

FBI appears to be continuing investigation of Julian Assange

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On Thursday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, prominent Australian publications, reported new information indicating that the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is continuing a probe of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

The article reported that the previous week Andrew O'Hagan, a British journalist, had been contacted by the FBI, who asked to interview him about Assange. In 2011, O'Hagan had been contracted to ghost write Assange's autobiography.

Like many representatives of the affluent and complacent British upper middle-class, he subsequently became an embittered opponent of WikiLeaks, writing a tedious and mean-spirited account of his relationship with Assange for the *London Review of Books*.

O'Hagan has indicated that he refused to speak to the FBI. He said he would rather go to prison than cooperate with an FBI operation targeting journalists. That is a principled stand.

The apparent probe, however, is disturbing and highly unusual. It has been years since the US government issued an indictment against Assange for exposing American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. The WikiLeaks founder has been detained in Britain's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison for more than four years on the basis of the successive indictments and an extradition request.

The probe could point to an attempt by the US government to concoct new charges against Assange or even other WikiLeaks representatives. Far more likely, it indicates that after all these years, the American state has no conceivable case against Assange and is continuing to fish for more lies and falsifications to attack him in the current extradition process.

This morning, WikiLeaks issued a statement, taking issue with the manner in which the FBI probe had been reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*. Both publications had stated that the O'Hagan request indicated that the FBI had "reopened" an investigation into the WikiLeaks founder.

WikiLeaks, however, noted: "Since the current process was initiated in 2017 under the Trump Administration after pressure from CIA head Michael Pompeo, the investigation has never been closed. It is therefore nonsensical to suggest it has been re-opened."

WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson commented: "The FBI has reached an alarming new low by asking a journalist (Mr. O'Hagan) to reveal his interactions with his source (Mr. Assange). There can be no doubt that the decisions taken in the case of Julian Assange are having a chilling effect on journalists globally.

"From spying on Julian's lawyers, to planning his assassination, the behaviour of his persecutors is opening a Pandora's box of abuses of power. The message that needs to be sent to the Biden administration and the Attorney General Merrick Garland is, for the sake of press freedom all over the world: Drop The Charges. End this now."

The statement was referencing well-documented dirty tricks operations against Assange by the American intelligence agencies, which have been central to the attempted US prosecution.

This included the revelation, contained in a September 2021 *Yahoo! News* report, that the Trump administration and the CIA had discussed illegally kidnapping Assange from London or even assassinating him. The *Yahoo* investigation was based on the statements of at least 30 former US officials.

In June 2020, after it had already issued 17 Espionage Act charges against Assange and requested his extradition, the US unveiled a superseding indictment. It was largely based on testimony from Sigurdur "Siggi" Thordarson, who years earlier had stolen money from WikiLeaks. The aim of the new indictment was to bolster the fraudulent narrative that Assange was a hacker, not a journalist and publisher.

In June, 2021, Thordarson admitted that his testimony had largely consisted of lies. It had been proffered to FBI agents, in exchange for an agreement not to prosecute him. Thordarson is a convicted sex offender and conman, previously described by a court-appointed psychiatrist as a

“sociopath.”

The WikiLeaks statement added: “The case against Julian Assange has no foundation and is politically motivated. The FBI’s latest move simply highlights the political desperation of his persecutors. The FBI’s efforts to create a case out of thin air include making a convicted fraudster their star witness (who has since recanted his testimony).”

In other words, the FBI has already plumbed the depths of depravity in its pursuit of Assange, but its efforts are continuing. Given O’Hagan’s previous animosity towards WikiLeaks, and the fact that he tape-recorded hundreds of hours of conversations with Assange for the autobiography, it is not hard to imagine why the FBI approached him.

Several troubling questions emerge.

The first is that the written request from the FBI to interview O’Hagan was transmitted to him by the Counter Terrorism Command of the London Metropolitan police. Why counter-terror cops would have any involvement in an ongoing US probe of a journalist who has long been under British custody is entirely unclear, but cannot augur well.

For many years, leading US politicians obscenely branded Assange a “terrorist.” Joe Biden, the US president is among them, having once described Assange as a “high-tech terrorist.”

In comments to the *Herald and Age*, Assange’s Australian lawyer Stephen Kenny responded to the O’Hagan revelation by stating: “It appears they are continuing to try to investigate, which I find unusual given the amount of time that has passed since the investigation began. I would think it is of some concern because we have been working to try to secure an arrangement that would see Julian come home.”

The Australian Labor government claims to have made representations to the Biden administration that Assange’s case has “gone on too long.” Labor has been exceedingly vague about how precisely the case should be ended.

But if such representations have been made, it increasingly appears they have been rebuffed.

The issue emerged on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “QandA” program last week. Host Patricia Karvelas asked Labor’s assistant foreign minister Tim Watts about the prospects of a deal between the US and Australian governments that would end Assange’s prosecution.

Watts said: “The Americans are in no doubt about what our view of this issue is.”

Karvelas replied: “Ok. If we’re going to use what you’ve just said, they’re in no doubt and we’re a close ally, don’t they owe it to us then? Isn’t that what you do with a close friend?”

Watts, visibly squirming, responded: “Well, friends frequently disagree.” He then rambled on about the difficulties of any more direct intervention by the Labor

administration to secure Assange’s freedom.

Some have noted that the Biden administration is less vocal in its pursuit of Assange than was Trump’s. Biden officials, when asked about the WikiLeaks founder, often flatly refuse to discuss his case, or ludicrously present it as a matter for the US Department of Justice and not the administration.

But it seems unlikely that FBI agents would be roaming around London, trying to dredge up dirt on Assange, without the approval of the administration, and likely the president himself.

The latest developments again point to the improbability of a positive resolution to Assange’s case, outside of a mass movement actively fighting for his freedom.

The Biden administration is waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine that threatens to spiral into a nuclear conflict. Under those conditions, it, together with US allies, including Britain and Australia, is cracking down on national security journalism and anti-war opposition more broadly.

A McCarthyite campaign against purported “Russian interference,” moreover, has been central to the political identity of the Biden administration. Lies and slanders against Assange, completely disproven, have played a central role in that. As it is whipping its upper middle-class base into a Russiaphobic frenzy, it seems highly improbable that Biden is about to extend a hand of benevolence to Assange.

The Australian government, for its part, is carrying out an unprecedented military build-up, in preparation for joining a US-led war against China. Such a program, it insists, must be a “whole of nation” war effort, raising the spectre of even further attacks on democratic rights.

It is ever-more apparent that the persecution of Assange is a spearhead of a global campaign of reaction, inextricably tied to a new period of imperialist war. That means that the fight for his freedom must proceed through the development of an international anti-war movement of the working class.



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