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Interview – Georgi Engelbrecht

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Georgi Engelbrecht joined International Crisis Group as Senior Analyst at the end of 2019. Before that he was assigned with the International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao, Philippines representing the European Union, where he served as focal point for International Humanitarian Law/Human Rights. Apart from his work in the Philippines, he had brief assignments for NGOs in Morocco and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the United Nations in Switzerland. He holds Master's degrees in International Law from the University of Turin and in Diplomatic Studies from the University of Malta.

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

I think there are several issues that we see at the moment around the globe that deserve attention. Perhaps the notion of peace processes – why some succeed, some fail – remains very interesting and relevant. The Bangsamoro in the Southern Philippines has been a good example for a long-standing conflict and decades of negotiations that finally seem to come to an end. Yet, despite the fact that the Comprehensive Agreement in 2014 was lauded by so many observers, the following years really show that the devil lies in the details, and most importantly, implementation matters. Another example could be the so-far unfortunately failed or failing peace process with the communists in the Philippines. President Duterte seemed close to a deal in 2017, but then the peace talks broke down and everything went back to square one. I think we can also take some lessons from that process. The Bangsamoro did learn from the past, just look at the 2008 Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD) between the Philippine military and some renegade Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) units. In retrospect, both the government and the MILF changed some of their assertions and ideas before reaching a compromise in the following years. I believe the Philippine experience is an important one, globally speaking. Apart from Bangsamoro there was also the Colombian experience with its peace deal, but the peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has also not been very smooth lately. So, we go back to the hard questions about peace processes: What works? How exactly does it or does not work? What are the roles of international mediators/players? How can communities, women, and youth be involved? I think two great books that captured the dilemmas in peacebuilding are *A Savage Order* by Rachel Kleinfeld and Severine Autesserre's *The Frontlines of Peace*.

Still looking at internal conflict, we have the same questions that prompt debate among researchers and academics, as well as those in the field and practitioners in NGOs or the UN. Why does conflict start? Why do some places see a lot of violence, and others less so? What makes people give up their guns? There is an immense variety of approaches and lenses to tackle these questions. There are broader general studies that tend to propose ideas and test hypotheses, and then we have specific updates or case studies from certain regions that usually fall under “area studies”. Not to mention that everyday work in and around conflict also results in important findings, best practices and conclusions. The interface of research and policymaking, for example, is a fascinating sub-field in itself.

Lastly, there is of course the external dimension. Inter-state conflict has been rising slowly in recent years and we see increasing geopolitical tensions and “flashpoints” across the globe. It can be seen in Asia where there are divergent ideas about order and where tensions between China and the West are also on the rise. The current situation could be a textbook case for academic debates – Power Transition Theory comes to mind – but ultimately, we talk about the dangers of war and to an extent also about issues such as “values” and “norms” and the way different states look

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at them. So, it is not only an academic or research exercise. When we talk about the tensions in the South China Sea, it is also about finding ways to mitigate the underlying causes, if possible, not only explaining the recent changes.

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

I do think that for many of those interested in the field, the world has changed in the last decades in line with major geopolitical events. 9/11 and the Global War on Terror was something that not only affected people's lives, in one way or another, but also shaped their perceptions of peace, security, and so forth. Both as an observer or as someone who has been directly affected, in whatever form. For me personally, the 1999 war in Kosovo also mattered as it actually made me really interested in the broader topic of International Relations. I was wondering why did the conflict start, why were different powers trying to play a role there. That was just a few years after my family and I migrated from the former Soviet Union to Europe, so there was already a baggage of sorts in place, or rather a predisposition to the big international questions. So you bring your personal experience into the equation. Then, in the post 9/11 era we have seen changes across the globe, war in the Middle East, the global Financial Crisis, the Obama presidency, the Merkel years in Germany, and the new challenges of climate change. I think as you watch these events pass over the years, as a student in school, university, and then when you actually work, you see how it correlates to perceptions of various issues. Now we have the pandemic that again affects every person subjectively and yet we have the broader consequences on society, economics, culture, politics.

Change, fluctuation and chance also play a role, in thought processes and also your life story. I wrote one Master's thesis on Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East and another one on the applicability of humanitarian law in settings of urban violence. These two disciplines, politics and law, have something in common but their philosophies and aims also differ at times. I think being exposed to different places, subjects and also cultures also influenced my thinking, not only when it comes to research interests or professional development, but also in a more general context. When I was a student in Malta and Italy, I was privileged to spend time with classmates from around the globe and discussing issues as diverse as the law of the sea, food security or the role of the Muslim brotherhood in the Maghreb. It may sound like a truism, but these experiences shape your thinking every day and hour and you see the world from different perspectives. This is strongly needed, particularly today when there are also tendencies of exclusionary politics abound, coupled with a rigid will to power and violence as an instrument to coerce people from various sides.

In your roles as a conflict analyst and peacebuilding specialist and now as Senior Analyst with International Crisis Group, you have spent most of your time in Mindanao, Philippines. How do you think your roles complement one another?

I started working in Mindanao in the field, mostly on civilian protection, with a community-based organization. That work gave me a grassroots-oriented perspective. We talked to and interacted with people in conflict-affected communities for whom displacement and human rights violations were often a daily occurrence. That really makes you understand why it matters to look at conflict, and even development I would say, from the ground up. What are the grievances of the population? How do they perceive safety and security? Who keeps them safe? What are their basic needs? We were confronted with these basic questions almost every single day. Later on, when I moved to the International Monitoring Team (IMT), the nature of work changed a bit. It was a ceasefire monitoring mission, so our job was to monitor and report any violations committed by either the Philippine government or the MILF – a relatively legalistic affair. But from what I understood in my previous assignment is that things are often not black and white. Incidents during war follow a certain pattern. Violence seemingly perpetrated randomly actually does follow a certain logic. And that is important to keep in mind, since ceasefire monitoring may appear a bit simple at first – was it a violation, or not? Working closely with members of Malaysian, Indonesian and Bruneian Armed Forces definitely expanded my perspective in many ways, starting with a nuanced understanding of the military chain of command up to technical knowledge.

With the International Crisis Group, the organization I am currently with, we aim to come up with policy recommendations for various stakeholders through the process of nonpartisan and rigorous analysis after solid field

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research. The aim here is always to prevent deadly conflict and to shape policies to build peace which requires talking to all kinds of people and also sometimes question one's assumptions or misconceptions. Having an experience in a conflict area definitely helps. Access to different conflict parties is an important feature too, as only then a broad picture could emerge that at least somehow portrays the shades of grey so prevalent.

What are some notable changes and continuities in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM or Bangsamoro) that you have noticed over the years?

I think it might be a bit too early to measure the real impact of the BARMM on the communities in Mindanao and its standing in history. This is now the third year of the transition. Many challenges of the process are not new, both in a political sense as well as in a broader sense vis-à-vis the economy or the nature of violence. For example, one of the key features of Bangsamoro political culture is the importance of political families and clans in their respective areas of influence. Historically they have been located just between the national government and their people, sometimes playing a role as interlocutors, sometimes as drivers or supporters of rebellion. Many mayors around Bangsamoro are former rebels from the first Bangsamoro insurgent movement, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). On the other hand, you have the phenomenon that their ascendance did not necessarily correspond with an improved situation in their towns and region. I guess that is something we see across other conflict zones too. Politics is different once you are in the system. It remains to be seen how MILF commanders and their leaders will adapt to civilian – and political – life, also considering tens of thousands of fighters are on the ground and not demobilized yet. When there was a peace agreement with the MNLF in 1996, not all fighters gave up their guns or were integrated into state security forces. What remained were the guns and the power that comes from their barrel, right? Thus, one crucial question is if the loose firearms across Mindanao might also be significantly reduced in the years to come. There are smaller initiatives at the moment, mostly led by the military, but it is a long-term objective.

In addition, it is important to look at the role of institutions, another promise of the peace process. BARMM's predecessor, the ARMM, had a bad reputation and was designated as a "failed experiment" by the Philippine government itself. It did feature several improvements in its last years, but a lot of weaknesses were rather structural. BARMM is an effort to mitigate these issues and I think we will see in the future how successful it is. Building institutions does not take only a few days, it is a continuing process; and in many ways the Bangsamoro goes against the grain.

One interesting thing I keep on encountering whilst talking with friends and colleagues from Mindanao is also the notion of connectivity and connections. Now it is possible to follow events in real time. Even if you are in a far-flung village in Maguindanao province, you may access Facebook Messenger and talk to people from around the globe. Social media really matters, but it is not easy to say whether it is only a force for positive change, like a friend from Maguindanao province told me a few days ago. We have violence that is captured occasionally at real time and shared on social network platforms. Political debates are often conducted online, people discuss and share posts and sometimes you have a social media avalanche that actually influences public opinion. In a way this could be framed as political participation, but the mirror image is more complex since social media is also becoming a vehicle to express grievances and sometimes bashing the "system" or rallying discontent.

In what ways is militant resiliency embedded in conflict zones in Southeast Asia? How can governments innovate their efforts to counter enduring terrorist elements in the region?

Militancy is often rooted in areas with a history of conflict. In Indonesia for example, I think it is not a coincidence that the Aceh rebellion of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) broke out in an area where there was an early revolt in the 1950s. Likewise, everything that happens in Mindanao now has decades old origins. One of the key points of the peace process in the Bangsamoro region is the element of "historical injustices". This is a crucial long-term view that is needed to grasp the intricacies of the current challenges, in Mindanao's case, ongoing skirmishes between military and smaller militant groups. If we look into history, it is often the same areas that are continuously affected by armed conflict in the Southern Philippines: Portions of Maguindanao, Cotabato province, Sulu. At the same time there are new sources of violence, something that happened in Lanao del Sur and Marawi, leading to the 2017 battle for the town that was probably the deadliest urban conflict in the country since the Second World War.

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When it comes to dealing with militancy it really depends on the context. What country are we speaking of? The situation in Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, differs from the Philippines since there is no protracted conflict left that could actually mobilize sentiments and grievances. Those come from other factors and conditions. Of course, there have been places such as Ambon where communal violence broke out and the conflict in Aceh that also lasted for decades. But the landscape has changed since then. Militants in Indonesia and Malaysia operate in a different context, with a state response that uses the counter-terrorism paradigm more than counter-insurgency. I think that there also are a number of scholars and practitioners doing great work on this topic.

In the Philippines, things are tricky given that there is a variety of armed groups with different socio-cultural backgrounds and histories. In Bangsamoro for example, it is important to let the regional government play a role in addition to Manila's prerogatives to act on security issues. The peace process in Mindanao really benefitted from jointness between government and the MILF and I think the spirit should continue to tackle challenges such as militancy. In addition, we can still draw on best practices from other conflict areas: Delivering on the peace dividends promised in the peace agreements is one. Talking to militants and dialogue could be another way forward, something both the government and the MILF have been trying to do, with varying success. I think by now everyone acknowledges that a purely military solution will not have much success.

In your article, you discussed the BARMM's potential for regional gains in contrast to its present reality of poverty. How can the Philippines build on this momentum with its neighbors, specifically with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei?

ASEAN remains an important player since it has been a functioning vehicle for governments in the region for many years. Manila works with both within ASEAN and some of its mechanisms, but some of these activities are rather low-key and perhaps less visible. Needless to say, ASEAN has also been riddled with contradictions, and the effects can be seen right now, regarding many issues. While we had some initial progress with programs such as the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), I think it has not moved ahead significantly.

In the past, some of the current BARMM leaders were exposed to Malaysia and Indonesia in terms of capacity building, also given the cultural similarities between Bangsamoro and its neighbors. I think if the peace process moves ahead, we will see even more exchanges, for example on a halal economy, Islamic banking, etc. With Indonesia there has been a good rapprochement, also due to the resolution of the boundary dispute. With Malaysia the relationship is certainly more complicated, because of Sabah, but there is also much potential. Malaysian military and police officers have been participating in the IMT peacekeeping mission.

I also see potential for cooperation particularly regarding the maritime economy, law enforcement and economic relations. Mindanao is located in a crucial area and I think there is some space for a few "win-wins". Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic hit all countries in the region very hard and perhaps for now each state focuses on its own national interest. So in that sense it will be important to see what a post-Covid regional situation will look like. For the Philippines it might be challenging to advance significant policy ideas, given that the elections are fast approaching. Malaysia is facing a complicated political situation internally, and Indonesia has been hit strongly by the pandemic. So perhaps we need to wait a bit before new developments can really grow. Diplomacy remains limited since face-to-face meetings are relatively rare and Zoom calls can only do so much.

The Philippines will be holding its national elections in 2022 which is also the year that the BARMM will hold its first regular elections. How is the Bangsamoro preparing for this crucial event and how do you envision this to affect the region's future?

I think there are two important developments at the moment. First, BARMM is working on the electoral code that will regulate the exercise. I do not think, however, that it is already in place so it might still take a bit of time. Second, one of the innovations of the new system in the Bangsamoro should be the introduction of political parties. The Bangsamoro is a parliamentary system, unlike the rest of the Philippines, where we also have political parties but a presidential type of government. The MILF has its own organization called the United Bangsamoro Justice Party

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(UBJP), and there are other parties too – some already in place, some in development. There have been seminars and workshops organized by NGOs and funded by the donor community and the process of political party-building started years ago after the 2014 peace agreement. But there remains a danger that the new innovative system might clash with the old ways of politics.

But before we can safely say that the elections will happen in the first place it is important to observe the debate about an extension of the transition period. Many experts and analysts took on this topic, there are many webinars and Op-Eds that deal with this question. It is not yet clear that parliamentary elections will take place. Local elections, for mayors and governors and of course the president will definitely happen, but this is nothing new. I also think the debate so far has been fairly open and we can hear different opinions across a variety of people and groups. On the other hand, from both sides, there are also many emotions pulled into the debate. The question about an extension should be decided soon, so we will see the trajectory in one or two months. It is necessary to know what the real course of events is so that the BARMM and other players can prepare. Uncertainty in the long run is not helpful.

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

This is a tough question but let me try. Whether one pursues a path as an academic, or a practitioner, it is important to keep the reasons in mind that make us do our job. The formal discipline of IR was founded shortly after the First World War, but people have been thinking about wars and peace since time immemorial, also because it affected them throughout centuries. I remember a university text we had to read in an edited volume, “All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up”. It raised important questions about the role of research inquiry into violence and war. Of course, it was written in the 1990s when the post-Cold War momentum actually did not turn out as expected by scholars such as Fukuyama. But I would say the crisis of international momentum does continue until now, so it's important to always go back to the reasons that keep us doing our work. Sometimes it is also a matter of checking one's privilege. There are a lot of voices from the Global South that not only deserve to be heard but whose ideas and visions probably need a stronger embrace from their colleagues in other parts of the world.

I think empathy is a key element of the equation here too, as well as a genuine understanding of the things we want to describe or analyze. Showing respect to communities, particularly those affected by conflict, is also a major responsibility, no matter in what function while working in or on conflict. Being aware of one's own prejudices, biases and misconceptions is also very important. We learn every day, and one should not be afraid to question hypotheses – after all that is also the scientific process. In work situations where one is facing split-second decisions it is less easy to make a sound call, but that's where experience comes in.

Apart from that it's the usual qualities that often matter: A healthy curiosity, dedication and persistence – even on bad days. One quote I heard in my graduate studies was Antonio Gramsci's point about “pessimism of the intellect, and optimism of will”. I believe that can also be applied in many ways, whether you are contemplating policy interventions, preparing a memo for your supervisor or team or rethinking a theory. Lastly, the world of today is complex and ever-changing while certain fundamentals do reoccur. That requires you to have an understanding of various disciplines and read broadly, and talk to very different people. Nonetheless, the quest for knowledge might always have engrained limitations and it is also good to be aware of it and remain humble.