

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH REPORTER
AND ANALYST WLADIMIR VAN
WILGENBURG**

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**EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW**

Profile of the Interviewee

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a reporter and analyst. He has covered the war against the Islamic State in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan and other subjects for international media and has conducted research for several think tanks. He co-authored two books for I.B. Tauris on the Kurds of Syria: one on their experiment with self-rule in 2019 and the other on the U.S.-Syrian Democratic Forces partnership against the Islamic State in 2021. He holds an MA in Conflict Studies from Utrecht University and an MA in Kurdish studies from Exeter University.

Have sub-state actors like AANES and the SDF used paradiplomacy to gain legitimacy on the international stage despite lacking formal recognition?

Yes, the SDF-linked Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and AANES operate several offices abroad, such as in Washington, Sweden, the Kurdistan Region, and other countries, and regions. Furthermore, the SDF has built a strong relationship with the U.S.-led Coalition since the battle in Kobani and with the U.S. Central Command through the fight against ISIS, especially by SDF-Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi. The SDF also has strong relations with non-U.S. members of the US-led Coalition, such as France. After the fall of Assad, there were also several meetings between the SDF/AANES and Western officials; for instance, recently the SDF leader met the French Foreign Minister, with help from the Kurdistan Region's Presidency (it was held in Erbil). The US has also played a major role in the talks between Damascus and the new authorities in Syria, which comes amidst US plans to reduce their presence in Syria (from 2,000 to 1,000 troops). The Coalition wants to have a deal between the new authorities and the SDF in order to facilitate their reduction of troops, and make a potential withdrawal easier, and to avoid the repetition of an Afghanistan scenario. France, especially, has also supported the future role of Kurds in a new Syria.

What role, if any, can the Kurdistan Region of Iraq play as a mediator between Syrian Kurds and Türkiye?

Currently, there is a peace process or a “disarmament” process between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and Türkiye. This makes it easier for the Iraqi Kurds to mediate between the Syrian Kurds and Türkiye. So far, the Kurdistan Region mostly facilitated talks between the different Kurdish factions in Syria, and the Imrali delegation from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) visited the Kurdistan Region and met the senior Kurdish leadership. The DEM delegation exchanged messages from the imprisoned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan. The DEM party also visited northeast Syria during the Kurdish Unity Conference, which was most likely facilitated by the KRG. During the past peace process before it collapsed in 2015, the main Kurdish parties also played a big role in mediating the peace process.

Therefore, the Kurdistan Region is playing a mediating role in the peace process in Türkiye and could also play a role in improving the relation between Türkiye and the SDF/AANES. The KRG also played a role in conveying messages from the SDF to Türkiye, during the meetings between KDP President Masoud Barzani with SDF chief Mazloun Abdi, and between Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani with SDF chief Mazloun Abdi. During the previous peace process before 2015, Turkish officials also met with Kurdish officials from the Democratic Union Party (PYD), such as Salih Muslim. However, so far there have been no official visits to Türkiye from the Syrian Kurdish side. Although there was recently a U.S.-backed ceasefire in Tishrin, in which the US played a mediating role, it’s unlikely that the SDF and Turkish officials met directly, during the recent talks. But during the war against ISIS, the US did facilitate meetings between Turkish-backed rebels/Turkey and the SDF, such as during the Manbij battle.

With Iran and Russia's influence in Syria waning, and Türkiye asserting itself more dominantly, should Kurds recalculate their political position? What realignments do you forecast?

In the past, SDF/AANES also tried to gain political and constitutional recognition from Damascus for their autonomy, with Russia playing a mediating role. Russia also played a role in de-escalating tensions between the SDF and the previous Syrian regime before the fall of Assad. But these talks never had any result, and the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad thought that eventually the US would leave, and then the SDF would be forced to deal with Russia, Iran, the Assad regime, and Türkiye also worked together through the Astana format, and opposed the U.S. presence. But instead, the Assad regime fell, and now the Russian role is quite limited. The SDF also tried (before the fall of Assad) to play a balancing role between Russia and the US, since both were present in areas under SDF control (both had bases in SDF-controlled areas).

In 2019, both Russia and the US played a role in de-escalating tensions between Türkiye and the SDF. In 2019, after the Turkish intervention, and (later canceled) US withdrawal, the SDF also invited limited Syrian armed forces on the border points between Turkish-backed groups and the SDF. Also previously, Iran played a big role in Syria through its militias. This was one of the reasons, many analysts and US officials argued, that the US should stay in northeast Syria, since otherwise Iran and Iran-backed militias would take over oil resources in Deir ez-Zour. But now with Iran gone in Deir ez-Zour, the US is slowly withdrawing from its bases in Deir ez-Zour. Russia still has a military presence in Syria, but its role is now much weaker.

As I mentioned before, in the past, there were joint Russian-Turkish patrols in northeast Syria, also near Kobani, after the Turkish intervention in 2019 (replacing US-Turkish patrols). With Russia's influence over Damascus gone, the SDF's ability to balance different actors is more difficult now. Now it's mostly Israel and Türkiye that decide on the future of Syria, as shown by the recent Israeli airstrikes in central Syria, after Damascus threatened to control semi-autonomous Druze areas

from Druze rebels. Therefore, it has no point at the moment for the Syrian Kurds to deal with Russia or even Iran, and we have seen more diplomatic meetings between the SDF with the US, France, Germany, and other actors, even with Israel. The SDF needs the role of the U.S. more now, especially since Damascus needs the U.S. to lift sanctions on Damascus to improve its economy. But if there is a successful peace process between the PKK and Türkiye, it would be easier for the SDF to deal with the new authorities in Damascus that are backed by Turkey and also stop fighting with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).

How do the policies and interests of Syria's neighbors and stakeholders shape the prospects for Kurdish autonomy or recognition in Syria?

So far, Türkiye has played the biggest role, since Türkiye wanted to prevent the SDF from creating a contiguous territory on its border and launched several military operations since 2016. Other Arab neighbors of Syria have played a big role in Syria, but not so much in northeast Syria. In the past, Saudi Arabia, in 2018, contributed to 100 million dollars for stabilization projects in northeast Syria (also due to U.S. pressure). Iraq, for instance, had contact with SDF on the repatriation of ISIS families and border security, and border crossings, but have played no role in recognition. Some of these Arab states could play a balancing role, like Saudi Arabia, which has welcomed the deal between SDF and Damascus. But as I said, Türkiye plays a bigger role in this issue, especially after the fall of Assad. In the past, Russia played a bigger role.

Are Syrian Kurds being meaningfully included in the constitutional reform process, and can their level of participation realistically influence the outcome in favor of their political aspirations?

So far, they have not been included. On March 10, an eight-point agreement was signed between Syrian interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa and the commander-in-chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Mazloun Abdi, which includes the formation of joint committees to discuss issues like a ceasefire, return of IDPs, constitutional reform, and others. But on March 13, Syria's interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa approved a draft constitutional declaration that sets a five-year transitional period, excluding Kurdish demands for decentralization, which was condemned by the AANES. It remains to be seen if the SDF demands for decentralization will be included in a new Syrian constitution, also after Syrian Interim President Ahmad al-Shara in a statement on April 27 said they reject any attempt to impose a partition or create 'separatist cantons' under federalism or self-autonomy (after the Syrian Kurdish parties held a Kurdish unity conference in Qamishlo on April 26, in which the Kurdish parties called for decentralization. U.S. officials also joined the conference in Qamishlo, but didn't make any statements).

Given the SDF's status as the largest ground force in Syria, how sustainable is their military dominance without U.S. support?

The SDF is currently the largest force in Syria, but without U.S. military support it would be difficult for the SDF to face Turkish military ground offensives. The U.S. played a big role in stopping Turkish territorial expansion in SDF areas. The SDF have limited abilities to confront Turkish airstrikes or drones without aerial or missile defense systems or counter drone technology. Nevertheless, SDF has improved its drone technology and was able to shoot down a number of drones. But as we have seen at Tishrin dam, the SDF managed to stop advances by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) after months of fighting. The SDF is able to fight other Syrian armed groups like the SNA, if there is no Turkish aerial support to the SNA. The SDF is also able to resist HTS advances or the SNA, but this would

be different if the HTS or SNA were to get Turkish aerial support. In that case, the border towns on the border with Syria are very vulnerable, as we also saw in 2018 in Afrin and in 2019 in Tal Abyad and Serekaniye. However, even if the U.S. withdraws, the U.S. could still put diplomatic pressure on Türkiye and Damascus to not attack the SDF.



ABOUT

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