

FBI trying to pressure British journalists into giving evidence against Assange

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A detailed article published by *Rolling Stone* this week claimed that multiple British journalists and public personalities have been approached by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and representatives of the Department of Justice, to encourage them to give evidence against WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

It was separately reported, last month, that London writer Andrew O'Hagan had recently been contacted by FBI agents who were seeking dirt on Assange. The *Rolling Stone* article indicates that at least three other individuals have received similar approaches over the recent period.

The common denominator of each of them is that they had dealings with Assange, before publicly falling out with the WikiLeaks founder. The clear aim of the American authorities is to parlay the subjectivism and perceived weaknesses of these generally complacent and upper middle-class individuals into ammunition that can be used as part of the frame-up of Assange.

The *Rolling Stone* author James Ball is a case in point. He translated an exceedingly brief association with WikiLeaks into a career as a professional journalist. Ball has frequently slandered Assange.

In 2018, for instance, as it was clear that the now US-aligned Ecuadorian government was moving to end Assange's political asylum, Ball proclaimed in the pages of the *Guardian*: "The only barrier to Julian Assange leaving Ecuador's embassy is pride." In between vile personal attacks on Assange, Ball insisted: "The WikiLeaks founder is unlikely to face prosecution in the US..."

A little over a year later, Assange was dragged from the Ecuadorian embassy by British police. It was immediately announced that the US had charged him over 2010 publications exposing US-led war crimes and had issued an extradition request.

Ball has never repudiated this despicable record, which is clearly why he was approached. That makes the revelations contained in his *Rolling Stone* article all the more devastating.

Ball wrote: "The first approach to get me to cooperate with

the Assange prosecution came via London's Metropolitan Police in December 2021. On legal advice, I had stayed quiet about these attempts at the time. But now more journalists have told me that police have turned up on their doorsteps, too, in the last month. Those approached are former *Guardian* investigations editor David Leigh, transparency campaigner Heather Brooke, and the writer Andrew O'Hagan."

In a meeting, Ball recounted a Metropolitan Police officer telling him and his lawyer: "One thing that it might be helpful for your client to know in all of this... obviously, we're working very closely with the Americans on all of this, and the three-letter-agencies [shorthand for the FBI/CIA/NSA etc.], and we've got a lot of information at our disposal."

Ball indicated that he was subjected to pressure, including the threat of being enjoined in some sort of Assange-related prosecution. He states that he rejected the intimidation and has gone public because he is due to travel to the US for work.

Ball also said he was motivated by the fact that others revealed to him they had also been targeted.

Ball relayed: "Brooke told me she was surprised at home (she had a guest at the time) by the two officers and spoke to them briefly outside her front door. She noted to me that they were 'almost aggressively friendly and passive,' making it clear they were seeking a voluntary witness statement on behalf of the FBI, and she was 'under no obligation' to provide it."

At the same time, Leigh returned to his flat to a Metropolitan Police letter which stated: "We have been contacted recently by officers from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington D.C. (FBI) who would like to speak to you. The FBI would like to discuss your experiences with Assange/WikiLeaks as referenced in WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy. I must stress this is purely voluntary and you are acting as a witness only. Therefore there is no requirement to speak to the FBI if you do not wish to."

The approaches raise a whole host of questions. The US Justice Department unsealed its indictment against Assange when he was arrested in April, 2019. Months later it added a host of new charges under the Espionage Act, for publications exposing war crimes, increasing the possible maximum-sentence Assange would face in the US to 175 years.

Proceedings for Assange's extradition have been going on for years. He is a hair's breadth away from being dispatched to the US, with only one avenue of appeal remaining within the British legal system. Yet as Ball notes, it appears that the FBI and the US government are trying to "strengthen their case."

That underscores the weakness of the US prosecution, a transparent attempt to criminalise true and newsworthy national security journalism, for which Assange is widely viewed as a heroic figure and has won a host of awards.

Perhaps most significantly, the ongoing investigation demonstrates the commitment of the Biden administration to the ongoing US pursuit of Assange. Since assuming the presidency in early 2021, Biden has not mentioned Assange. White House spokespeople have implausibly claimed that the administration has nothing to do with the attempted prosecution, because of the supposed independence of the Justice Department.

But it is clear that the US is intensifying its multi-year witch hunt of Assange and his collaborators. The complex efforts to secure the testimony of high-profile journalists are unquestionably being conducted by the administration itself, and would likely have been approved at the highest level, i.e., by Biden.

At one point in his account, Ball noted that the FBI had expressed interest in his attacks on WikiLeaks, related to a former Russian associate of the organisation. Ball wrote: "The U.S. government cannot make much use of what I revealed in the article in a court of law unless I testify to it—and it is not hard to see how I could be useful if they were trying to strengthen the political case against Assange."

As he indicates, it does appear as though the FBI is trying to line up testimony for expanded court proceedings. Given the limited scope of extradition hearings in Britain, there is every likelihood they are preparing for the criminal case that would be held in a secret US court after Assange's extradition.

That underscores the bankruptcy of any illusions that friendly appeals to the governments involved will halt Assange's dispatch. His persecution is the spearhead of a broader onslaught on democratic rights, and especially anti-war opposition, under conditions of the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and Washington's confrontation with China.

It is no accident that the Biden administration, which is overseeing these war policies of American imperialism, is also intensifying the campaign against Assange.

Among some Assange supporters, hopes were raised in May when Australian Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese again made comments to the effect that "enough is enough" in the Assange case and the "matter needs to be brought to a close." He claimed to have conveyed these sentiments to the Biden administration.

But Albanese does not seem to have mentioned Assange for over a month since those comments. If it is true that Labor has suggested an end to the US prosecution, the news of FBI agents trawling around in London indicates those overtures have been rebuffed. Albanese is traveling to Germany at the beginning of next week, to step up collaboration with the militarist administration of that country. He is then heading to Lithuania to take part, alongside Biden, in a NATO summit planning the next escalation of the war in Ukraine.

Finally, a word should be said about those approached by the FBI. Each has indicated, at least through Ball, or in O'Hagan's case independently, their refusal to cooperate with the US prosecution. That is a principled stand.

But it is hardly accidental that they were approached in the first place. In their embittered and subjective attacks on Assange, the American intelligence agencies saw fellow-travellers of their more than decade-long campaign to destroy WikiLeaks for exposing the crimes of the US state. The FBI's apparently favorable reading of Leigh's hack job book on Assange speaks volumes.

A question inevitably emerges. The four who have revealed the approach say they have refused to cooperate. But have others in this milieu, heavily concentrated around the British *Guardian*, been similarly approached and stayed quiet because they gave the opposite answer?



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