

Julian Assange's Nightmarish Future

The *WikiLeaks* publisher is in a maximum-security prison that has been called the UK's Guantanamo Bay, Elizabeth Vos reports.

By [Elizabeth Vos](#)

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While Julian Assange waits for what comes next – sentencing on skipping bail in England and a U.S. extradition request – he is being held in a maximum-security prison in London that has been called the [“UK's Guantanamo Bay”](#) and has been used to [detain alleged terrorists](#), sometimes [indefinitely](#).

The reputation of [HM Prison Belmarsh](#) raises natural concerns about the wellbeing of the *WikiLeaks* publisher there.

“While many prisoners at Belmarsh say it's difficult to see a doctor or a nurse, these services are available at the facility,” reports *Bloomberg News*, regarding the possibility of Assange receiving overdue medical attention.

Her Majesty's Prison Belmarsh had been used to detain high-profile national security prisoners indefinitely without charge under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act of 2001, passed six weeks after 9/11, until the House of Lords ruled it violated the British [Human Rights Act](#).

Assange was found [guilty](#) on Thursday of skipping bail. On May 2 he is scheduled to participate in a court hearing via video link on the U.S. extradition request.

Assange's name now tops the alphabetical [roster](#) of notables who have done time at Belmarsh or who are still there. The list includes notorious gangsters, serial killers and drug traffickers. Ronnie Biggs of the 1963 Great Train Robbery was imprisoned there. Others are subjects of high-profile scandal, such as Richard Tomlinson, imprisoned for six months in 1997 after he gave a synopsis of a proposed book detailing his career with MI6 to an Australian publisher. Andy Coulson, a former press secretary to Prime Minister David Cameron, was imprisoned for a few months for the phone hacking scandal that engulfed *News of the World* while he was editor there.

One mainstay of the inmate population are convicted terrorists. Abu Hamza al-Masri, an Egyptian cleric, was at Belmarsh until his extradition to the United States where he is serving life in prison on 11 counts of terrorism. Rams Mohammed, Muktar Said Ibrahim and Yasin Hassan Omar were were all incarcerated there for their roles in the 2005 attempted bombings of the London underground. Anjou Choudhry completed his sentence at Belmarsh for promoting the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant](#). Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale are identified as Islamic terrorists convicted of the murder of British soldier [Lee Rigby in London](#).

There is legitimate concern about how Assange will fare inside Belmarsh. A 2018 survey by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons found that "91 percent of men said they had problems

when they arrived at Belmarsh, which was higher than at other local prisons and more than at our last inspection," [Business Insider](#) reported.

In 2009, the same prison authority had found "[extremely high](#)" amount of force used to control inmates at the prison.

Detainees were "unable to see the intelligence evidence against them and are confined to their cells for up to 22 hours a day. Their solicitors say they have been 'entombed in concrete,' [BBC](#) reported in 2004.

The 2018 chief inspector's report said the prison contains a "High Security Unit (HSU) within the already-high-security premises, which the report described as a 'prison within a prison.'" The report went on to state that:

"The role of the high security unit (HSU) remained unclear. We were told it was for high risk category A prisoners, but such men are held in main locations in other high security prisons and we did not understand why the approach was different at Belmarsh. We noted that two of the men held were only standard risk category A prisoners and that in December 2017 two men from the main prison had been held in the HSU segregation unit. The conditions and the regime in the HSU provided prisoners with an intense custodial experience in which they could exercise little self-determination, and we were concerned that prisoners could be located there without any oversight process or redress."

Describing the use of solitary confinement, the chief inspector's report found: "Conditions in the unit were

reasonable, but some prisoners could not have a shower or exercise every day. Those who could only be unlocked in the presence of several officers were most affected.” The report repeatedly described concerns that arose due to staff shortages, and added in a separate section: “We remained concerned about this use of designated cells, where men were held in prolonged solitary confinement on an impoverished regime.”

Individual accounts from former Belmarsh inmates published by CAGE, an advocacy group against human rights abuses that occurred as a result of the “war on Terror,” described their experiences. An anonymous prisoner who was later acquitted said: “The prison system is run in such a way as to humiliate and degrade the inmate as much as possible. The process of dehumanisation starts immediately.” In the wake of Assange’s imprisonment, CAGE published a statement, saying in part: “The UK is doing the U.S.’s dirty work by persecuting a man who exposed war crimes.”

Vigils and protests in support of Assange were held outside the prison on April 14 and April 15.

The last time Assange was held in a British prison, in 2010, he says that he was given food containing metal objects that severely damaged a tooth. This was at London’s HM Prison Wandsworth. The incident caused serious injury and he did not receive proper medical treatment during the six and a half years of his confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy. A medical report published by *WikiLeaks* in 2015 describes Assange’s version of the event:

Mr. Assange reports that the broken tooth (UR4) was initially fractured when he was in the SCU at Wandsworth Prison in December 2010. Mr. Assange showed me contemporaneous Wandsworth prison reports regarding Mr. Assange's receiving the attention of a dentist after a hard object had broken his upper first premolar (UR4). (Mr. Assange reports that the piece of fractured tooth disappeared from Mr. Assange's cell while he was in the showers; immediately after Mr. Assange complained to CSU staff about the object in his food). Mr. Assange says that the episode not only caused physical pain and distress, but also, in conjunction with the segregation, caused him to feel targeted and persecuted. A series of dental complications have resulted from the fracture.

'This is Unlawful, I'm Not Leaving'

Uniformed British police officers, aided by what appeared to be plain-clothes secret police, had entered the embassy on Thursday morning when the Ecuadorian ambassador "indicated he was preparing to serve upon Mr Assange documentation revoking his asylum," attorney James Hines, Queens Counsel, who represented the U.S. government, told the court during Assange's bail-skipping hearing. *The Guardian* quoted Hines as later telling the court that day:

"Officers tried to introduce themselves to him in order to execute the arrest warrant before he barged past them, attempting to return to his private room.

"He was eventually arrested at 10.15 am. He resisted that arrest, claiming 'this is unlawful' and he had to be restrained.

"Officers were struggling to handcuff him. They received assistance from other officers outside and he was handcuffed saying, 'this is unlawful, I'm not leaving'.

"He was in fact lifted into the police van outside the embassy and taken to West End Central police station."

Assange was likely referring to the 1951 Convention on Refugees that forbids a nation that has granted someone asylum from returning that person to a country where the asylee is likely to be persecuted.

Police were then filmed forcibly dragging the handcuffed, physically ill Assange from the steps of the embassy. During the arrest, Assange was seen holding a copy of Gore Vidal's "The History of the National Security State," as he shouted: "The UK must resist this...the UK must resist."

Fears of U.S. Mistreatment

In view of then CIA Director Mike Pompeo's comparison of *WikiLeaks* (46:00 minutes into the above video) with Al Qaeda, while calling it a "non-state hostile intelligence service," concerns are mounting in Assange's camp about the harsh treatment he may face by British, and if he's extradited, U.S. authorities.

In the hours following the arrest, Reuters reported: "Lawyers for Assange said he may risk torture and his life would be in danger if he were to be extradited to the United States."

On the same day, human-rights organizations and press-freedom advocates argued against the prosecution of the *WikiLeaks* founder. These groups included the ACLU, The Freedom of the Press Foundation, the Center for Investigative Journalism, Amnesty Ireland, Committee To Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the National Union of Journalists, the The Knight First Amendment Institute and Digital Rights Watch.

The Intercept's [Glenn Greenwald](#) was quick to note the widespread mischaracterization of the charge against Assange as one of “hacking,” writing that the charging document and related materials indicate Assange may have attempted to help Chelsea Manning, a U.S. Army whistleblower then known as Bradley Manning, use a different username to access classified material she was legally allowed to access at the time. In other words, Greenwald says Assange is charged with helping a source preserve anonymity, a common practice by investigative reporters.

Greenwald also [points out](#) that this action has been on public record since 2011, but that U.S. authorities under the Obama administration refused to use it as a basis of prosecution due to the chill it could put on press freedom.

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UN Visitor

The UN independent expert on the right to privacy, [Joe Cannataci](#), issued a statement following Assange's arrest. “This will not stop my efforts to assess Mr. Assange's claims that his privacy has been violated,” he was quoted by the United Nations' [news service](#). “All it means is that, instead of visiting Mr. Assange and speaking to him at the Embassy. I intend to visit him and speak to him wherever he may be detained.”

[Shortly before Assange's expulsion](#), UN Special Rapporteur on Torture [Nils Melzer](#) expressed alarm at reports that an arrest was imminent. If extradited, Melzer said Assange

could be exposed to “a real risk of serious violations of his human rights, including his freedom of expression, his right to a fair trial, and the prohibition of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Assange’s supporters likewise fear for his treatment in Belmarsh.

[Matthew Hoh](#), a senior fellow with the Center for International Policy and a former Marine, visited Assange at the embassy. He worries about the mistreatment Assange might face in custody. He believes, “When they get their hands on him, they will do things that will be criminal, it will be immoral, it will be torture,” he said during an online [Unity4J](#) vigil held days before Assange’s expulsion.

The online [Assange vigils](#) are co-hosted by *Consortium News* and have been held for over a year, to maintain public awareness about Assange after Ecuador withdrew his internet access.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges, during a [Unity4J panel](#), offered his fear of what he believes will happen to Assange if he is extradited to the United States :

“He will have a hood over his head, he will be shackled and chained, he’ll be put on a black flight, he will be taken to the U.S., put into solitary confinement – which is a form of torture, it is how people break, and often break very quickly. He will be relentlessly interrogated, there will be all sorts of psychological techniques – it will be very hot in his cell and then very cold. They will constantly wake him every few hours so he will be sleep

deprived. They will maybe even put him into a dry cell, where there is no water, so he will have to ask for water to go to the bathroom or wash his hands.”

Hedges continued:

“Everyone has a breaking point, and they will attempt to psychologically destroy him, and we have seen with Guantanamo that several of these detainees, most of whom were just sold to the U.S. by warlords in Afghanistan or Pakistan, are emotionally crippled for life. It will be scientific torture. I used to cover the Stasi state in East Germany, and the joke in the Stasi state was that the Gestapo broke bones and the Stasi break minds, and that’s what they’ll do. That’s what will happen. I’ve seen it with Muslims who have been entrapped in the U.S. in so-called terrorism plots, and by the time they shuffle into court, they are a zombie.”

Hedges added: “There will be a veneer of legality: it will be the figment of law. But he will be treated like all of the people who have been disappeared into that system from around the world.”

Micol Savia, representative of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers at the United Nations, drew on Chelsea Manning’s experience of torture in U.S. custody when raising concern that Assange may be likewise abused, writing via Twitter:

“#Assange’s eventual extradition to the US would expose him to a substantive risk of human rights violations. The

likely treatment he would receive can easily be inferred from the unjust trial and detention of [Chelsea Manning] @xchelsea, who faced life in prison and was subjected to torture.”

Elizabeth Vos is a freelance reporter and regular contributor to *Consortium News*. She co-hosts the #Unity4J online vigil.

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