

Interview – Eda Gunaydin

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, OCT 27 2021

This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Eda Gunaydin is a graduate student in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. Her key research interests are in the areas of gender, race and violence in international relations. Eda recently won the ISA Feminist Theory and Gender Studies Best Graduate Paper Award and the ISA Women's Caucus Graduate Student Best Paper Award for her paper titled 'Saving the YPJ, saved by the YPJ: ambivalent agency and foreign policy in Syria'. It has been accepted for publication to the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. The paper engages with the feminist IR scholarship that has observed that representations of women, particularly Middle Eastern women, are often used to legitimate interventions and prolong wars – for example the appeals made for women's rights in Afghanistan to legitimate the 2002 invasion. In 2016 Eda received the University Medal in Government and International Relations, and has been a research assistant in the Department since 2015.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I was 23 when I wrote my honours thesis on the Rojava movement in 2016. I remember the sense of possibility many of us on the left felt seeing the gains the movement made throughout 2013-2015. The key thing that encouraged me to pursue this area of research was the work being done by grassroots activists and militants in North East Syria (NES). If I hadn't read work by Dilar Dirik, Hawzhin Azeez, and Nazan Üstündağ, I may never have started to engage seriously with critiques of the nation-state, and I wouldn't be the IR scholar I am today. I also owe a large intellectual and personal debt to Sarah Phillips, my PhD supervisor. We met after I finished my honours – she had been one of my markers. I am a first-in-family student, and the fact that she took the time to personally encourage me to keep pursuing my research was vital for my decision to decide to complete a PhD. Her encouragement has always been warm, consistent, and it is rare to meet someone who makes you feel so valued and respected intellectually. She has helped complexify my thinking about the power of the state, introducing me to the work of Veena Das and James C Scott, among others. I also look to the small embroidery I have of Jodi Dean that sits on my desk everyday. Reading her work reminds me to be a materialist.

In your paper (co-authored with Megan MacKenzie, and Umeya Chaudhuri), you analyse the continued support for the military in Australia despite high awareness of sexual violence committed by those in the military. What role does the media play in creating an atmosphere that allows the public to wilfully overlook sexual violence by military personnel?

In this paper, we discuss the seeming paradox around the fact that the Australian Defence Force is one of Australia's most trusted institutions despite the prevalence of several high-profile 'sex scandals' reported critically in the media. We find that the way that these incidents are discussed follow one of two pathways: either they are reduced to a case of 'bad apples', and considered atypical 'blips' for the institution, or they are considered so typical and therefore so normal for the institution that they are unremarkable. Our key finding was that these two frames often work together to send a message to civilians and the public that military sexual violence is a phenomenon that simply cannot be

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prevented or addressed.

Your thesis focuses on the creation of post-state sovereignties by the Kurds of Rojava. What is meant by post-state sovereignties? What impact does their creation have for an international system exclusively built upon nation-states?

My thesis makes two key connected arguments. The first is that, despite discursive efforts that seek to understand the governance model in NES as a state-making project, there is a clear pattern of practice and theory produced by participants and ideological adherents of the movement that contest statist discourse. The second is that, at the same time, these aforementioned discursive efforts are often successful: that is, discourses that cast NES as a state-making project constitute it as one, both because they make possible activities that render NES more state-like, and because they reproduce an international system that rewards stateness and state-seeking, while foreclosing alternatives. The project is therefore an attempt to excavate the former out from under the latter. Inside an international system built upon nation-states, certain answers to how society should organise itself politically take on their meaning via, and take their conditions of possibility from, the nation-state. I use this thesis to unpack how NES provides *non*-state-centric answers to problems of religious and ethnic co-existence; to achieving peace and order without the monopolistic and sacred violence of the state; to entering into the 'international' without recourse to state-centric concepts like the 'citizen'; and achieving women's liberation without statist, liberal forms of feminism. My goal in articulating these 'post-state sovereignties' is to ask how, in the absence of the presupposition of the nation-state, certain signifiers (secularism; the economy; the international; women's liberation; violence and order) are re-articulated into alternative webs of signification, which give rise to novel theorising about how it is possible for society to be politically and democratically organised. I suggest that their creation provides a real challenge to the assumed necessity of the nation-state.

In your paper *Saving the YPJ, saved by the YPJ: ambivalent agency and foreign policy in Syria* you argue against the use of Western representations of women to justify their interventions in these countries. What are the limitations of these representations, and in what way does this impact the manner in which women view themselves?

I won't speak to the broader Middle East or Global South, although it is clear to me and other feminist IR scholars that the problem of appealing to women's rights in order to justify interventions in MENA and elsewhere is rife – we need look only to Afghanistan in 2002 to see this. In the Syrian context in particular, I have argued that Western representations of the YPJ helped make Operation Inherent Resolve possible. These representations have often focused on how 'badass' these Kurdish female militants are, and how exceptionally feminist they are. What has been lost in these depictions is a fuller rendering of the politics of these women. Their belief in women's liberation does not adhere fully to Western or mainstream liberal feminism, but is rather drawn out of an autochthonous women's liberation movement called jineology. Likewise, these women have rendered potent critiques of the ways they have been exoticised and commodified in Western media, despite professing open anti-capitalist politics.

What are you currently working on?

My thesis! I am in the final twelve months: send coffee. I am also editing – always editing! – a paper about Western volunteer foreign fighters of the YPG and untangling how these acts fit both into histories of orientalism but also internationalist solidarity. The article is called 'White saviours or comrades? New ways of theorising foreign fighters, and Western volunteers of the YPG', and it was highly commended for the ISA Teresia Teaiwa Student Paper Award in 2020. I became interested in this topic when contemplating the way that YPG fighters have appraised the work of Western volunteers who travelled to northern Syria during the conflict and formed the International Freedom Battalion (IFB), partially inspired by the Paris Commune and the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War. These peoples' acts are spoken about almost exclusively via the language of solidarity, comradeship, sacrifice and class suicide. I thought this kind of understanding of acts of internationalism has sometimes been de-prioritised in the postcolonial literature, which can often err on the side of appraising these kinds of acts as examples of white saviourism. I do think there is a tension here, though, and, with the acknowledgement that although we can point to clear examples of white saviourism in the foreign fighting space in northern Syria, I use the article to nevertheless try

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to provide a postcolonial account of some of these foreign fighters as ‘comrades’. I do this in order to take seriously Jodi Dean’s recent call to produce new political theory on the figure of the comrade, who is often overlooked in political theory. I show that doing so is generative, allowing us to uncover a non-state-centric account of foreign fighting. This account subverts the modern norm that expects loyalty to the nation-state and that appraises all foreign fighting as an inherently deviant (impure, extremist) political entanglement.

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

I very much consider myself to still be a young scholar, and want to note that I am still always learning from others. The only advice I could probably give is, first, to know your worth, and use it to act with integrity. We live in a climate of neoliberalism and racial capitalism, a time of unforeseen stress and precarity in the higher education sector where over-work and individualism are sometimes rewarded. But I believe that if we have a chance of building a more hopeful future, that begins with being aware of our own power, both intellectual power and labour power, and using it to support one another.

Second, I would suggest an exercise that I have been using for a few years that guides me when I feel overwhelmed and uncertain about my career. The exercise is to list down your five top values: for example, a few of mine are reciprocity, community, building relationships, and giving. Yours might differ! But I make sure to always check in with them, especially during times of stress, and ask myself whether I am acting in alignment with my values or not. If I’m not, it’s an important reminder that I might be off-course, focusing too much on things that might not matter in the end, and it helps me to try to be intentional about steering myself back on course.