

If It Smells Muslim: Lemon Cologne, Hebrew Lessons and Turkish Identity

Marcy Brink-Danan

Turkey smells like lemons; to be precise, it smells like what Turks call “limon kolonyası,” lemon cologne: an antibacterial concoction of fragrance, water, and alcohol. While rose, lavender, and even hazelnut colognes exist, it is the lemon version that Turks sprinkle abundantly to clean diners’ hands before or after a meal, to welcome a guest arriving after a voyage, and to revive someone after fainting. I have yet to enter a Turkish home that doesn’t have a little glass bottle of cologne or a Turkish institution without an industrial sized bucket of the stuff hidden in a utility closet.

If, given the widespread use of cologne, observers of Turkey would find the statement, “Turks smell like lemons,” uncontroversial, what of the following: “Muslims smell like lemons?” Surely “Turk” and “Muslim” are not interchangeable terms, even in a state where the majority of Turks are Muslim. Yet pundits, politicians, tourists, and theologians regularly call Turkey a “Muslim” or “Islamic country,” an affront to the secularist designs of the republic’s founders and the fact that separation of mosque and state is enshrined in Turkish law. Adopting the French political model of *laïcité*, the founders of the Republic of Turkey imagined a public sphere dramatically emptied of religious symbolism.

I was reminded of the slippery equivalence between Muslimness and Turkishness while sitting in the basement of a Jewish community center in Istanbul in 2002. Turkish Jewish adults used the center’s café as a makeshift classroom for Hebrew lessons offered by an Israeli living in Istanbul. Over home-cooked food, students struggled with the Hebrew for “allowed” and “forbidden,” constructing practice phrases such as “It is forbidden to eat on Yom Kippur” or “We are allowed to eat on Ramadan.” The teacher, who knew little Turkish, taught class in English (for some of the students this meant that they got two language classes for the price of one). Toward the end of the meal, the cook offered everyone a splash of lemon cologne. Watching the Israeli teacher’s quizzical expression, one of the students smiled broadly, explaining this cultural practice to him in English: “Muslims do this.” Then, just as quickly, she turned to me to say, in Turkish:

“Turks do this.” Here I was, eating kosher food, speaking Ladino, Turkish, and Hebrew with Jews whose deep integration into Turkish cultural life included the commonplace use of lemon cologne at the end of a meal. Why, then, would my friend say, “Muslims do this” in light of evidence to the contrary?

This slippage is what anthropologists call “indirect indexicality.” That’s a fancy way to say that relationships between things and what they stand for often skip a mediating step, creating a seamless relationship between signs that might otherwise not be linked, such as: lemon cologne–user = Turk = Muslim; ergo: lemon cologne–user = Muslim. One might expect Turkish Jews, the very folks whose citizenship belies the fact that Turkishness equals Muslimness, to have a heightened consciousness about what counts as Turkish or Muslim. Yet, despite their deep historical roots in the region, full Turkish citizenship, and fluency in Turkish, Turkish Jews are regularly reclassified as *yabancı* (Turkish for stranger or foreigner) in everyday interactions with Muslim Turks. If Jews (specifically Romaniote and Karaite communities) lived in the region now called Turkey before there even were Turks, why are they considered foreign today? Through what linguistic and social practices is one made—or makes oneself—a stranger? What does a turn of phrase about lemon cologne tell us about hegemony in Turkey?

Turkish Jews stand in a paradoxical relationship to Turkish hegemony for their pronounced role as authors and advocates of proto-republican reforms in the late Ottoman era. Despite the Jews’ loyalist attitude, the early years of the Republic of Turkey saw an increase in xenophobia in which minority languages were banned and devastating riots occurred. During the early years of the republic, becoming Turkish, and the fear of not being perceived as Turkish enough, engendered a profusion of effacing social practices among Jews and other minorities in Istanbul, such as adopting Modern Turkish instead of ethnic minority languages, “Turkifying” personal names, and removing other markers of difference from the public sphere. An excessive tax, the *Varlık Vergisi* instituted during World War II, pilfered small

Jewish (and other non-Muslim) businesses to the point of bankruptcy and was a major impetus for Jewish emigration from Turkey. *Varlık Vergisi* is commonly translated as “Capital Tax” or “Wealth Tax;” we might, however, consider an alternate translation of *varlık* as “presence,” which focuses attention on the devaluation—both financial and symbolic—of non-Muslim presence. While a muted version of Sunni Muslim identification was nonetheless incorporated into the vision of a secular Turkish Republic—and has reemerged with a vengeance since the 1990s—the languages, practices, and beliefs of Turkey’s religious and ethnic minorities took on a marked and taboo character.

Despite these hardships, some non-Muslims, albeit a tiny fraction at less than 1 percent of the population today, remained in Turkey. Currently sixty to sixty-five thousand Armenians, twenty to twenty-five thousand Jews, and three thousand Greeks live in Turkey. These traces of difference were overwhelmingly erased from the hegemonic narrative when the Republic of Turkey redefined the status of its minorities as full citizens. Fifty years ago, scholars of Turkey considered Turkish identity to be a zero-sum game, arguing “a non-Muslim in Turkey may be called a Turkish citizen, but never a Turk.” During ethnographic research in Turkey in 2002–03, I found this to be sometimes true and sometimes not. Jews today work and play in the same venues as Muslim Turks, go to the same bars and movie theaters, wear the same clothes, speak Turkish like their compatriots and, increasingly, marry Muslims. If prior to the 1960s intermarriage was quite rare, by 1992 marriages between Jews and Muslims in Turkey was recorded at 42 percent, with the rate of intermarriage nearly doubling between 1990 and 2001.

Turkish Jews have some habits that are unlike those of their Muslim neighbors and others that reveal their integration into the national Turkish fabric. In addition to the requisite bottle of lemon cologne, Jewish homes in Istanbul have collections of items from Israel: Dead Sea soaps and creams fill bathroom vanities, Israeli good luck charms hang on bedroom walls, and Israeli foodstuffs, such as Elite-brand coffee, Wissotsky tea,

or Max Brenner chocolates, are regularly served at Jewish social gatherings. These artifacts of contact between Turkish Jews and Israelis (usually duty free offerings) should not be surprising given the history of such a huge out-migration of the former after the establishment of the State of Israel, during which family networks became separated; an estimated one hundred thousand Jews of Turkish origin now live in Israel. Turkish Jews' knowledge of Israel, however, is generally concealed in public, as anti-Semitism and the complicated relationship Turkish Jews have with Israel (and, perhaps more importantly, the relationship that Islamists and leftists *perceive* them as having with Israel) generate incentives to maintain "*kayadez*," the Ladino term for "low-profile."

In a radio interview following a 2010 Israeli raid on a Turkish flotilla attempting to break the blockade of Gaza, the Turkish Prime Minister condemned Israel's actions yet warned that anti-Israel sentiments, evident in the massive street protests at the time, should not be allowed to spill over into anti-Semitism against Turkish Jews: "Our Jewish citizens have, as members of the Turkish people, defended, and continue to defend, the right position of Turkey to the utmost." He went on to insist that "looking with hatred upon

our Jewish citizens . . . is not acceptable." But why should Turkish Jews be punished for the actions of a foreign government? By saying that Turkish Jews should not be punished for Israel's actions, the Prime Minister reinforced the seemingly natural and logical connection between Turkish Jews and Israel in the first place. Reading these comments recalled an image that circulated in the Turkish press just a year earlier of proprietors of a Turkish social club posing proudly for photos, pooches in arms, next to a sign reading "No Jews or Armenians allowed; Dogs Welcome!" as a protest to Israel's invasion of Gaza in late 2009. The perception that Jews are "naturally" less Turkish than their Muslim neighbors by virtue of their possible affiliation with Israel are apt examples of indirect indexicality gone awry.

These semiotic slippages exemplify how identity performances are expressed by way of casual indexical assumptions. These sloppy associations, in which citizenship is symbolically reassigned or entire religious traditions are conflated (why, otherwise, should Armenians and Diaspora Jews be banned from a Turkish club as a reprisal for Israel's military actions?) reveal how social meaning—especially stereotype—is produced less through

denotation (direct indexicality) than through connotation (indirect indexicality).

Reluctance to challenge the implicit Muslim-ness of Turkey in public makes sense in the current political climate, but doesn't explain why my friend, who has since moved to Israel, described the use of cologne as a "Muslim" practice in private. While I doubt she would credit a slip of the tongue to her decision to emigrate, I have no doubt that a lifetime of moments of non-identification with the majority contributed to her alienation from Turkish life. In light of the regularity with which opinion-makers assert that Turkey is a "Muslim" country, the onus remains upon those of us who study Jews from "Islamic" lands (a phrase that is still common in Jewish Studies) to provide evidence that undoes ideological assumptions about what is Muslim and what is not, such as lemon cologne and other iconic Turkish things.

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