

Interview – Eva Koulouriotis

Written by E-International Relations

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Eva J. Koulouriotis is a political analyst specialising in the Middle East with a focus on: the Syrian revolution and the international and regional conflict around it; Iran, Iraq, Israel and Turkey's role in the Middle East; the consequences of US, EU and Russian involvement in the region; jihad and jihadist organisations and Greek-Turkish relations. Koulouriotis has held several positions with the European Union of Women (EUW), being the Vice President of the Hellenic Section since its establishment and most recently being appointed as the Interim President of the newly established Culture Commission of the International EUW Council. Prior to this, she worked for a variety of public and private organisations in multiple countries, with a focus on business organisation, development and strategic planning. From a young age, she worked for the New Democracy political party in Greece. Koulouriotis has contributed to a range of both Greek and international media, including Al-Quds Al-Arabi, The New Arab, Al-Sharq Qatar, Annahar, Orient News, Arab News, Huffington Post Greece, the Greek weekly Paraskinio and RT. She is the founder of the Athena Forum for Peace and Security, an international policy think tank, and of the cultural movement 'Ginomai Politis' (Becoming a Citizen). Eva can be found on Twitter @evacool.

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

The Middle East in general is the main part of my study, but the Syrian crisis is of particular interest, because in order to understand it, one also has to understand the international balances of power. And not only that. If you are studying Syria, you will have to study jihadist groups, which is something I am very interested in. You have to study the international powers, including the differences that occur within them (such as between the Obama and Trump periods) and between them (such as between Russia and the United States) and how they react to issues in Syria. You can also see how the countries of the Middle East interact with each other, for example relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia were bad and then improved, how this affects the Syrian conflict and how this becomes apparent on the ground. Consequently, the Syrian crisis is like a mirror of greater international geopolitical issues. That's why I watch it closely.

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

I have been involved in politics since I was a child. My family, especially my father, was actively involved and had deep political thinking and historical knowledge which he instilled in me by regularly supplying me with history books. I have worked for a long time in foreign countries, so I was given the opportunity to get in touch with many peoples and cultures. Initially, I focused on European issues due to my involvement in the New Democracy party. However, when I was in Ukraine and then in Kosovo as head of the missions of the Greek Doctors of the World, my interest in international affairs expanded. Then, during the Iraq war in 2003 and onwards, I turned to the Middle East and began to study it more because I realised that in order to understand the bigger picture, I had to pay more attention to this region. But it was not easy. It took me a long time traveling, talking to people, reading, monitoring and researching until I felt mature enough to talk and analyse what was happening in the Middle East. I did not want to rush to do it without having a deep and integrated knowledge of the issues.

The foreign policy of Turkey and the role it plays in the Middle East and wider region have been key themes of your research and writing. Can you identify any specific factors which led to your interest in

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this subject? What are some of the main challenges you have faced in pursuing this, particularly in regard to gaining an understanding 'of the field'?

First of all, as a Greek, throughout my life I became acquainted with the tension between Greece and Turkey, which is a reality. Secondly, the first thing we learn at school along with the alphabet is that there is a problem with Turkey. The same happens in higher education, in the army, in politics and in our daily lives. I was fortunate, however, to have two highly educated and cultured parents, who helped me deal with things completely differently from childhood. Despite the fact that my maternal grandfather was born in Istanbul and fled to Greece, he never instilled in his children, and consequently in me, a hatred for Turkey. Instead, my family tried to make me understand Turkey from another more objective perspective.

Greek-Turkish relations have generally been tense, with their ups and downs. But if I want to be a political analyst who understands what is happening in Tora Bora in Afghanistan or the ideological conflict between various Islamic organisations, I must also be able to understand what is happening between Greece and Turkey, on and under the table or behind closed doors, no matter how complicated. For this reason, I have looked for serious and mature answers about Greek-Turkish relations, talked to Turks and Greeks who come from Turkey or who live there, and have slowly acquired, I believe, an objective approach. Objectivity in this case, of course, is not always good, because when you talk about Turkey in purely analytical rather than emotional terms, Greeks consider you to be a traitor and that you do not love your country. This is especially the case when you criticise the Greek government, as I often do, for its foreign policy and point out its mistakes. This is the biggest challenge for me, but I think I have reached a sufficient level of maturity in analysis so that when I talk about geopolitics, I completely eliminate personal emotion.

In regional conflicts spanning from Syria to Libya, Turkey and Russia have been supporting opposing factions. Nonetheless, there are an increasing range of areas in which these two countries are cooperating and a perception that Turkey is moving closer to Russia at the expense of the West. How would you describe the current state of Turkey-Russia relations and how are these contradictions best understood?

I am used to saying that in politics there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, there are only common or conflicting interests that change from one moment to the next. There have been numerous wars between Russia and Turkey throughout history. But when countries get to the point where they understand reality very well, they separate economic issues from politics. This happened between Russia and Turkey when Erdogan came to power and trade relations between the two countries developed significantly. This does not mean that they are not enemies, since Turkey is a member of NATO, nor that they do not disagree on various issues. But they may also agree, as was the case with the war in Iraq, where both Russia and Turkey opposed the US invasion because they both had interests there, or US sanctions on Iran, with which both have important trade relations.

But when the revolution against the Assad regime in Syria broke out, things changed given Turkey's geopolitical position and the fact that Syria was Russia's last foothold in the Mediterranean after the fall of Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein and Egypt's rapprochement with the United States. Russia's need for Syria and Obama's vague strategy for the crisis that had erupted gave Moscow the green light to interfere. On the other hand, Turkey's long border with Syria was enough to put it in the middle of fire. Initially, Erdogan tried to contact Assad, in an effort to change his mind. Their economic relations had been particularly good, especially from 2007 to 2011, and the citizens of the two countries could move between them without even needing a passport. But when the revolution in Egypt succeeded, Turkey considered it certain that the same would happen in Syria, so it decided that it had to choose the 'right side' – the opposition. Despite the different stance of Russia and Turkey in the Syrian crisis, business continued as usual.

The turning point came when a Russian military aircraft was shot down by Turkey in 2015. The non-supportive attitude of Turkey's allies in this crisis caused damage and changed the way Turkey views both NATO countries and Russia. Then came the failed coup in 2016, which Turkey blamed on its allies, although not shouting it, marking a major shift in Turkey's relations with Russia and the West. Turkey began to lean more towards Russia politically. Erdogan's first visit abroad after the failed coup was to Moscow. Then, Putin visited Istanbul and in the context of

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their understanding Russia supported, with its air force, the Turkish Operation Euphrates Shield by bombing ISIS in front of Turkish troops. Then the circle of Astana talks on the Syrian crisis began in which the two countries had the upper hand over Iran, until they reached the current state of cooperation in northern Syria.

Erdogan has managed to convey the following message since 2016: “If Russia or the West wants me on their side, they should satisfy me”. Neither side wants to lose Turkey. It is a risky strategy, but so far it has worked very well. He has very good relations with Russia and Putin does not consider him to be a NATO enemy. We saw in the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan the mutual respect that exists between the two leaders. At the same time, Erdogan creates a feeling in the West that if they put a lot of pressure on him, he will turn even more towards Moscow, so they must be careful how they treat him. Hence the recent superficial sanctions in response to Turkey’s purchase of a Russian air defence system. In my opinion, where Turkey will be in the long term will depend on the coming four years of a Biden presidency. That is, whether he will bring it closer to the West or push it further towards the East.

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, fought between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it was reported that Turkey provided extensive support to Azerbaijan, even including the deployment of Turkish-backed fighters from Syria. What are Turkey’s main interests in the region and does Turkish involvement fit within a broader pattern of interventionism in other regions?

It is a fact that Turkey not only intervened by sending Syrian opposition troops, but also Turkish special forces and Turkish-made weapons that significantly contributed to the victory of Azerbaijan. It is certain that this is part of a larger plan that Turkey has and the intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be separated from that. This plan began after the Justice and Development (AKP) party’s rise to power, which aimed to make Turkey a strong country by exploiting its geopolitical position and dynamics. Thus, once the country had stabilised economically, it used these advantages by intervening and trying to impose its influence outside its borders, just as other powerful countries around the world do. In this context, Turkey became involved in Syria, northern Iraq, Libya and most recently in Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, there is a Turkish military presence in Qatar and Somalia, a country of great strategic importance, where it trains the Somali army.

There is a huge amount of propaganda that speaks of ‘neo-Ottomanism’, attempts to revive the Ottoman Empire and of creating conflicts in various countries. In fact, Turkey’s presence outside its borders has nothing to do with religious or nationalist motives. It is simply a country whose government is trying to find the best ways to pursue its interests. Thus, it seized the opportunity to get involved in the Libyan conflict, as Libya is a very important country due to its strategic position and energy-producing resources. Turkey got the green light to intervene in Libya from the United States, as was the case in Syria where Turkey had European and American support and still has it in order to maintain its presence in Idlib and northern Syria.

In Azerbaijan, Turkey’s interests obviously differ from those it has in other regions. Each region has its own characteristics. In northern Syria, Turkey seeks to prevent terrorist attacks linked to the presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) there, as well as to be at the negotiating table for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. In northern Iraq, it again wants to deter the PKK and also gain a stake in the oil companies operating there. For Turkey, Libya is the entry point into the African continent and an opportunity for energy exploitation. Finally, Turkey recently signed an agreement worth \$5 billion with Azerbaijan for the construction of houses in Nagorno-Karabakh by a Turkish company. Bilateral relations are very warm as Azerbaijan realises that Turkey was the country which contributed most decisively to its victory against Armenia. My sources have informed me that there will be even more agreements in the future, such as on the construction of a gas pipeline to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Turkey, and it goes without saying that the price of Azeri gas will be much more advantageous for it. Another important benefit secured by Turkey with this victory is the way in which countries of the region which share a common origin perceive Turkey, that is, as a reliable friend and protector. This will translate into economic earnings, as we have already seen from the decision of Uzbekistan to stop buying Chinese drones and buy Turkish drones instead.

In conclusion, each country must promote its own interests. Some countries have governments that know how to take

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the right steps, at the right time and in the right place, while others do not. This is what Turkey is doing, with much luck of course, and ensuring the best results. This does not, however, mean that Turkey has expansionist aspirations. Applying such labels is a feature of media propaganda. By this logic, we should call Macron the new Napoleon because of the enormous French presence in Central Africa and call Russia the new Soviet Union because of its influence in the countries of the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. Everything is related to the prism we see it through. For the Syrian opposition, for example, the involvement of Turkey was beneficial. For me as a political analyst, Turkey is a country that is looking for new markets for its products, new energy sources and economic and political empowerment, which is good for its people. Some other countries will suffer as a result, but this is the nature of geopolitics.

Recent months have seen growing tensions between Turkey and other countries in the NATO alliance, in particular Greece and France. How do you expect Turkey's role within NATO to evolve in future?

Starting with the context, it is certain that we have entered a new era where the position of the United States is not as it was in the late 1990s, largely due to China's economic rise. Recent cyber-attacks show that it is vulnerable and the pandemic made that weakness more apparent. After the end of the Cold War, the United States was a superpower without NATO, so the allies followed its wishes. But now it realises that in order to remain strong it must re-approach its allies. Now more than ever it needs to be a member of NATO. We will see this during the Biden administration. He will try to close the rifts created by Trump, especially with his European allies, mainly France and Germany.

In this context, the US will seek to keep Turkey, which possesses NATO's second largest army, part of the NATO alliance. For many reasons as mentioned above, Turkey has clearly approached China and Russia on various issues, such as the Turkish Stream pipeline, the Syrian crisis and Libya, where communication with Moscow is close. Moreover, the tensions in the Mediterranean and the crack that Greece is causing in Europe with its 'either with me or against me' attitude is not as bad for Turkey as it is for the West. If Turkey chooses the other side, it will open a huge market for it in China and Central Asia, while in a possible currency war it could trade in the national currencies, the Turkish lira and the yuan. So, it is not Turkey that needs the West as much as the West needs Turkey.

Nevertheless, Turkey remains close to the West. Erdogan does not want to leave the West, which is why he suddenly raised the issue of EU membership. He believes that the West is preferable to the East. But the recent tensions in the eastern Mediterranean and the attitude of France, which in my opinion is behind those tensions, undermine EU and NATO cohesion. In recent articles I explain the role of Macron and how he uses Greece for this purpose. This is primarily because Turkey is involved in African countries such as Libya, Mali, Chad, Niger, which France wants to keep to itself, but also because of Macron's personal need to lead. The US will not be happy to see two alliance members clash. If it takes the side of Greece, a Western country posing the dilemma of 'either me or Turkey', then Turkey will turn to the East.

These case studies are useful for making the following point. As long as there is a controversial plan coming from Paris, supported by a number of UAE-led countries and using Greece as a front against Turkey, there will be a tension that is bad for both Greece and Turkey, even if it is good for France. France sells aircraft to Greece, sales which would obviously not occur under other circumstances, and France uses this as a bargaining chip over Libya.

Whether Turkey's international presence and tensions with Greece will affect its role in NATO's future is clearly in the hands of the Americans. If Biden chooses to follow in Obama's footsteps, pushing Turkey into Russia's arms, then the rift with NATO could widen. If Biden is more rational – and I think he will be mainly because of his close associates who understand that the US needs Turkey if they have to confront Russia, which he sees as the number one enemy – then the issues will be resolved. There will be some agreement resolving America's concern about Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system and tensions will be reduced. Biden can also reduce Greek-Turkish tensions. France will retreat in front of the US.

You have argued that there is a “cautious calm in the Eastern Mediterranean following the victory of Joe Biden in US presidential elections”. What were the main causes of the current tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and what role, if any, is the US likely to play as a mediator?

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Indeed, there is calm in the eastern Mediterranean which started before the US elections. Both sides understand that America's future is important for the future of the region. Until Biden clarifies his foreign policy, the situation will remain stagnant. That is why the EU will not impose tougher sanctions on Turkey until March 2021, as they want to see how Biden will move first. Whether Biden takes a hard line or the opposite, then the EU will follow suit. It is certain that France will strongly pressure Biden to take a hard line, but the White House has the upper hand. As I said above, despite Obama's role in a number of crises, I believe that Biden will be reasonable in the way he handles Turkey and disappoint those who expect the opposite.

In addition to your work as a political analyst, you have also worked extensively with the European Union of Women. How does the organisation strive towards its goal of strengthening peace “on the basis of justice and the free cooperation of peoples”? What are some of the challenges you face in your work with the Culture Commission?

As a member of New Democracy party, I started working in the party's international relations section at an early age. In this context, I got involved with the European Union of Women. The EUW is a pan-European organisation with 17 member countries and was founded in 1953, before the Treaty of Rome in 1957. It was founded by European women working to promote peace, justice and cooperation between European countries, which they considered could only be achieved by increasing the influence of women. To achieve these goals, working commissions have been set up to address various issues in different policy areas. It has an advisory role to the Council of Europe and a Special Advisory role to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Through the work of the commissions, the organisation also contributes to the work of the European Parliament through the European People's Party Women's (EPPW) Section and the national MEPs. One of the working commissions is the newly formed Culture Committee, which I was appointed chairman of by the International Council until the next elections.

Culture is a very broad and multifaceted concept. It is particularly interesting that in all European languages the word 'culture' (cultivation) is used instead of the word civilization, which expresses a broader social concept. In the Greek language we use the same word for both concepts: 'civilisation' (*politismos*). And this is because in ancient Greece the citizen (*politis*) was the centre of society: 'city' (*polis*) – 'civilian' (*politis*) – 'civilization' (*politismos*). I become a Citizen, that is, an entity integrated in the City (*Polis*) so that I derive the rights from Democracy. *Politismos* (culture) implies refined morals, spiritual development, high-level behaviours between people and aesthetic expression evolved without nihilism. Culture is everything we are: politics, social behaviour, food, language, family and friendship, business ethics, religion, the way we dress, music, literature, cinema, design and architecture.

The job of the Culture Commission is to promote the concept of culture and to consider the safeguarding of cultural heritage, cultural exchange and artistic creation in the nations of the European Union and beyond. It is concerned about whether women have access to, participate in and contribute to all aspects of life. This encompasses our right to actively engage in identifying and interpreting cultural heritage; deciding which cultural traditions, values or practices are to be kept, reoriented, modified or discarded; to promote an intercultural dialogue, mutual respect and acknowledgement of the differences and of the common values and to determine and implement proposals aimed at promoting the integration of the cultural dimension of the EUW members.

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

Firstly, if one wants to analyse international politics, they must be able to separate themselves from their emotions as an individual and as a citizen of a particular country. For example, a Palestinian who has experienced the loss of a family member due to Israeli actions is likely to hate Israel and vice versa. When analysing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they will not be able to be impartial.

Secondly, talking about a region that is completely unfamiliar in terms of culture, traditions, customs and mentality is the biggest mistake Western analysts make. Therefore, anyone dealing with different countries should be well acquainted with the traditions of these societies, their religions and the way they think and live. They should converse and socialise with people in the region and, finally, read its history without engaging their emotions in relation to peoples and religions. They should face the issues free of any prejudice, dogmatism, political beliefs or personal

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preference. When one succeeds at this, after having talked to many people and read in depth their history, then they may try to study the politics of the region. One must have the ability to perceive the reality there accurately so that they can make correct analyses and be led to the right conclusions and not spread fallacies.

Objectivity, impartiality, absence of emotions and composure are the characteristics of a good analyst. Let's build a generation of self-respecting scholars of international relations that will not be the obedient instruments of their employers. Only in this case will they not be in a difficult position to change their attitude when the media they work with change their position towards a country. In this way they will maintain their self-esteem, gain the respect of others and will be able to have a clear conscience that they have not lied to anyone.