

Medical Opinion, Torture and Julian Assange

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On November 27 this year, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, [delivered an address](#) to the German Bundestag outlining his approach to understanding the mental health of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. These comprised two parts, the initial stage covering his diplomatic asylum in the Ecuadorean embassy, the second dealing with his formal detention in the United Kingdom at the hands of the UK legal and judicial system. The conclusion was a recapitulation of previous findings: that Assange has been subjected to a prolonged, state-sponsored effort in torture, nothing less than a targeting of his being.

Melzer's address is an expansive portrait of incremental inter-state torment that led to Assange's confinement "in a highly controlled environment within the Ecuadorean embassy for more than six years." There was the eventually justified fear that he would be sought by the United States in extradition proceedings. The Swedish authorities threw in their muddled lot between 2010 and 2019, attempting to nab Assange for rape claims despite "not being able to produce enough evidence for an indictment, and which now, after almost a decade, has been silently closed for the third time based on precisely that recognition."

Then came the British contribution, consisting of encouragement to the Swedes by the Crown Prosecution Service that the investigation should not be closed, inspiring them not to get "cold feet". (The cold feet eventually came.) The Ecuadorean contribution completed the four-piece set, with the coming to power of a pro-Washington Lenín Moreno. Embassy personnel in London were encouraged to make conditions that less pleasant; surveillance operations were conducted on Assange's guests and meetings.

Melzer, along with a medical team, attended to Assange on May 9, 2019 in Belmarsh, finding a man with "all the symptoms that are typical of persons having been exposed to psychological torture for a prolonged period of time." There was little doubt, in Melzer's mind, that symptoms "already measurable physically, neurologically and cognitively", had been shown.

These calls went unheeded. Melzer, in early November, [accused](#) the UK authorities of showing "outright contempt for Mr Assange's rights and integrity." Despite warnings issued by the rapporteur, "the UK has not undertaken any measures of investigation, prevention and redress required under international law." Melzer's prognosis was bleak. "Unless the UK urgently changes course and alleviates his inhumane situation, Mr Assange's continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life."

This point has been [repeated](#) by Dr. Stephen Frost, a chief figure of the dedicated outfit calling itself Doctors for Assange. "We repeat that it is impossible to assess adequately let alone treat Mr Assange in Belmarsh prison and that he must as a matter of urgency be moved to a university teaching hospital. When will the UK government listen to us?"

The medical degrading of Assange has assumed ever greater importance, suggesting unwavering state complicity. On November 22, over 65 notable medical doctors sent the UK Home Secretary [a note](#) based on Melzer's November 1 findings and Assange's state at the October 21 case management hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court. "It is our opinion that Mr Assange requires urgent expert medical assessment of both his physical and psychological state of health. Any medical treatment indicated should be administered in a properly equipped and expertly staffed university teaching hospital (tertiary care)."

In a [second open letter](#) to the UK Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice dated December 4, the Doctors for Assange collective warned that the UK's "refusal to take the required measures to protect Mr Assange's rights, health and dignity appears [to] be reckless at best and deliberate at worst and, in both cases, unlawfully and unnecessarily exposes Mr Assange to potentially irreversible risks."

The same grounds [were reiterated](#) in a December 16 letter to Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, with a curt reminder that she had "an undeniable legal obligation to protect your citizen against the abuse of his fundamental rights, stemming from US efforts to extradite Mr Assange for journalism and publishing that exposed US war crimes." In the event that Payne took no action on the matter, "people would want to know what you [...] did to prevent his death."

In the [addendum to the open letter](#), further to reiterating the precarious state of Assange's health and medical status as a torture victim, the doctors elaborate on the circular cruelty facing the publisher. An individual deemed "a victim of psychological torture cannot be adequately medically treated while continuing to be held under the very conditions constituting psychological torture, as is currently the case for Julian Assange." Appropriate medical treatment was hardly possible through a prison hospital ward.

A lesson in understanding mental torture is also proffered. "Contrary to popular misconception, the injuries caused by psychological torture are real and extremely serious. The term *psychological torture* is not a synonym for mere hardship, suffering or distress."

At Assange's case management hearing on December 19, restrictions on medical opinion were again implemented; psychiatrist Marco Chiesa and psychologist David Morgan were prevented from attending. Both had been signatories to the spray of open letters. According to Morgan, [he had hoped](#) to "provide some observations about Julian Assange's health, psychologically, and with my colleagues, physically." Instead, it transpired that access was denied, [according to](#) psychologist Lissa Johnson, "despite members of the public offering to give up seats for them."

Cold-shouldering expert opinion can be counted as one of the weapons of the state in punishing whistleblowers and publishers. The State has always made it a bureaucratic imperative to sift the undesirable evidence from the apologetic message. Accepting Assange's condition would be tantamount to admission on the part of UK authorities, urged on by the United States, that intolerable, potentially martyring treatment, has been meted out to a publisher.

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