

OLIVER: I've been here for an extradition hearing.

It's for an Israeli private investigator who's accused by the U.S. of orchestrating a hacking operation against American climate activists.

The private eye's name is Amit Forlit.

He was arrested earlier this year at London's Heathrow Airport.

And we should say at the top, Forlit has previously denied ordering or paying for hacking.

JAMES: All right, so a private investigator.

Do we know who he was allegedly working for?

OLIVER: So a British lawyer representing the U.S. Justice Department said Forlit was allegedly working for an unnamed public affairs firm based in Washington, D.C.

And that that firm was allegedly representing one of the world's biggest oil and gas companies based in Texas - again, unnamed.

The lawyer said the oil and gas company wanted to discredit activists connected to climate change litigation.

JAMES: So the private eye was allegedly working for this public affairs company, which in turn was allegedly working for a big oil and gas company.

OLIVER: Yeah, exactly.

JAMES: OK.

But the U.S. government hasn't named the companies.

OLIVER: No, it hasn't.

We did hear from one of Forlit's lawyers this week.

She said in court that the U.S. is trying to prosecute Forlit for leading a hacking operation that was allegedly commissioned by a public affairs firm called DCI Group that was representing ExxonMobil.

The Justice Department didn't respond to a message seeking comment.

It hasn't accused Exxon or DCI of wrongdoing.

Exxon and DCI declined to comment on being mentioned in court.

Before the hearing in London, both said in emails to NPR that they haven't been involved in hacking.

JAMES: Why did you contact those companies before they were mentioned in court in London?

OLIVER: So there have been media reports stating that the U.S. has investigated DCI as part of its hacking probe.

Before the London hearings, a source familiar with the probe confirmed to NPR that the U.S. has investigated DCI's possible role in the hacking.

The source wasn't authorized to speak publicly.

NPR hasn't found what, if any, links the Justice Department thought DCI may have had with the hacking campaign.

And we have not found any indications that the Justice Department investigated ExxonMobil.

JAMES: So it sounds like the government and journalists have been pursuing this hacking investigation for a while.

OLIVER: Yeah.

So the government investigation became public in 2019.

A business associate of Forlit's was arrested in the U.S.

He eventually pleaded guilty to hacking-related charges.

And in 2023, a federal judge sentenced him to more than six years in prison.

In that case, federal prosecutors said stolen information was leaked to the media and that ExxonMobil's lawyers used the media coverage to try to fight state climate investigations.

Federal prosecutors did not accuse ExxonMobil of any wrongdoing.

The company said at the time that it had not been involved in hacking.

JAMES: OK. So where do things go from here?

OLIVER: I mean, you know, it's been years since the hacking allegedly started, but the victims say it's critical for the U.S. to find out who ordered it.

Matt Pawa is one of the victims and an environmental lawyer.

He says finding out what happened is important for punishing whoever was ultimately responsible.

MATT PAWA: And for the purposes of deterrence, so that this is not done again.

And deterrence gets to these big issues of, you know, living in a free society.

If we have a lot of hacking, then we're not going to live in a very free society because people are going to be afraid to speak out.

OLIVER: For now, we're waiting to see if the U.K. extradites Forlit.

Another extradition hearing is expected in the coming weeks.