

SECURITY

Visa, MasterCard Move To Choke WikiLeaks

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Covering the worlds of data security, privacy and hacker culture.

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An appeal for donations on WikiLeaks' site.

The mounting legal and political forces working against WikiLeaks just scored two major financial blows against the whistleblower site. On Tuesday morning, Visa suspended payments to WikiLeaks, [according to the Associated Press](#). And late Monday, MasterCard told [Cnet](#) that it would also attempt to

block payments to WikiLeaks, arguing that its "rules prohibit customers from directly or indirectly engaging in or facilitating any action that is illegal."

Visa and Mastercards' moves represent the latest and most serious tightening of the financial vice around WikiLeaks since it released the first portion of a quarter million diplomatic cables last week. On Friday, PayPal blocked payments to the site, and the finance arm of the Swiss post office, PostFinance, [announced Monday](#) that it was freezing Assange's accounts.

Both PayPal and PostFinance have faced anger as a result of their decisions and even [cyberattacks](#): A group that calls itself Operation: Payback has [taken credit](#) for floods of junk web traffic that have temporarily taken down both the Swiss bank's website and PayPal's blog. Expect those attacks to now target Visa and MasterCard, too.

WikiLeaks continues to accept donations via the Icelandic credit card processing firm Datacell, though any credit card payment it's been receiving through that channel will be choked by Visa's and Mastercard's decisions to block the transfers. But the site also accepts bank transfers to two accounts, one held by Commerzbank Kassel in Germany and the other by Landsbanki in Iceland, as well as postal donations to a mail address in Melbourne, Australia.

As the financial net around WikiLeaks closes, the legal one around Assange is getting tighter too: As my colleague Parmy Olson [has reported](#), he was arrested Tuesday morning in London to face questioning by British police, and may face extradition to Sweden for sex crime charges. When I asked WikiLeaks about the possibility of Assange's arrest late last month, a spokesperson said that "Such a manoeuver would of course distract the organization's work, however it is robust enough to continue and contingency plans are in place." That's a statement that's been echoed today by WikiLeaks spokesperson Kristinn Hrafnsson in media interviews Tuesday.

It's a sign of WikiLeaks' dire situation that even Assange's arrest seems like a trivial problem compared to the starvation diet that financial industry has implemented.

Neither Visa or MasterCard has revealed any political pressure behind their move to cut off WikiLeaks. But the two firms no doubt felt that pressure from both sides of the political aisle, as Attorney General Eric Holder has promised to explore all legal

options against WikiLeaks and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and others have branded him a "terrorist." The two credit card firms may have felt the heat from their banking partners as well, given that Assange has [promised](#) to reveal tens of thousands of documents from a major U.S. bank in early 2011.

I've contacted both companies for comment but haven't immediately heard back. If anyone can offer information that sheds light on how Visa or Mastercard made the decision to snub WikiLeaks, please email me at [agreenberg \(at\) forbes.com](mailto:agreenberg@forbes.com).



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