

# **‘Burned at the Stake’ – The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Demolishes the Fake Claims Targeting Julian Assange**

By [Media Lens](#)

Global Research, February 14, 2020

[Media Lens](#) 13 February 2020

Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

*On the face of it, the task seems almost hopeless. As Tolstoy wrote:*

‘The power of the government is maintained by public opinion, and with this power the government, by means of its organs – its officials, law courts, schools, churches, even the press – can always maintain the public opinion which they need.’ (Leo Tolstoy, ‘Writings on Non-Violence and Civil Disobedience,’ New Society Publishers, 1987, p.111)

Last December, we witnessed the awesome capacity of state-corporate power to manipulate public opinion and undermine a democratic election with a ruthless propaganda campaign smearing Jeremy Corbyn, a passionate anti-racist. The campaign [depicted](#) Corbyn, not just as an anti-semite, but as someone who might ‘reopen Auschwitz’. The truth wasn’t just distorted, it was reversed.

Israeli-born academic and author Jamie Stern-Weiner has [commented](#):

‘no mainstream reporter ever investigated whether the allegations against Labour were true.

‘Where journalists did not reflexively endorse the accusations against Labour, they were content to uncritically relay them alongside the party’s response.

‘Accusations by Jewish communal figures or anti-Corbyn MPs were considered inherently significant, whether or not they were accompanied by supporting evidence.’

Careful, credible analysis that made a nonsense of the claims [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) was simply ignored.

Vested interests may appear to hold all the cards – they work hard to give that impression – but this is only an appearance. The very fact that they work so relentlessly to shape public opinion indicates the precarious nature of their dominance.

The problem is inherent, structural – a ‘democratic’ society that subordinates the needs of the many to the needs of the few is a society based on lies. Propaganda obfuscating those

lies can be disseminated endlessly, day and night, but it will always be vulnerable to individuals and groups with genuine expertise motivated by genuine concern for others. As the Buddhist sage Je Gampopa commented:

‘Even a single virtuous act overcomes many evils... a small good action can overcome a great wrong; it is highly efficient.’ (Gampopa, ‘Gems of Dharma, Jewels of Freedom,’ Altea, 1994, p.135)

Following in the footsteps of senior UN officials like Denis Halliday, Hans von Sponeck and Scott Ritter – who, between them, demolished many of the deceptions ‘justifying’ the genocidal 1990s US-UK sanctions regime in Iraq and the 2003 war of aggression on Iraq – consider the ‘highly efficient’ [comments](#) made to the Swiss magazine, Republik, by Nils Melzer on Julian Assange:

‘Four democratic countries joined forces – the U.S., Ecuador, Sweden and the UK – to leverage their power to portray one man as a monster so that he could later be burned at the stake without any outcry. The case is a huge scandal and represents the failure of Western rule of law. If Julian Assange is convicted, it will be a death sentence for freedom of the press.’

The problem for the propaganda system targeting Assange is that Melzer is not just someone blogging on the internet; he is the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. In addition, he is a professor of international law at the University of Glasgow and holds the Human Rights Chair at the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in Switzerland, where he has been teaching since 2009, including as the Swiss Chair of International Humanitarian Law (2011–2013). Melzer even speaks fluent Swedish. In other words, it is hard to imagine anyone better qualified to comment on the Assange case.

Melzer describes how, on August 20, 2010, a headline appeared on the front page of Expressen, a leading Swedish tabloid, declaring that Julian Assange was suspected of having committed two rapes. Melzer describes his reaction on investigating these claims:

‘I speak fluent Swedish and was thus able to read all of the original documents. I could hardly believe my eyes: According to the testimony of the woman in question, a rape had never even taken place at all. And not only that: The woman’s testimony was later changed by the Stockholm police without her involvement in order to somehow make it sound like a possible rape. I have all the documents in my possession, the emails, the text messages.’

The order of events is extraordinary and outrageous:

‘A woman walks into a police station. She doesn’t want to file a complaint but wants to demand an HIV test. The police then decide that this could be a case of rape and a matter for public prosecutors. The woman refuses to go along with that version of events and then goes home and writes a friend that it wasn’t her intention, but the police want to “get their hands on” Assange. Two hours later, the case is in the newspaper. As we know today, public prosecutors leaked it to the press – and they did so without even inviting Assange to make a statement. And the second woman, who had allegedly been raped according to the Aug. 20 headline, was only questioned on Aug. 21.’

As Melzer says, this behaviour demonstrated the 'willful malevolence of the authorities'. Melzer leaves no doubt about the real significance of the rape claims:

'Imagine a dark room. Suddenly, someone shines a light on the elephant in the room – on war criminals, on corruption. Assange is the man with the spotlight. The governments are briefly in shock, but then they turn the spotlight around with accusations of rape. It is a classic maneuver when it comes to manipulating public opinion. The elephant once again disappears into the darkness, behind the spotlight. And Assange becomes the focus of attention instead, and we start talking about whether Assange is skateboarding in the embassy or whether he is feeding his cat correctly.'

The goal:

'A show trial is to be used to make an example of Julian Assange. The point is to intimidate other journalists. Intimidation, by the way, is one of the primary purposes for the use of torture around the world. The message to all of us is: This is what will happen to you if you emulate the Wikileaks model.'

It is very much to Melzer's credit that he admits that he was himself initially taken in by the propaganda campaign. He reveals that, in December 2018, he was asked by Assange's lawyers to intervene. He declined:

'I was overloaded with other petitions and wasn't really familiar with the case. My impression, largely influenced by the media, was also colored by the prejudice that Julian Assange was somehow guilty and that he wanted to manipulate me.'

After Assange's lawyers made a second request in March 2019, Melzer felt that that 'my professional integrity demanded that I at least take a look at the material'. The result:

'It quickly became clear to me that something was wrong.'

With unprecedented clarity, Melzer unpacks the meaning of the many bizarre twists and turns in the political persecution of Assange. Was it true, as so many journalists claim, that Assange sought asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy to evade Swedish justice? Melzer comments:

'The [Assange] lawyers say that during the nearly seven years in which Assange lived in the Ecuadorian Embassy, they made over 30 offers to arrange for Assange to visit Sweden – in exchange for a guarantee that he would not be extradited to the U.S. The Swedes declined to provide such a guarantee by arguing that the U.S. had not made a formal request for extradition.'

Was this standard practice?

'Such diplomatic assurances are a routine international practice... I say this on the strength of all of my experience behind the scenes of standard

international practice: If a country refuses to provide such a diplomatic assurance, then all doubts about the good intentions of the country in question are justified. Why shouldn't Sweden provide such assurances? From a legal perspective, after all, the U.S. has absolutely nothing to do with Swedish sex offense proceedings.'

Melzer was asked if it was normal, or legally acceptable, for Swedish authorities to travel abroad for such an interrogation:

'For exactly these kinds of judiciary issues, there is a cooperation treaty between the United Kingdom and Sweden, which foresees that Swedish officials can travel to the UK, or vice versa, to conduct interrogations or that such questioning can take place via video link. During the period of time in question, such questioning between Sweden and England took place in 44 other cases. It was only in Julian Assange's case that Sweden insisted that it was essential for him to appear in person.'

Melzer's conclusion:

'From my perspective, Sweden very clearly acted in bad faith. Had they acted in good faith, there would have been no reason to refuse to answer my questions. The same holds true for the British: Following my visit to Assange in May 2019, they took six months to answer me - in a single-page letter, which was primarily limited to rejecting all accusations of torture and all inconsistencies in the legal proceedings. If you're going to play games like that, then what's the point of my mandate? I am the Special Rapporteur on Torture for the United Nations. I have a mandate to ask clear questions and to demand answers.'

He adds:

'There is only a single explanation for everything - for the refusal to grant diplomatic assurances, for the refusal to question him in London: They wanted to apprehend him so they could extradite him to the U.S. The number of breaches of law that accumulated in Sweden within just a few weeks during the preliminary criminal investigation is simply grotesque.'

The media version was rather different. In 2012, the Guardian's Laura Barton [wrote](#) of Assange and the Ecuadorian embassy:

'Poor Julian. It can't be easy to be confined to one building, no matter how prestigious the postcode... And so we decided to assemble a collection of items that Assange might be missing, and deliver them.'

A photograph showed an unsmiling Barton delivering a Guardian hamper to their bete noire at the Ecuadorian embassy:

'we packed our hamper with a selection of edible items not native to Ecuador - Kellogg's cornflakes fortified with vitamin D to compensate for the lack of sunlight in Assange's life, a jar of Vegemite (as an antipodean, Julian was likely

to spurn Marmite), a packet of chocolate-chip cookies, and a punnet of clementines.

'Recalling that Bill Keller, editor of the New York Times, once remarked upon Assange's questionable hygiene and the fact he wore "filthy white socks" we added three pairs of crisp, white sports socks and a shower gel in the "feelgood fragrance of eucalyptus and citrus oils" that promised to be both "revitalizing" and "refreshing."'

We have documented many similar examples of this relentless, ferocious and frankly weird corporate media mockery of Assange [here](#) and [here](#).

Assange is currently being held in London's Belmarsh prison prior to a hearing that will determine if he is to be extradited to the US. He has already served a 50-week sentence for skipping bail. Melzer comments on this sentence:

'It is obvious that what we are dealing with here is political persecution. In Britain, bail violations seldom lead to prison sentences – they are generally subject only to fines. Assange, by contrast, was sentenced in summary proceedings to 50 weeks in a maximum-security prison – clearly a disproportionate penalty that had only a single purpose: Holding Assange long enough for the U.S. to prepare their espionage case against him.'

A US grand jury has indicted Assange on 18 charges – 17 of which fall under the US Espionage Act – around conspiracy to receive, obtain and disclose classified diplomatic and military documents. Melzer explains why Assange has no chance of receiving justice in the US:

'He will not receive a trial consistent with the rule of law. That's another reason why his extradition shouldn't be allowed. Assange will receive a trial-by-jury in Alexandria, Virginia – the notorious "Espionage Court" where the U.S. tries all national security cases. The choice of location is not by coincidence, because the jury members must be chosen in proportion to the local population, and 85 percent of Alexandria residents work in the national security community – at the CIA, the NSA, the Defense Department and the State Department. When people are tried for harming national security in front of a jury like that, the verdict is clear from the very beginning. The cases are always tried in front of the same judge behind closed doors and on the strength of classified evidence. Nobody has ever been acquitted there in a case like that. The result being that most defendants reach a settlement, in which they admit to partial guilt so as to receive a milder sentence.'

Meanwhile, Assange's physical condition has continued to deteriorate:

'I visited Assange in his cell in London in May 2019 together with two experienced, widely respected doctors who are specialized in the forensic and psychological examination of torture victims. The diagnosis arrived at by the two doctors was clear: Julian Assange displays the typical symptoms of psychological torture. If he doesn't receive protection soon, a rapid deterioration of his health is likely, and death could be one outcome.'

Melzer's conclusions are utterly damning:

'We have to stop believing that there was really an interest in leading an investigation into a sexual offense. What Wikileaks did is a threat to the political elite in the U.S., Britain, France and Russia in equal measure. Wikileaks publishes secret state information - they are opposed to classification. And in a world, even in so-called mature democracies, where secrecy has become rampant, that is seen as a fundamental threat.'

He adds:

'We give countries power and delegate it to governments - but in return, they must be held accountable for how they exercise that power. If we don't demand that they be held accountable, we will lose our rights sooner or later. Humans are not democratic by their nature. Power corrupts if it is not monitored. Corruption is the result if we do not insist that power be monitored.'

His final thoughts are an urgent warning to us all:

'I have seen lots of horrors and violence and have seen how quickly peaceful countries like Yugoslavia or Rwanda can transform into infernos. At the roots of such developments are always a lack of transparency and unbridled political or economic power combined with the naivete, indifference and malleability of the population. Suddenly, that which always happened to the other - unpunished torture, rape, expulsion and murder - can just as easily happen to us or our children. And nobody will care. I can promise you that.'

We [tweeted](#) the Guardian editor and a number of key Guardian journalists who have commented on Assange:

'For the first time, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, speaks in detail about the explosive findings of his investigation into the case of Julian Assange. Please read and comment @KathViner @MarinaHyde @suzanne\_moore @GeorgeMonbiot @HadleyFreeman @OwenJones84'

We also [tweeted](#):

'As @NilsMelzer says, a failure to respond to his findings indicates a lack of good faith. Please respond @KathViner @MarinaHyde @suzanne\_moore @GeorgeMonbiot @HadleyFreeman @OwenJones84'

We also [wrote](#) to Ash Sarkar, contributing editor at Novara Media, who described Assange on Twitter as 'a definite creep, a probable rapist, a conspiracist whackjob':

'Hi @AyoCaesar, will you please respond to these comments from @NilsMelzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, on attempts to portray Julian Assange 'as a monster so that he could later be burned at the stake without any outcry'? @novaramedia @AaronBastani'

We received no answer from any of the journalists contacted (to be fair to Monbiot and Jones, having blocked us on Twitter for sending them polite, rational challenges, they may not have seen our tweet).

Despite the credibility and integrity of the source, and the obvious newsworthiness of the issue, our ProQuest database search finds that Nils Melzer and his comments published in Republik on 31 January have not been mentioned in any US or UK media outlet.

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