

Interview - Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Written by E-International Relations

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Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a political analyst, journalist and co-author of *The Kurds of Northern Syria*. He currently writes for *Kurdistan 24* and has also written for the Kurdish daily *Rudaw*, *Al-Monitor*, *Middle East Eye*, a variety of think tank publications such as the Washington Institute, the Jamestown Foundation, Carnegie Endowment, the Atlantic Council, and others. He has spent time living in Iraqi Kurdistan and has also conducted field research in northern Syria. Van Wilgenburg completed a Masters in Kurdish Studies at the University of Exeter and prior to this a Masters in Conflict Studies at Utrecht University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

For me personally the most exciting research in journalism is field research-based work related to the Kurds. From time to time, there are some reports featuring on the ground interviews published by think tanks or journalists, but sadly many research papers and academic papers are published without such interviews. This is often the result of universities or other institutions preventing their students or researchers from doing fieldwork due to security restrictions and other problems with access. However, there are some exceptions. For instance, since 2019 the Rojava Information Centre has been providing a lot of information from the ground to journalists and researchers. One of their most recent reports dealt with the political, humanitarian and security outcome of Turkey's October 2019 invasion of northeast Syria. The Middle East Directions Programme provides multidisciplinary research on the Middle East and North Africa and they have published very good reports on the situation in Afrin, Deir ar Zour and northeast Syria since the Turkish invasion. There have also been a number of other reports such as a field survey of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters by Dr. Amy Holmes and a report on al-Hol camp by Elizabeth Tsurkov. The Crisis Group has published various reports on northern Syria and the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General also publishes very good quarterly reports on Operation Inherent Resolve to combat ISIS, summarising key events in both Iraq and Syria. Dr Anne Speckhard's International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism has also produced many articles on ISIS foreign fighters and families in Syria. These are just some examples. But now with COVID-19 and travel restrictions, we will see less field research reports coming out and less media focus on northeast Syria and the Kurds in general.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

It is very difficult to see developments on the ground when you have not visited a country. The situation on the ground in Iraq and Syria is much more complex and dangerous from time to time, when compared with sitting and writing about the Kurds from the Netherlands. I first came to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 2009 and visited northern Syria (Rojava) in 2013. I had already been writing about the Kurds from a young age, including the Syrian Kurds prior to the Syrian civil war. I now live in Erbil, in the KRI, so my way of thinking has changed a lot since I was a young student when the information I received was either from Kurds living in the Netherlands or from the internet. During the war against ISIS since 2014, the Kurdish issue started gaining much more attention in the media, since Kurds played such a big role in fighting ISIS in the region. This did not change my thinking, but it did result in a lot of changes to my work due to the increased interest in the Kurds in general. Kurds (and political parties) from Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey all played significant roles against ISIS.

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To what extent are you able to apply the knowledge and skills you developed during your post-graduate studies in your current role as a journalist? Have your chosen subjects (Kurdish Studies and Conflict Studies) helped you to progress in your career?

I first wrote about the Kurds for a final project for history during Secondary School. I didn't have much academic knowledge of the Middle East. Conflict Studies definitely helped a lot to learn how to understand conflicts and the different theories on conflict resolution, transformation and especially the causes of conflict. With Conflict Studies you learn a lot about different conflicts in the world, but also a deeper theoretical understanding of conflict, which definitely helps and goes much deeper than just journalism, which is often more descriptive and just focuses on current events. My knowledge really deepened a lot when I carried out field research for my Conflict Studies MA thesis in Kirkuk on competition between Arabic and Kurdish political actors and political mobilisation.

When I started with the Kurdish Studies MA programme, I already knew a lot about Kurdish history, politics, religions and culture, but I decided to do the programme to learn the Kurdish dialects (Sorani and Kurmanci). I am still not satisfied with my Kurdish language skills, but I can speak far more Kurdish than I did before. I definitely think the Kurdish Studies programme is a good background for people that want to learn about the Kurds and want to do research on the Kurds either as a journalist or academic. There are not many non-Kurdish researchers working in the Middle East that know Kurdish, so most of the time the focus is on Arabic, Turkish or Persian.

As a reporter for Kurdistan 24, you contribute articles covering a range of subjects including the conflict in northeast Syria. The conflict in this region is characterised by a range of competing narratives and the involvement of multiple actors. What difficulties do you face in verifying information in such a complex and fast changing environment?

The biggest challenge is verifying information from areas occupied by Turkey in Syria, such as Afrin, Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad since it's almost impossible to visit those areas. The number of reporters that travel to these areas is very limited, which is not the case for reporters that travel to areas in the northeast controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF forces. Kurds living in Afrin or other civilians living in Turkish occupied areas are often afraid to talk to the media for fear of repercussions. Even Kurdish families from Afrin who have left fear talking over WhatsApp to their own relatives about politics and often avoid any political talk. Also in Syria itself many civilians are afraid to talk fearing repercussions, no matter whether it's in Kobani or Raqqa. Many civilians also travel through different areas either under the control of the SDF, the regime or Turkish-backed groups. They prefer not to talk to the media at all to avoid getting into trouble with any of the different factions. I cover the Kurds in Syria, but also the Kurds living in Turkey and Iran. These are very difficult areas to cover because there is almost no political freedom for Kurds in Iran and in Turkey there used to be more political space in the past, but now thousands of Kurds in Turkey are in jail. In both Turkey and Iran, Kurds fear talking to the media and there are many cases of censorship or pressure by the state authorities. In Iran, Kurdish political prisoners are executed from time to time.

You have previously discussed the difficulties faced by journalists covering Kurdish affairs, including bans from travelling to certain countries. Is it possible for journalists to strike a balance between objective reporting (with the risk of less access) or reporting in a way which is more favourable to the authorities (but with the potential for greater access)?

I think objective reporting on the Kurdish issue in Turkey or in Iran without losing access is almost impossible in some cases. In Turkey it became more difficult to report on the Kurdish issue after the Kurdish-Turkish peace process failed in July 2015 and after the failed Turkish military coup in 2016. During the peace process, reporting was a bit easier and you even saw some reporters of the Turkish state media reporting on a Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) press conference on the peace process in the mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. After the peace process broke down and following the attempted coup, everything related to the Kurds became a security issue again. As a result, many reporters were denied entry or deported for reporting on Kurdish issues, such as Rod Nordland from the New York Times or Jiyar Gol from the BBC. Other reporters were relocated before they could get deported or banned. From time to time there are still some reports on the Kurdish issue, such as the coverage of the killing of Barış Çakan, a Kurd, in Ankara.

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You almost never see any reports in the international press about the Kurds in Iran. There was not a lot of coverage when Iranian missiles hit the Iranian Kurdish opposition parties based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in September 2018, in contrast to the coverage when missiles launched from Iran targeted US troops two years later. Nevertheless, there are a number of Kurdish human rights organisations reporting on human rights violations. But even though the Trump administration is very hostile towards the Iranian government, there has not been much interest in the Kurds in Iran from the US media or even from the US administration. In general, the reports that come out from the local media are mostly about the executions of Kurdish political or normal prisoners, the killing of Kurdish porters (known as Kolbars) and the arrest or detention of Kurds. Dr Martin van Bruinessen, one of the most renowned academic experts on the Kurds, in a recent review of a book by Dr Michael Gunter noted that “due to difficulty of access, there has been no recent field research in Turkish or Iranian Kurdistan, whereas the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and to a lesser extent Rojava (Syria) have allowed researchers freedom of movement.”

The Rojava region of northeast Syria has gained significant autonomy in the context of the Syrian Civil War. What do you believe are the likely long term prospects for the region in a future post-war political settlement?

It's very difficult to predict the future. But there are several possible scenarios: 1) There could be another Turkish military intervention, which would lead to the further ethnic displacement and cleansing of Kurds on the Syrian-Turkish border. 2) The Kurds could get a political settlement or deal with Damascus for limited autonomy (not dependant on a US withdrawal or new Turkish attack), which seems unlikely at the moment. 3) The Kurds could get into a conflict with Damascus and Russia in the future, but this depends also on the US presence in Hasakah and Deir ar Zour. 4) The US could pull out, forcing the Kurds to get a weak deal with Damascus or face further Turkish attacks. Another possibility is that the situation stays a frozen conflict for the coming years, with the US staying in the area and the Kurdish-led forces continuing to control and lead a local administration in the northeast. Or a mix of all of these scenarios. So far, Damascus has won several military victories, but it is in a more difficult position due to economic sanctions and a bad economy (the Syrian government is not able to stop the freefall of the Syrian currency).

How far is there an alignment between the diplomatic goals of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Rojava region of north eastern Syria? What are the main obstacles for cooperation between the two entities?

There was never an ambition to unite the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria, but in the past there were always various Iraqi Kurdish parties with their own interests in Syria and with different political relationships with Damascus. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq backs the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria. In 2012 and 2014 there were Kurdish power-sharing agreements between the KNC and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) or Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) in Syria, but they were never implemented on the ground. The KNC follows a more traditional Kurdish nationalist model, similar to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, going back to when the Syrian Kurds created the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S) in 1957 inspired by Mullah Mustafa Barzani. However, the Barzani movement faced competition after the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan moved to Syria and lived there in the 1980s and 1990s until a Turkish-Syrian agreement in 1998. The PYD follows a more multi-ethnic administration model following the ideology of a *democratic nation* of Abdullah Ocalan, and became the dominant actor on the ground since the establishment of the People's Protection Units (YPG) in 2012.

There were still attempts to unite these two main Kurdish factions, but it was complicated due to ideological differences and political competition. Turkey also opposed Kurdish unity between the KNC and PYD, since it views the PYD as a proxy of its enemy the PKK and therefore feared a Kurdish unity deal would give the PYD more legitimacy. Due to the political differences and competition there were often tensions between the PYD and the KNC/KDP (KRG). This led to arrests and the expulsion of KNC politicians, the KRG shutting down the border and also the imposition restrictions on PYD officials in the Kurdistan region. However, in late 2016 and 2017 relations slightly improved due to American influence, with the US needing the support of Syrian Kurds against ISIS.

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After Turkey opposed the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017 and attacked Afrin in January 2018, relations between the factions improved, with the KDP allowing delegations to go to Afrin and the KNC and PYD both able to use the Semalka border crossing for travel. Also during Turkey's cross-border attack in October 2019, relations improved further for various reasons, including the fact that the KRG did not want another influx of thousands of Syrian Kurds into their territory and demographic changes in Syria. Nevertheless, ideological differences remain and despite a new Kurdish unity initiative by the SDF Commander-in-Chief General Mazloum Abdi leading to a more positive dialogue, there is so far no agreement yet to share power in Syria. Although the KNC and PYD both believe in a decentralised or federal Syria, the problem of ideological and political differences remains and they therefore have difficulties in sharing power or making concessions to each other. For instance, the KNC is part of the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition and Turkey is heavily opposed to a Kurdish unity deal. Furthermore, the PYD says it does not accept the creation of two military forces suggesting it could lead to a civil war like the one fought by Iraqi Kurds in the 1990s, by allowing KNC-linked Rojava Peshmerga to come back to Syria.

In response to a call of the UN Secretary General, French President Emmanuel Macron has proposed a worldwide military truce amid the coronavirus pandemic, a proposal which you have noted is supported by the Kurdish dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). How realistic is it to expect the global spread of the virus, and proposals such as that put forward by Macron, to have a significant impact on events on the ground in Syria?

There were already ceasefire deals in Idlib between Russia and Turkey in March 2020, and a separate US-Turkish, Russian-Turkish ceasefire deal for the northeast in October 2019. There are from time to time on-going skirmishes between the SDF and Turkish-backed groups or bomb attacks and violence in SDF-held or Turkish-held areas. There is no major fighting, as in early October 2019, but there are always tensions and smaller levels of violence. However, many in Syria expect that at some point violence could break out again between the Syrian government and Syrian rebel groups, or between Turkey and the SDF, once the COVID-19 threat is reduced or even before that point.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Learn as many local languages as possible, do not rely only on secondary sources and try to do field work (but with careful security preparations). Also, bear in mind the various restrictions in countries where you want to do research and how this may impact your future or current research. Always take into consideration the security of your (civilian) sources since many can face repercussions just for meeting foreign researchers.