

# Transcript: Rena Netjes | Omroep Zwart

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**Presenter:** Welcome to Omroep Zwart. This is a subject where journalism, personal networks and geopolitics intersect in a fascinating, but sometimes complicated way. In recent weeks there has been considerable attention online for the release of Max van den Berg. He became known primarily as the man who appeared with a torch outside the home of then-minister Sigrid Kaag. The conspiracy theorist had been held in a Syrian cell for several weeks but has since been freed. One of the people who played a direct role in that release is journalist Rena Netjes. But how does such a release actually work, especially when contact with the country in question is so difficult? Rena, good evening.

**Rena Netjes:** Good evening.

**Presenter:** Take us back to the beginning. Who exactly is Max van den Berg and how did he end up in a Syrian cell?

**Rena Netjes:** I will, but as someone who is an Arabist and has taught Arabic for many years — and still teaches Syrian Arabic — I also found your previous item very interesting. I could hear that the speaker had slightly standard Arabic pronunciation, so I shall certainly follow her. Sorry, I had to get that off my chest. Now, what happened is — I have to be honest and say I had no idea who Max van den Berg was. One afternoon a few weeks ago I saw on Twitter that Max van den Berg had been arrested in Syria. I think it was Chris Klomp who shared that. I immediately translated it into English, because in my experience it is always useful to draw international attention straight away. Then Chris sent me a message: do you have any idea which group was involved, or anything like that? It was in Damascus, so Damascus is under the control of the interim government. That is what I said as well: it can really only be the interim government, because there are no other groups that can operate there in that way.

But I was naturally — because it involved Syria, where I work full-time — and now a Dutch citizen was involved, the first thing I did was Google Max van den Berg. I saw a criminal record, and I quickly looked at his social media. Oh, the torch outside Kaag's house — that was essentially all I knew about him. I saw a great deal of pro-Palestine content and thought: yes, I understand. Because the Syrians — my initial feeling after about an hour that afternoon — they no longer have any air defence systems, everything has been destroyed. When Assad fell, the whole country was being bombed in that first month. I was once in Homs when the entire building shook — I had to run outside myself because of Israeli bombardments nearby. We heard those bombs every evening. It is no joke being in that area.

So I thought: if he is going around with a Palestinian scarf and he also went to the province bordering Israel — I have never been there myself, because the media centre essentially prohibits it, it is not safe. Israel carries out regular incursions, people are arrested in Syria

including innocent young teenagers, some of whom are now in notorious Israeli prisons. The last thing Syria needs is someone drawing Israel's attention and handing it a reason to bomb Syria. Israel has of course already done that.

Anyway, I Googled who Max van den Berg was, saw the criminal record, looked at his social media and thought: I am going to ask them.

**Presenter:** But you did not know Max at all.

**Rena Netjes:** No.

**Presenter:** So why did you get involved on his behalf?

**Rena Netjes:** My father always said: we are in this world to help one another. When I was in trouble in Egypt, I was also glad that people did their best for me. If I know the country well and know many people in Damascus, then I simply have to help. But there is also journalistic curiosity: what is happening here, what has gone on? It is a combination of the two.

I had explained that I had Googled Max and found a criminal record. I saw in November that he had travelled from Istanbul to Aleppo, with a great deal of pro-Palestine content and so on. Yes, I understand. Because the Syrians — my initial feeling after an hour — they no longer have any air defence systems.

And I had come to know a network in Damascus. I had focused heavily on the north at first, where I know a great many people. Damascus was newer territory for me, but I knew an office of researchers and lawyers who by far gave me the most information. I had been looking into Algerian Polisario fighters who were allegedly being held prisoner. Many people said: that is a made-up story, it is not true — but they had a great deal of information surfaced in no time. I had gained a lot of respect for them and had by then had many sessions with them. So I thought: I am going to ask them.

**Presenter:** But you did not know Max.

**Rena Netjes:** No.

**Presenter:** So why did you get involved?

**Rena Netjes:** My father always said: we are in this world to help one another. When I was in trouble in Egypt I was also glad that people did their best for me. If I know the country well and know many people in Damascus, then I simply have to help. And there is also journalistic curiosity: what is happening here?

**Presenter:** You also wrote an article about this. In it, you wrote that personal trust is the key in a release such as this. What do you mean by that?

**Rena Netjes:** I can no longer remember my own article word for word, but I have a great deal of trust in that network, and they in me. We have been working together for a year. There was an initial period of feeling one another out. They tell me things off the record: you can publish this, not that. And when that pattern repeats itself, Syrians also come to trust you: Rena does not immediately take everything to the media. I also do not want to put them in danger.

**Presenter:** And in this specific case, you approached people, and they made contact with the prison?

**Rena Netjes:** Yes. The person I had the most contact with, I explained everything to — including that Max has mental health problems, so that he immediately understood the full picture. He said: I am going to make enquiries with my friends in the ministries. Late that evening I heard back: he is in a detention centre. I then also reported this to Chris Klomp, who wrote about it. But at least we knew by then that he was in a detention centre and not in some other situation — such as being held by a jihadist group, because those groups cannot operate in Damascus.

I had asked where exactly, but he did not answer that. He did say immediately: the intention is that he will be extradited to the Netherlands, but the Netherlands has no consulate and no embassy in Syria. That was also a reason I carried on.

**Presenter:** That is not really an obstacle for you as a journalist.

**Rena Netjes:** Not for me. I do speak to Dutch diplomats occasionally, but they do not enter Syria. I go there constantly. So I can tell them: it really is different from what you think. At a certain border crossing there is enormous chaos, but I crossed it a few weeks ago and it was extremely well organised — my passport was scanned, everything was checked.

**Presenter:** And that brings it back again to personal trust.

**Rena Netjes:** Yes. I have been working on Syria for ten years and now have extensive networks — with doctors, activists, rebels, Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Druze. I also appear in Arabic-language media from time to time, particularly Syrian. Amusingly enough: when I was in Damascus in December, people said to me: may I please take a selfie with you? They recognised me. That also gives a sense of security. I was always outspoken against Assad, and that has not been forgotten.

**Presenter:** Why were you outspoken against him?

**Rena Netjes:** Because he drove approximately one million people to their deaths.

**Presenter:** The relationships you build — do you do that consciously, or does it develop organically?

**Rena Netjes:** I travel without insurance. I prepare everything very carefully, but I actually need to do that less and less because I already know so many people. I have no language barrier, I speak fluent Syrian Arabic. The opposition based here in Istanbul knew me very well and always helped me gain access to Syria. A rebel commander told me in 2016: Rena, you cannot go in, it is too dangerous. But I kept knocking, and five years ago I was allowed into northwest Syria for the first time. That has grown since. I simply have very good friends there.

**Presenter:** In Syria you are by now more than just a journalist.

**Rena Netjes:** You do hear that occasionally from Dutch people: activist. But I think: when there is so much injustice, I simply want to show it. I do not call that activism myself. I have

made eight to ten lengthy field trips, so when I make a strong statement, it is based on ten years of engagement with the country, following Syria every day and speaking with Syrians — Kurds, Arabs, people from across the country — for different media. When I have an opinion, it is based on many years of fieldwork and hundreds, perhaps even thousands of interviews.

**Presenter:** But that also means you sometimes become part of the story yourself.

**Rena Netjes:** I do not think so, because I am simply Dutch. My business premises are in Amsterdam, and I am very happy with my Dutch passport — in terms of women's rights, the Netherlands is naturally a great deal better.

**Presenter:** But this story does show what you do there and how you do it. Journalism, personal networks and geopolitics overlap enormously. How do you experience that?

**Rena Netjes:** The investment we have made in all kinds of networks — that is my true passion. As a teenager I was already reading about Hezbollah. I simply want to understand what is happening. Nobody knows that one hundred per cent, but I want to know as much as I possibly can. And I have now combined everything: I know immediately who I need. That person is a good friend of mine, and I have experience of him helping me obtain an enormous amount of information. In December it was the same again. I was also struck by the fact that in half a day he knew what was going on.

It later turned out he could not tell me everything. They had agreed with the Ministry of the Interior that they would not tell me everything either, because they did not actually want the story to get too much media coverage.

**Presenter:** But this work is not without its dangers.

**Rena Netjes:** No, but I manage those dangers by having all these networks. If something happens, I know who to call. I also have contact with Dutch defence, but if things really go wrong, it is the Syrians who can help me, not the Netherlands from so far away.

**Presenter:** You also did this work in Egypt. There you were actually convicted for the work you do. What exactly happened?

**Rena Netjes:** I had done an interview with a journalist from Al Jazeera. There had been attacks in Cairo, and we believed that jihadists were coming from the Sinai into Cairo. We were going to meet in the lobby of the Marriott Hotel, but he asked me to come up to the office. I had no idea they had an office there. Security became very nervous, and at that point I already knew: this is going to go completely wrong. Al Jazeera was seen as the great enemy of dictator Sisi.

I had interviewed him and went to the Netherlands for Christmas. A few days later the entire team was arrested, including an Australian journalist who was held for over a year. Everyone who had been present turned out to have been placed on a terrorism list. I was in the Netherlands and saw on Twitter that they were looking for a Dutch male who had worked for Al Jazeera and had been at a Marriott — a whole list of things that did not match me. I immediately called the embassy, which came to collect me. My name had already appeared on state television, fortunately with all sorts of errors.

But I am now in talks with Egyptian diplomats here in Istanbul, and they want to help me resolve the matter.

**Presenter:** If you were to go there, you would face ten years in prison.

**Rena Netjes:** Yes, that is — I do not think they would act so quickly, but it is still frightening.

**Presenter:** Does that demotivate you?

**Rena Netjes:** No. I have experienced what others experience, and I escaped — truly because I spoke Arabic. Because in Arabic they were looking for a Dutchman, and that did not match. At the time I did not dare go back to Cairo, and I also did not dare go to Damascus, because Assad was worse than Mubarak.

**Presenter:** And now you mention his name: Austin Tice. You are now focusing on the search for him. Who exactly is Austin Tice?

**Rena Netjes:** An American veteran, former military — I am not sure of his exact role, but I believe special forces. Someone else would know. He went from Turkey to Syria in 2012, to the north. That was fairly all right at the time, there were many rebels. But the closer you get to Damascus, the more security forces there are. He went into regime territory and was arrested quite quickly in a suburb of Damascus — a kind of Wimbledon of Damascus, you might say, Al-Raiya. About six weeks later a video of him appeared, blindfolded, with people dressed in the manner of jihadists. He calls out something himself — the video is 46 seconds long. But everyone says: that video was staged. It was the Assad regime that was holding him.

I spoke to a former ambassador here in June 2023 about Syria, and also asked: do you know what happened to Austin Tice? And he said: he is dead. So I thought: that is probably the case. He is no longer alive, nothing has been heard for so long.

Until I arrived in Damascus four days after the fall of Assad. We wanted to get in immediately. We had just come from Syria — we were in northeast Syria when the rebel offensive began. You cannot go to the northwest from there, so you had to go through Turkey first. The Turks would not let me in straight away; they considered the situation too dangerous. Anyway, on the fourth day after Assad's fall, we were in Damascus. I posted a photograph of the main square there — the Dam Square of Damascus, so to speak — and there was very little wifi.

That evening we had been invited to someone's home for dinner, and I saw that I had missed a call from another former ambassador, an American ambassador: "Rena, can you call back as soon as possible? It concerns an American citizen." We naturally did so straight away. I was with a Syrian colleague, and it turned out to be about Austin Tice. An American agency with three letters — I would rather put it that way — had apparently seen my photograph. That photograph had been taken less than one kilometre from where the Americans believed Tice had last been held.

We discussed various things. He said: the FBI is essentially looking for someone I trust, who could conduct an investigation the following day at a particular location. Was I prepared to do that? Of course, absolutely — if I were in that position, I would be grateful that someone was

still looking for me. But I was also surprised: I arrived in Damascus before the American intelligence services. How is that possible? I did not know either, and that was also the ambassador's surprise. Which is why I mention it.

I had also pushed the Turks quite hard: if you do not let me in, I am flying to Lebanon right now. I could see that a British Al Jazeera journalist had just got in, and then the Turks said: all right, everyone can go in tomorrow morning.

After an hour he called back: "Rena, they have found someone else after all." By then I had already seen that a journalist from the Washington Post was also in Damascus, so I assume they asked an American — that is the most logical thing. I am not American, I am Dutch.

But I thought: perhaps this does not entirely rule out the possibility that he was still alive. At the end of that trip I went to see my network in the north — good friends by now — and told them this story. They said: "Rena, we have something to tell you. Three years ago we started, and for two years we searched for Tice." How that continues, I cannot yet say — I am very sorry — but I am writing a book about it.

I have seen enough, genuinely enough in visual terms, to believe that he was still alive two years ago. And that has been verified by the Americans: my network is in contact with the Americans, and the Americans have confirmed it. But the negotiations simply failed.

You also have to understand: the Americans do not pay those they designate as terrorists, whereas the French and the Spanish have done so — they also got their journalists out of Raqqa, for example. Until the Americans were all beheaded, like James Foley. The French and Spanish all got their people out. I know from my contacts in France, from the journalists themselves, that significant sums were paid. That is a choice a country makes. But it is very unfortunate if you happen to be American.

**Presenter:** If America cannot manage to get him back, why should you be able to?

**Rena Netjes:** I am not saying I will manage to get him back. But what is very important: Biden said in December 2024, already almost walking out of the press conference room when someone asked about Tice: "He is alive and we hope to bring him back soon." My network in the north and an NGO in Damascus that held a press conference said the same thing: Tice is alive. More American officials said that month that he is still alive and that they hope to bring him home soon. Until March everyone believed he was still alive and being heavily guarded by serious criminals.

But since March there has been nothing, and there are a few worrying signs. My network says: we no longer know. A very thorough investigation is needed: what happened after March, a year ago? Perhaps he has passed away.

**Presenter:** That is what you are going to find out, and people can donate towards that. An online fundraiser has been set up.

**Rena Netjes:** This is how it came about: when Max was free, people were asking me online how they could thank my Syrian network, how they could thank me, could they make a donation. I had been trying for months to get American organisations to understand that I want to investigate this and that it might produce something — but I get nowhere, everyone

refers me on to someone else, and ultimately nobody responds. I have to earn a living like everyone else. I did not have the budget for the trips and interviews that are necessary, because this is very complex and complicated. He will have been moved repeatedly, which is why you have to visit different locations.

So I said to Norbert Dikkeboom — who had also been pulling hard at my sleeve, because I had almost given up — we discussed everything: which ministry, what might help to get some movement in the case. Meanwhile my contact in Damascus had been working very hard. He visited Max every other day, saw him via a camera, arranged good food and hygiene supplies so that Max would feel as comfortable as possible. He also invited people from the security services to a restaurant to explain that Max is not mentally entirely well. And he ensured that Max's camera, phone and laptop were not confiscated.

Syrians very much want investment to come to Damascus — that is his line of work. So the angle that Dutch media are covering Syria also helped. We played that card strongly: issue a statement now, show openness, release him.

But I must also say: this is a truly unique person who stuck his neck out and put money down out of his own pocket without telling me. I feel he simply deserves to get that back. I will arrange that.

**Presenter:** And that is partly possible through the fundraiser. Despite everything, I can hear that you still have a great deal of trust in the people there.

**Rena Netjes:** In some people, certainly — in others, not at all. There are real angels walking around there. Those people and those people and those people I consider part of my circle of friends, and I know I can always call on them. With my friends in the north we dance regularly — war, dancing, helping one another, it all runs together. But that does give you a very full picture of what the country is like. I genuinely enjoy working there. There are so many warm people.

**Presenter:** Rena Netjes, thank you very much. Donations for her search for Austin Tice can be made via [steunactie.nl](http://steunactie.nl). Thank you for this conversation.

**Rena Netjes:** Thank you.