

# UN report shines light on psychological torture

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Detainees in the Camp 6 detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, the US naval base in Cuba, on which WikiLeaks released information said to indicate psychological torture [File photo: May 31, 2009/Brennan Linsley/Pool/Reuters]

## News|Human Rights

UN expert outlines comprehensive definition of what constitutes psychological torture.

A new United Nations report has set out a comprehensive definition of psychological torture for the first time.

An advance, unedited version of the report – titled Torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment – which was released late on Monday, gives a comprehensive legal framework of the concept.

The report was prepared by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, a professor of international human rights law at the Geneva Academy of International Law, who says this is the “first time a UN special rapporteur systematically addresses the topic of psychological torture”.

To date, advocacy on and understanding of psychological treatment has been “fragmented and inadequate”, he added.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, he said that, while psychological torture has been recognised as a distinct concept from physical torture for a long time, “many governments do not recognise psychological torture as torture”.

As part of his research for the report, Melzer and a medical team visited Julian Assange in May 2019 while he was detained in Belmarsh prison in London in order to assess his health and conditions of detention.

Melzer is of the view that Assange, who as head of WikiLeaks uncovered torture himself, has experienced torture and could face further torture if extradited to the United States.

The medical team also assessed risks of torture or ill-treatment arising from Assange’s possible extradition to the US.

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[Assange extradition hearing gets underway in London \(2:57\)](#)

The report will be presented to the Human Rights Council at its annual meeting in March.

## **What is psychological torture?**

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Melzer believes the issue of psychological torture, which falls under his mandate as special rapporteur, has long been neglected by the international community.

The report defines psychological torture as including all methods and circumstances that purposefully inflict, or intend to inflict, severe mental pain and suffering. Methods include the purposeful infliction of fear, depriving someone of control over their lives and disrupting a victim's self-determination and autonomy.

Psychological torture directly targets psychological needs such as security, self-determination, dignity, social rapport and communal trust.

According to Melzer, to ensure the adequate implementation of the prohibition of torture, its interpretation should evolve with developments in technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and biomedical sciences.