Interview – Katerina Dalacoura

Dr Katerina Dalacoura is Associate Professor in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her main areas of interest include the relationship between political Islam and international human rights norms, the concepts of culture and civilization in international relations, Turkish foreign policy and democracy and secularisation in the Middle East. She is the author of *Islamist Terrorism in the Middle East* and has contributed articles to *Economy and Society*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Democratization* and *International Politics*. Dalacoura has held a variety of academic positions, including as British Academy Mid-Career Fellow, has been involved in the European Commission Horizon 2020 sponsored project 'Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture', and worked for the International Institute of Strategic Studies. She is the recipient of a three year Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship on the topic of 'The International Thought of Turkish Islamists: History, Civilization and Nation' which will start in September 2021.

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

My field is the International Relations of the Middle East, a distinct area of study, separate from Middle East area studies and also the politics, economics, geography and anthropology of the region. The dynamism of the field can be seen in the growing number of academic publications produced within it and the number of academic posts opening up for teaching and researching it. The traditional concerns of the International Relations of the Middle East have been with war, terrorism, oil and 'Islam'. Recent trends, however, point to new and perhaps unexpected areas of study which reflect, dare I say, a more hopeful future for the region. Examples include a focus on de-sectarianisation, the future of democracy and political change, new insights about Islamism following its political failures after the Arab Spring, a shift towards secularisation and the strengthening of national loyalties, in the benign sense of overcoming parochial identities.

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

The start of my academic career, in the 1990s, was marked by a short flirtation with post-modernist thinking. I abandoned this, after a period of intense reflection, in the last year of my PhD. Since then I can only define myself as a liberal, in the broad sense. For me, liberalism encompasses potent traditions of tolerance and critique (some of which it shares with strands of post-structuralist and post-colonial thinking). It encourages self-reflection and self-doubt. I have constantly struggled with the major questions liberalism puts forward: how do we balance between different types of rights, between the rights of different individuals and between the rights of groups and individuals? In so far as I have made progress in my understanding of the world, it is in how we can strike a (slightly) better balance between these different demands, which are so difficult to reconcile.

I am a modernist and, while I recognise the problems, losses and crimes associated with modernity, I think progress is possible, though it takes much longer than people think and it is never uni-directional. I am a positivist (which does not mean believing in quantitative methodologies!) while accepting that, as human beings, we can only grasp reality in a partial way. Recognising that reality is historically contingent does not entail moral relativism and I see it as incumbent on us, especially as academics, to deepen and widen our knowledge and understanding.

Interview – Katerina Dalacoura
Written by E-International Relations

My academic work, by which I mean both teaching and research, is not normative and I do not see activism on behalf of any cause as consistent with my job as an academic. I try, in so far as I can, to stand back and not promote my political views or values, especially to my students. In turn, I am fiercely jealous of my own intellectual freedom: for example, I hate the very word 'curriculum', let alone 'doing' anything to it, though I value debate and raising awareness around the issue of what we teach and how.

In 2016-2019, you were involved in the 'Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture' (MENARA) project, which aimed to shed light on the historical, political, economic and social dynamics that are affecting the Middle East and North Africa. What were the main and/or surprising findings of the project? What were the key challenges faced by a project of this scale?

This was a major project, involving numerous partners (think tanks and universities) across Europe and the Middle East. Its main focus was the current Middle Eastern architecture and we offered an interpretation of where the region stands at the present moment, defined by the 2011 Arab uprising and the many conflicts (but also opportunities) which emerged from them. Our reports covered an impressive range, from broad methodological and epistemological discussions about how the Middle East should be studied, and how the term 'regional order' should be defined, to delivering the findings of focus group-based research in the region about future social and political trends. I myself led a report on gender and participated in two others on religion and regional identities. The project offered in-depth analysis and academic knowledge in an accessible and politically relevant way. The greatest challenge was working together with such a varied group of individuals and institutions so as to deliver the work we had promised. The even bigger challenge was finding ways to influence policy makers – whether we succeeded is, to my mind, unknown and perhaps unknowable.

The Middle East is going through crisis, because of deepening authoritarianism and conflicts. But it is a complex region with much potential. The achievements of the 2011 Arab Spring are not lost and will come to fruition in the future. The MENARA project captured a glimpse of these future possibilities, even though it naturally focused on the ongoing crises afflicting the region.

Throughout the history of the modern Turkish Republic, there has been an ongoing tension of 'East versus West'. However, you have pointed out that these concepts have not been static, with the 'East' being associated at differing times with Islam, anti-imperialism and even communism. How relevant is the 'East versus West' narrative today? Do these concepts serve as a useful tool for analysing Turkey's position on the global stage?

The terms 'East' and 'West' are ubiquitous when it comes to thinking about Turkey: Samuel Huntington may be scorned in our sophisticated academic circles but his influence is everywhere! West and East (with 'East' referring most often to 'Islam') are believed to exist, not only in the cultural sense but also as homogeneous entities, both outside Turkey and inside it. But West and East are mythical entities, which at the very least are not completely discrete from one another. Internally, contrary to a narrative which goes back to the late years of the Ottoman Empire and continues to be cultivated by both the AKP and its opponents, Turkey is no longer characterized by an East-West fracture, if indeed it ever had been. Turkish identity is marked by competing ideas about the definition of the Turkish nation, the meaning of ethnic identity and the relevance of Islam in public and personal life. The country of strong electoral majorities for the AKP has also polled in favour of joining the EU. Diverse self-identity perceptions are underpinned by a complex social reality.

Transnational relations enmesh Turkey in the so-called 'West', especially Western Europe, where a large Turkish diaspora lives, and Turkey trades with and is dependent economically on the European Union more than any other region. Political, economic and cultural ties to the United States are dense. Defence cooperation with NATO members is institutionalized, ticking away beneath the headlines, as do bilateral security, intelligence and other institutional partnerships with the EU. Serious tensions and problems between Turkey and the US and the EU do exist, but they do not signify a Turkish decision for a permanent parting of ways.

Turkey's former Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, believes that Turkey can lead a civilizational synthesis

Interview – Katerina Dalacoura

Written by E-International Relations

of East and West informed by 'Islamic values'. Would you agree? Are you aware of any examples of other countries or leaders who similarly believe that they could lead such a synthesis?

In his long career as an academic and as a politician in Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu actively put forward the proposition that Turkey could be the leader of an East-West synthesis, in both civilizational and political terms. He was tapping into a number of intellectual traditions and ways of thought, Islamist and secular, particular to Turkey (I am not aware of examples of similar formulations in other countries). But he has not succeeded: politically because the 'synthesis' idea fell victim to failures in Turkish foreign policy and intellectually because his perspective is informed by an essentialist position about 'Islamic values' and a mischaracterisation of the West. My own view is that we should let go of these categories altogether. This would make talk of 'synthesis' and of Turkey being a 'bridge' redundant.

Do ideological considerations guide interstate relations in the Middle East? Are there any notable examples of where Turkey, or other countries in the region, have recently taken actions based on 'Islamic values'?

Ideology does inform interstate relations in the Middle East but it is one of many factors at play. Ideological considerations occassionally come to the fore, depending on circumstance, though it can be difficult sometimes to distinguish between rhetoric and reality. When it comes to Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, I would suggest that the AKP government has always been driven by the desire for power projection, security preoccupations and a pragmatic mix of both national and narrow party political interests. Ideological concerns, consisting of a fluid blend of Islamist, neo-Ottoman and 'civilizationalist' ideas, mingled with a hefty dose of Turkish nationalism, have played a variable, significant but auxiliary role. The Arab uprisings of 2011 opened up opportunities for the AKP to pursue its ideological objectives and they became more central to its policies, if only in some areas or clusters of relationships. However, they receded after 2015, when a confluence of domestic and regional factors caused the onset of a transactional, 'post-ideological' phase.

Later in 2021, you will be commencing with your Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship project 'The International Though of Turkish Islamists: History, Civilization and Nation'. What are your hopes for the project with regards to non-Western versus Western IR? Do you foresee any particular challenges in conducting the necessary fieldwork?

This is an International Relations project which engages with the concept of a 'global IR'. Three overlapping themes about 'the international' will constitute the project's core: history and historiography; civilisation and culture; nation and state. Using insights and tools from global intellectual history, I will trace how Turkish Islamist thought, from the late nineteenth century until the present, evolved in conversation with philosophical and political debates in both European and Muslim settings. As in my other work, I hope to query and ultimately challenge the very categories of 'Western' and 'non-Western' on which theoretical debates in IR are increasingly centred.

The main outcome of the project will be a scholarly monograph, to be published by a university press (to be decided). Most of the work will involve textual analysis, looking at the writings of both iconic and minor Islamist intellectuals, and the ideologies of religious associations and political organisations in Turkey. I will spend blocks of time in Turkey over the three years of the Fellowship, for fieldwork. This is always challenging – 'fieldwork' can mean so many different things and be conducted in such varied ways. When I am in Turkey I am a foreigner, of course, and a Greek, at that (I am also British but in Turkey I am seen as a Greek). Although this is an obstacle, being an outsider also opens opportunities for communication and acquiring insights that would not exist for an 'insider'. One of my issues with culturalism in all its forms – and the many other 'identity'-centred views that afflict our age – is that it equates understanding with being an 'insider', rather than seeing the insider's perspective as one of many.

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

There are three tests, in my mind, for good academic work: meeting the 'what?', the 'so what?' and the 'then what?' criteria. The first means that one's work must be accessible and understandable (I sometimes read or listen to academic work which I find impenetrable or is an 'edifice of words'; I used to think it was me, but now I am not so

sure). The second means that one's work must not be trivial. It can be narrow – and narrow is often best – but not trivial. The third means thinking through the implications of one's work, in so far as it has a normative content. Critique is necessary, but what is the next step? A responsible moral position is one that does not end with critique but puts something positive in the place of what is being critiqued.