Interview - Zeynep N. Kaya

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Zeynep N. Kaya is a Senior Teaching Fellow at the Department of Development Studies at SOAS and an Academic Associate at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge. She completed her PhD in International Relations at LSE, where she conducted research on the transformation of Kurdish nationalism and territorial identity in an international context. Before moving to SOAS she worked as a Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre for six years. Primarily interested in gender, violence, and conflict, she has authored numerous papers and reports on Kurdish politics, as well as on gender, violence and displacement in the Middle East. Her book*Mapping Kurdistan: Territory, Self-Determination and Nationalism* will be published by Cambridge University Press in mid-2020.

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

For me, it is IR work on gender in a Middle Eastern context. Although the field of gender studies has focused on the region of Middle East extensively, IR focus on gender in the Middle East has remained small. There have been some country-based gender studies, but what is really fascinating, for me, is how international gender norms are interacting within the Middle East context. How are local and international actors using normative frameworks that are gendered, to pursue their goals and interests? What are the areas of tension and clash, and what are the areas of opportunity?

I think there is a lack of understanding of how these norms travel in the Middle East. There is a general assumption that these norms are international, that they originate in the West, and that there is a different kind of normative gender framework in the Middle East. This top-down view overlooks the complexity of gender issues in the Middle East. Hence, I am personally also interested in working with practitioners on the ground, and their conception of gender norms, feminism, and so forth – mainly to show that these are not Western imports. Local norms and activities around gender equality and enhancing women's position in society have been long present in the Middle East. Thus, I find debates about the interaction between local gender norms and 'the international', and perspectives challenging the hierarchical understandings that Western gender norms are simply being disseminated to local contexts exciting.

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

It was a gradual process. Initially, my work was more theoretical. It is still theoretical, but fieldwork in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, has become a very important component of my work. This has really transformed the way I 'do' IR. My worldview over time has changed more towards the local and towards change, instead of grand theoretical claims, debates, and paradigms. I used to prioritise the structural and wider transformations in explaining changes in international system. However, the more I worked on the ground, the more I switched towards a critical theory perspective that seeks to understand important, dynamic and diverse processes that impact change in real contexts, but are usually overlooked. I am interested in how changes *there* shapes international relations.

I am a firm believer in the interaction between theory and practice. Practice informs theory and vice versa, but 'practice' has usually been understood as state behaviour or the workings of international organisations, rather than practice and its results 'on the ground' by everyday actors not deemed influential enough to shape international politics. Working with local actors has made me more hopeful about the world becoming a better place in the long term.

How has the recent Turkish invasion of Northern Syria impacted the PYD (Democratic Union Party), and its relationship with the Turkey-based PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)?

I don't think Turkey's intervention will significantly impact the PYD-PKK relationship. These two organisations have a strong and long-term relationship. Challenges posed by the Turkish state, or by any other regional state, actually bring them further together. Nonetheless there are significant differences between the political contexts they act in, which might create tensions between the them in the long-run. The PYD has been able to forge international links with states which, in a sense, provided a degree of international legitimacy as reliable allies on the ground. The PKK obviously does not have this kind of international legitimacy. Furthermore, the PYD is mainly responsible for administering northern Syrian areas, *de facto* governing a mixed population. Therefore their priorities and goals in the Syrian context might differ from PKK's wider goals.

There are a lot of possible problems coming up for the PYD. It's very hard for them to claim legitimacy while having close links with the PKK, making their life difficult, internationally and regionally. Yet, at the same time, without the PKK the PYD couldn't have survived. Because of the PYD's increasingly dire position in northern Syria (coming under Turkish attack and losing international – especially US – support), we can expect the PYD to stay dependent on the PKK. Moreover, we must not forget that both movements are loyal to shared ideas and ideological goals, which I think will help sustain their long-term relationship. For now, I can't imagine PYD and PKK moving apart from each other.

The PYD's position is evidently precarious, and it always has been. The US's presence in northern Syria, supporting the Kurds, was never going to be permanent. In fact, I was surprised that it lasted this long, after ISIS was defeated. But the PYD is not alone. First, as I explained, it has essential support from the PKK. Second, the PYD has not had a terrible relationship with the Assad regime over the course of the Syrian War. I expect the PYD will have to reach out to the regime more, and vice versa, in order to forge a new kind of arrangement in which the PYD will give up some of its jurisdictional rights or make other concessions, and in return the Assad regime will provide them with some protection. This seems very likely. Third, the PKK and the PYD have good relationships with Russia. It's an ambiguous relationship, but there is a long-term historical precedent of Kurdish-Soviet and Kurdish-Russian relations. The PKK always had representation in Moscow, and the PYD has been included in the Astana peace talks led by Russia. Evidently, Russia also has a good relationship with the Assad regime, so all in all, it's not like the PYD doesn't have any friends, internationally and regionally. I suspect the *de facto* autonomy they had will be constrained in the future. Predicting what kind of administrative arrangement might emerge from this and what concessions the PYD will be forced to make, remains speculation. In any event, the recent process has clearly weakened the PYD's hand vis-à-vis Assad.

How have relations between the Kurds across the Middle East been affected by the Turkish invasion?

Among Iraqi Kurds, there is of course much resentment about Turkey's intervention in Syrian Kurdistan. Politically, however, the relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds is very complicated. The Iraqi Kurds are divided between a couple of parties, mainly led by the Barzani (KDP) and Talabani (PUK) families. The KDP, dominant party in the regional government, has forged good relationships with Turkey. Turkey was not initially supporting any sort of autonomous rule in Iraq. It did not oppose the creation of a no-fly zone in Northern Iraq for the Kurds in 1991 but remained against Kurdish autonomy. Only after 2007, Turkey began to have good relations with Iraqi Kurds after a significant policy change. Turkey and the KRG established friendly relations, and Turkish investment went to the KRG. A new pipeline was opened, too, through which the KRG could sell its oil (illegally, according to the Iraqi government) to international markets. For these reasons (as well as due to past animosities between the KDP and the PKK), the KRG, especially the KDP, has supported or has not opposed Turkey's policy vis-à-vis the PKK and its affiliate parties, such as the PYD.

That's one dimension. The other dimension is that the Kurdish dominant force in the Syrian context now is the PYD. However, there are Kurds political parties who don't necessarily support the PYD in Syria, but they have become less influential and visible under PYD rule. The KDP tried to exert its influence in Syria through these non-PYD parties (with Turkish support), but this was unsuccessful. Consequently, there was rivalry between the KDP and PKK-PYD

in terms of who would call the shots in northern Syria in the calamity of the Syrian civil war. During that time, the KDP was side-lined. Overall, therefore, at the political level, I wouldn't think the KDP would have a major issue with Turkey's policies towards northern Syria.

What is your assessment of current relations between Kurds within the diaspora?

The Kurdish diaspora has always been vocal and political active. There has been much campaigning to criticise the Turkish government's actions and the US withdrawal from Northern Syria. Large segments of the Kurdish diaspora have been supportive of the PYD. There is definitely a strong sense of resentment among the Kurds, and especially after the Siege of Kobanî (2014–15), the diaspora has been carrying out advocacy work to generate support for Kurds in Syria.

That said, the template which exists in the region is in part 'copied' in the diaspora. The divisions within the Kurdish community continue, so you don't see many Iraqi Kurds and PKK supporters coming together for a cause or to do a campaign together. There are lots of different political parties, and they all seem to be doing their campaigning and advocacy work separately. Nevertheless, in the diaspora, there is a much stronger sense of a unified Kurdish identity, of "Kurdishness" with imagined, coherent identity traits, and strong associations to a territorial location. Historically, diaspora Kurds have been more forceful in promoting that idea of Kurdish unity. There are multiple reasons for this. It's not because they are not engaged with what is happening day-to-day in the region. They maintain contact, and some have very direct experience with political experience and suffering (this includes political exiles and asylum-seekers). Yet, at the same time, the Kurds in the diaspora can forge transnational links and work across state boundaries. As a consequence, there is more space to share ideas and goals. That kind of engagement gives them a sense of unity, I think. Secondly, the Kurds in the diaspora are very much aware that presenting a unified idea of Kurds and the suffering they experienced at the hands of states, within the international norms of human rights, and ethnic and minority rights. In this way they can attract more attention among the international community.

You have visited Iraqi Kurdistan to study the position of women in the region. Can you explain how the position of women in Iraqi Kurdistan (officially the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG) is different from that in the rest of Iraq?

It's hard to identify a whole group of women living in Iraqi Kurdistan, and generalise their experience, because individuals' and communities' gendered experiences are very much connected to factors like socioeconomic status, urban–rural differences, level of education, exposure to conflict and violence, ethnicity, religion, and so forth. I think the main difference between Iraqi Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq is at the legal level. The KRG has launched new strategies and policies since the 2003 international intervention in Iraq. They changed some of their penal laws and the personal status law, which determines inheritance, marriage issues, and citizenship. The Kurdish personal status law is much less discriminatory against women compared to that at the Iraqi state level. When you look at urban life in Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, even before the intervention Kurdish society has been relatively more secular. The Iraqi state was also secular under Saddam's rule and Iraqi women were generally very emancipated, but from the 1980s onward, religion and conservative norms gained in prominence. This happened because as Saddam was facing sanctions and economic deterioration, he made alliances with the religious authorities in Iraq. This wasn't the case in Iraqi Kurdistan. Politics was always more about the rivalling Barzani (KDP) and Talabani (PUK) groups, tribal affiliations, militias, and about countering the Iraqi regime.

Moreover, the KRG wanted to increase its legitimacy internationally, and forge good relations with international actors. The legal changes I mentioned were indeed supported by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). However, it's very important to remember that there has been a long-standing Kurdish women's rights movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, and they've really pushed the government to make changes. Relative safety in the region compared to the extreme violence and lack of rule of law in the rest of Iraq are other important factors that might lead to different experience of women in the KRG and the rest of Iraq. In a context of conflict, gendered experiences become more extreme but gender becomes less of a priority to states engaged in violent turmoil – women's issues are immediately de-prioritised, often not out of necessity but as an excuse.

Women's presence in the armed wings of Kurdish political movements has been prominently displayed by the movements and their supporters. What are the reasons behind this?

The PKK has had a long-term pro-gender approach. It defines itself as a feminist organisation and women are actively involved in all aspects of the organisation. Within the KRG, the PUK's peshmerga forces have had female battalions as well, even before 2003. Indeed, there is a leftist, egalitarian tendency which used to be quite prominent in the PUK. At the same time, the international normative framework was very conducive to receive this as a positive element in these organisations. I believe Kurdish political organisations pushed for women's inclusion and this gained them some degree of leverage in their interactions with international actors, though I don't think this push is exclusively instrumental. Still, women's visible presence serves as a marker to differentiate themselves from other political parties/movements, and perhaps from other ethnic communities/nations in the region.

How have the Yazidi communities in Iraq changed in the wake of the IS-perpetrated atrocities which, according to many, constituted a genocide (including the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Parliament)? How are they dealing with post-conflict trauma?

The Yezidi community as a small religious minority has had a precarious position in the states they lived in throughout the history. They have been persecuted several times and have usually lived in the margins of the states they live in, geographically, socially and politically. Yezidis have a vivid memory of their historical persecutions, shared by all community members. They define the attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) attacks as the 74th genocide against their community.

ISIS-perpetrated atrocities have impacted the society in significant ways. Yezidis in the diaspora and in Iraq express a need for change. They feel that they came to the brink of extermination and that their survival is under threat. They believe they cannot survive as a community in Iraq anymore if the situation does not change. Originally there were 500,000 Yezidis in Iraq, and most of the Yezidis from Sinjar, whom ISIS attacked, are displaced in Iraqi Kurdistan and some of the have taken refuge outside Iraq. Sinjari Yezidis can't imagine how they can go back because there is no guarantee they can return to their homes in safety. The Sinjari Yezidis I have spoken to don't want to give up their homeland forever, but they feel like there is no other choice but to immigrate to Australia, Germany, the US, and other places.

The trauma caused by the sexual and other forms of violence the Yezidi community experienced at the hand of ISIS has left lasting scars at both individual and community levels. While it's a conservative community, Yezidi religious authorities have made some efforts to reincorporate women survivors of sexual violence, as well as men who were forced to convert to Islam. They decreed in 2014 that forcibly converted Yezidis would be welcomed back to the society; they were all baptised again in the temple at Lalish. This has been a huge relief for the community. Women who were captured by ISIS were not sure whether they would be accepted back by their families, husbands or parents, some of them were afraid they might be killed (because of the practice of 'honour' killing).

Much work on trauma is being done, and the Duhok governor has allocated a lot of resources in the health sector to provide support. However, the numbers are huge and it's hard to access every woman and every family, especially those who live outside camps for internally displaced people (IDP). Some international support also exists, but overall it seems long-term aid and support will not be sustained once the humanitarian challenge is overcome.

Can you tell us a bit about your forthcoming book *Mapping Kurdistan: Territory, Self-Determination and Nationalism*? What has your research on Kurdistan revealed about issues of statehood, territory, and sovereignty in the international order?

Mapping Kurdistan looks at the Kurdish political engagement with the international community and predominant international norms throughout history. Its approach sits at the intersection of Historical Sociology and Constructivism in IR. It tried to move away from state-level analysis of Kurdish politics, which dominates most of the political analysis on the Kurds, to the international level. In the book, I look at the interaction between the Kurds and the international community. I do this with a focus on how Kurds, as non-state actors, engaged with the wider international normative

frameworks (around sovereignty, self-determination and political legitimacy and how these norms transformed historically) that made certain agendas or actions legitimate in different historical periods since the late nineteenth century.

In very general terms, I try to frame the wider international normative framework of each particular era in terms of identity, nationalism, and statehood. What does it mean to be a nation in the nineteenth century, and how were nations defined/identified? In the First World War, what were the processes that shaped nation-building? How were these processes and international normative framework different in the Cold War, and in the post-Cold War period? I trace this normative transformation through the concept of self-determination – how it was understood, how it was framed to obtain legitimacy, and how it was practiced in different world historical contexts. I situate Kurdish politics within each normative analysis in different historical periods and trace the changes in the way in which they engaged with international actors and promoted their goals and territoriality to gain support, leverage and legitimacy. To a large degree, the book is about how concepts and norms such as self-determination are not fixed and are subject to historical change.

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

Travel and visit the place you're doing your research on. Or if the research is not based on a case but an analysis of systemic processes, institutions, some degree of ethnography, contextualisation and historicization is always needed. This helps stay in touch with reality and makes theoretical engagement richer.