

Reactions to the Negative Portrayal of Turks in a Seventeenth-Century Multiple-Text Manuscript

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Context

This study focuses on two couplets and a one-sentence response written adjacent to them in the margin that demonstrates how Turks were perceived by the Arabs and two different reactions to how they were portrayed. They are found in a multiple-text manuscript (*cönk*) held in İBB Atatürk Library Muallim Cevdet Manuscript Collection MC_Yz_Ko564, folio 74a. Sized 180x180-160x165 mm, the manuscript in question includes numerous works, including a translation of *Pend-i Attâr*, Būşirî's *Qaşıda al-Burda*, Suleymân Çelebi's *Vesiletü'n-Necât*, anecdotes of Abū Ayyūb al-Anşārî, Ĥamdullāh Ĥamdî's *Ķiyāfetnāme*, Nihādî's (?) translation of *farā'iz*, Ķadrî's translation of a hundred hadiths in verse (written before 1623)¹, another translation of forty hadiths, an anonymous debate between several personified narcotics, fatwas issued by Ibn Kemal (d. 940/1534) and Şun'ullāh Efendi (d. 1021/1612), as well as various poems, letters, and prayers. Given this miscellany's contents, we may deduce that it was compiled as early as the seventeenth century. Accordingly, the couplets included may very well have been written prior to the seventeenth century, and the accompanying marginal record either in the same century or sometime after that.

The first and more important one of the two couplets is written in Arabic and advocates rather emphatically that burning in Hell is preferable to being a neighbor to Turks in Heaven. One of the reactions to it takes the form of a couplet, albeit written in

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¹ The date was deduced from another manuscript dated 1623. See Nihat Öztoprak, "Klâsik Türk Edebiyatı'nda Manzum Yüz Hadîsler" (PhD diss., Marmara University, 1993), 51.

a macaronic style. Whereas the first line affirms the idea expressed in the original couplet *in Turkish*, the second line advises *in Arabic* to distance oneself from Turks even if that Turk is his own brother. Most likely penned sometime later, the marginal record states that the Arabic couplet is a form of blasphemy. Moreover, the one who inserted this record similarly crossed out the parts of the couplet he deemed offensive. Contextualizing the two reactions requires adopting of a two-facet approach: (1) the negative perception of Turks among Arabs in the pre-modern era, especially given that the couplet was written in Arabic, and (2) the mindset that perceived this couplet to constitute blasphemy.

Turks were perceived in an overwhelmingly negative light by medieval Arabs. In a general sense, Turks were depicted in various poems, proverbs, and hadiths as being callous enemies against whom that Arabs needed to seek protection. For instance, the following proverb advises Arabs to maintain their distance from Turks and not to associate with them, “*Tarāki tarāki min ṣuḥbatīl-atrāki.*”² Likewise, the following hadith advises the Muslims not to touch the Turks until they have touched the Arabs, “*Utruku’t-turka mā tarakūkum.*”³ In a similar vein, Turks have been identified as Gog and Magog, even described as a barbaric and brutal people in early historical sources. In later sources, however, we observe praise for Turks’ bravery, devotion, and military prowess. Al-Jāhez (d. 255/869), for instance, endeavored to eulogize Turks’ virtues in his *Manāqeb al-Turk*, thus overcoming the prejudices held against them. It is remarkable that the majority of all negative discourse appears prior to the Turks’ embrace of Islam. With following their conversion, we notice a gradual increase in laudatory discourse.⁴ As such, the Turks have not been portrayed in a monolithic, static manner. Still, as the couplets bear witness, exceptions may exist throughout history.

One explanation for these offensive words’ effacement may be found in the concept of *alfāz al-kufr*. This concept is defined as utterances that contravene revelation (*wahy*),

² Ramazan Şeşen, “Eski Arablar’a Göre Türkler,” *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 15 (1968): 30.

³ Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, 4302, accessed December 3, 2022, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4302>.

⁴ Ahmet Karadeniz, “İslam Kaynaklarında Türk İmgesi ve Onun Değişimi,” *Genel Türk Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (2019): 32-33.

thus causing one to leave the fold of Islam. These utterances can manifest as open revilement of religious values and injunctions, mocking religion, and deeming what Allah has ruled haram to be halal and vice versa.⁵ Handled predominately in the Ḥanafī school and fatwa books, *alfāz al-kufr* constitutes a broad corpus of literature among the Ottomans, both as a section in catechisms (*‘ilm-i ḥāl*) and individual treatises.⁶ Because apostasy has a dramatic impact on how one is treated both in this life and the next, Muslim scholars have undertaken painstaking efforts to raise awareness among Muslims not to utter *alfāz al-kufr*, whether intentionally or unintentionally.⁷ It appears that this marginal writing is a consequence of this consciousness. Moreover, the probable date of the manuscript’s composition coincides with the peak written Islamic catechisms dedicating a separate section to *alfāz al-kufr*.⁸ Concerning *alfāz al-kufr*, the Arabic couplet also reminds us of a question asked to Ebussuud Efendi: “What does the sharia require if Zayd states that he will refuse to enter the same heaven that women also enter?” Ebussuud’s response to this question is telling: “If he refuses to enter, [let him go] to Hell.”⁹ Both this question and the couplet are based on the same mentality of rejecting entry to heaven if an undesired group also resides there. Ebussuud’s reply is meaningful in this respect. Moreover, beyond the scope of *alfāz al-kufr* but still within the larger bounds of sharia, it should be emphasized that Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Kemal ruled insulting Turkishness to constitute a crime requiring *ta‘zīr* punishment.¹⁰

Although the poet’s identity is unknown, he or she was presumably an Arab who had had negative experiences with Turks. It is also reasonable to suggest that these couplets are, in fact, a rewriting of the aforementioned proverb and hadith. Regarding

⁵ S. Nuri Akgündüz, Zübeyir Bulut, “Akâidden Fıkha: Hanefî Fıkıh Kitaplarında Elfâz-ı Küfür,” *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi* 6, no. 2 (2017): 911.

⁶ Muharrem Kuzey, “Osmanlı’da Elfâz-ı Küfür Literatürü ve Önemli Eserler,” *TALİD* 14, no. 27 (2016): 206.

⁷ Kuzey, “Osmanlı’da Elfâz-ı Küfür,” 229.

⁸ Tijana Krstic, “You Must Know Your Faith in Detail: Redefinition of the Role of Knowledge and Boundaries of Belief in Ottoman Catechisms (*‘ilm-i ḥāls*),” in *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450-c. 1750*, ed. T. Krstic, D. Terzioğlu, (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 168.

⁹ Pehlul Düzenli, “Osmanlı Hukukçusu Şeyhülislâm Ebussuûd Efendi ve Fetvaları” (PhD diss., Selçuk University, 2007), 35.

¹⁰ Ahmet İnanır, “İbn Kemal’in Fetvaları Işığında Osmanlı’da İslâm Hukuku” (PhD diss., İstanbul University, 2008), 286.

why the second couplet begins in Turkish but continues in Arabic, this may be an attempt to forestall public indignation among readers who do not know Arabic. Consequently, these couplets are one instance of the negative portrayal of Turks in various texts. The marginal record claiming the original couplet to constitute blasphemy similarly demonstrates the praxis of a vibrant manuscript culture that approaches texts critically and the reception of *alfāz al-kufr* as a concept within Ottoman literature.

Keywords: Couplet, marginal record, 17th century, Turk, Arab, blasphemy

Transcription

Law kānati l-atrāku fi l-jannati jāran Bu söz küfürdür

La-taraktu l-jannata wa-ḥtartu nāran

Hoş buyurmuş bunu ol gevher-i pāk

Utruku't-turka wa law kāna aḥāk

Translation

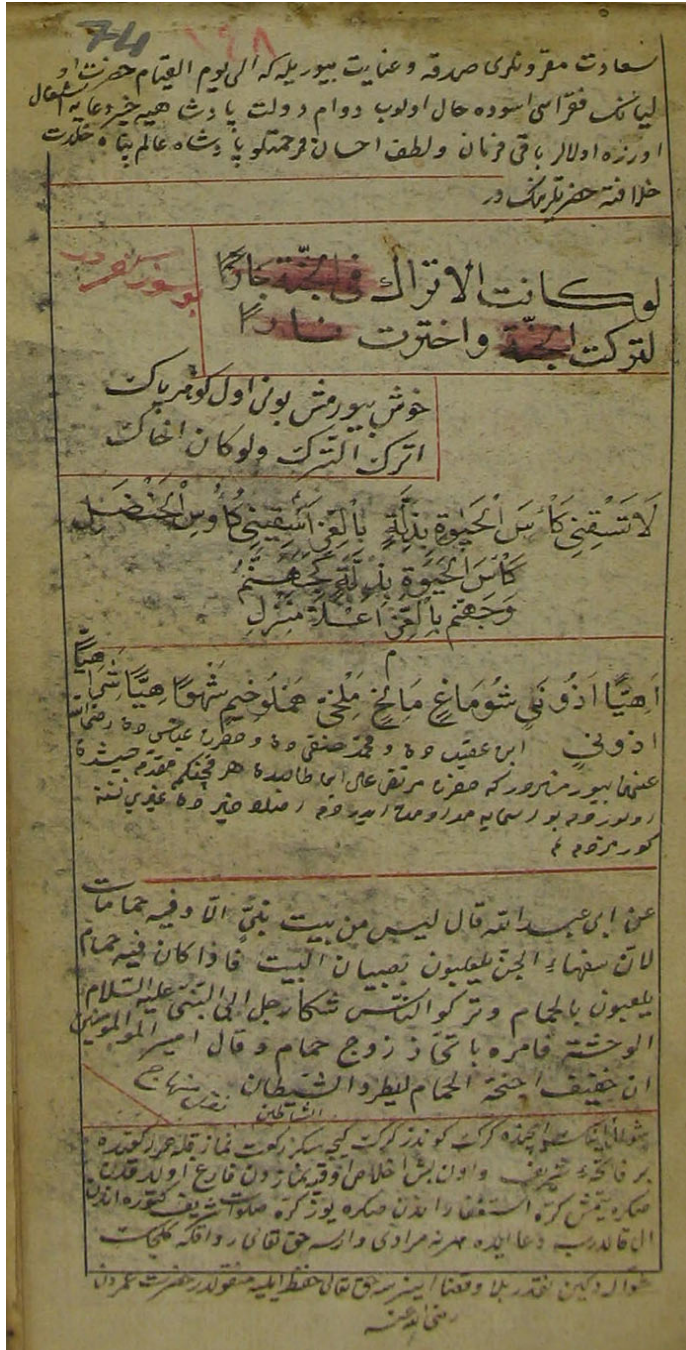
Should Turks be my neighbor **in Heaven** *This statement is blasphemy*

Preferring **Hellfire**, I would definitely leave **Heaven**

The immaculate gem uttered this pleasantly

Leave the Turks, even if he is your brother

Facsimile



Kuzey, Muharrem. “Osmanlı’da Elfâz-ı Küfür Literatürü ve Önemli Eserler.” *TALİD* 14, no. 27 (2016): 203-231.

Öztoprak, Nihat. “Klâsik Türk Edebiyatı’nda Manzum Yüz Hadîsler.” PhD diss., Marmara University, 1993.

Şeşen, Ramazan. “Eski Arablar’a Göre Türkler.” *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 15, (1968): 11-36.

Cite this article:

Benli, Şeyma. “Reactions to the Negative Portrayal of Turks in a Seventeenth-Century Multiple-Text Manuscript” *Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions* 1/1 (Winter 2023): 11-17. <http://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-23-01-03>