, war is incompatible with fundamental civil liberties, which governments erode in a bid to suppress widespread opposition to militarism among workers and young people.

The lawless campaign against WikiLeaks is yet another exposure of the fraud of Washington's claims to be defending "democracy" and "human rights" in Ukraine or anywhere else. What emerges is an imperialist regime that will use all methods, including criminal, to stamp out opposition to its illegal wars and interventions.

The full Der Spiegel article can be read in German here. Investigative journalist Tareq Haddad has provided an English translation here.

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