Halal Turkey

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey is cool nowadays. Istanbul bustles with designer high-rises, fusion restaurants in the gentrifying Beyoglu neighborhood, and a Picasso exhibit in the Sabanci museum on the Bosphorus. The city's new museum of modern art overlooking the Ottoman Topkapi Palace teems with visitors. Istanbul has all the signs of a city that is coming of age as a world-class metropolis.

What is more, an air of confidence is palpable across the country. After three decades of chronic high inflation, price increases in Turkey are now in the single digits. With the exception of persistent high unemployment, most economic indicators are positive. Low inflation has ushered in a sense of stability, leading to a powerful economic boost: since 2001, the Turkish economy has grown by more than 30 percent. Thanks to these developments, "mortgage" is now a word in Turkish, and middle-class Turks are within easy reach of their first homes. The start of accession talks with the European Union has further added to Turkey's sense of strength. Istanbul's hotels are full of foreign businessmen searching for investment opportunities.

Yet beneath this air of cosmopolitanism and economic stability, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Ankara seems intent on making Turkey a bit more halal. On November 10, 2005, the Turkish daily Milliyet reported that the AKP had started a process of designating foods and meats halal, or religiously edible for Muslims.

The AKP has instructed Turk Standartlari Enstitusu (the Turkish Institute for Standards, or TSE), a government body responsible for setting up standards for the consumer market, to issue an official standard designating halal foods. The TSE is now working on a halal standard, which is to go into effect in fall 2006, legally reshaping the consumer market.

"What is wrong with designating all foods as halal?" asked an AKP deputy when I inquired about the pending standard. "After all, we are all Muslims, and we all eat only halal foods anyway," he added. Indeed, at first glance, the halal standard initiative seems benign. Nothing appears wrong with it until, of course, one remembers that Turkey is a secular country, and in secular countries, governments do not tell their citizens what they can eat on religious grounds.

In secular societies markets regulate food behavior, and this is the case in Turkey. Turkish companies already sell halal food because that is what the consumers want. Representatives of Turkey's meat and poultry industries confirmed this fact in interviews. Small poultry shops such as Kumes Caddebostan in Istanbul, as well as large poultry and meat processing firms, including Beypilic, Erpilic, and Pinar Et, repeat the same answer: "Our products are halal." A Pinar Et representative adds that in order to satisfy the customers' expectations for halal food, the company receives a document from the mufti in Kemalpasa, where Pinar Et's slaughterhouse is located, certifying that all the company's meats are halal.

None of this is surprising: 99.98 percent of Turkey's population is nominally Muslim and around 90 percent of Turks practice Islam at some level. This means most Turks demand halal food, which the market provides. Indeed, with

pork being available only at a few fancy restaurants and a number of grocery stores in districts with Christian or expatriate populations, the chances of accidentally running into non-halal food in Turkey are almost nil.

If all food is already halal, why does the AKP want to set up a state halal food designation? The AKP's explanation is that this would help exports. Pointing at Malaysia, which already has a halal designation, TSE chief Kenan Malatyali told Milliyet on November 10, 2005, that if Turkey also had a halal designation, this "would help increase exports." At first, this analogy seems fine, except Turkey is a secular country and Malaysia is not. And if the aim is to satisfy foreign companies, why not simply attach a halal designation to exports on request?

Another problem with the halal standard is that Muslims have differing definitions of what constitutes halal. Clerics in Turkey suggest a very straightforward, Turkish definition of halal. Ismail Isi, a representative of Diyanet (Turkish higher body for religious affairs), says, "So long as it does not mix with pork or other non-permissible animal products, all food is halal." He adds, "To be halal, an animal has to be slaughtered following a certain Muslim ritual," involving the citation of the besmele (a short prayer) and other rules of conduct, such as not torturing the animal during the slaughter.

It is this simple and direct in Turkey. In Malaysia, on the other hand, the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) has a detailed, seven-page explanation of what constitutes halal. JAKIM says that food that comes in touch with najis (filthy) things, including alcohol, "during its preparation, processing, packing, storage and transportation" is not halal.

If certain foods were labeled non-halal, people would stop buying them even if such foods are technically halal. Sooner or later, merchants would realize that in order to stay in business they would need to keep a "halal" designation, for which they would have to stop selling non-halal food, and also avoid serving and marketing alcohol.

I had my suspicions confirmed at a small butcher shop in Istanbul, a neighborhood mom-and-pop operation. "The opposite of the word halal is not non-halal" says my butcher. "It is haram. And haram does not just mean non-halal; it is what you wish to your enemy if you see them choke." Asked how customers would respond if he offered two kinds of meat, both halal, but one carrying an official halal label, my butcher replies, "If I offered them halal and haram meat? Everyone would buy only halal and I would go bankrupt if I continued to sell meat not labeled halal."

A halal standard would shape Turkish market behavior right away. Regardless of how un-Turkish the standard's characterization of halal is, once published, the AKP text would redefine halal in Turkey. That makes the actual wording of the standard critical. The TSE is mum on this issue: its personnel refused to be interviewed on the halal standard, which is being drafted away from public scrutiny.

What is more, the halal standard would be the death knoll for Turkey's long and peaceful tradition of drinking. After the standard began to be enforced, alcohol would disappear from stores and restaurants. Drinking would be relegated from the social shores of the Bosphorus to the social underground. What is even more worrisome, the standard would create a faultline between those who eat and drink "halal" and those who dare to eat and drink "haram."

Perhaps the AKP means well by following the Malaysian example. However, what is good for Malaysia is not necessarily good for Turkey. Malaysia is a multireligious society. Muslims, who constitute 50 percent of the country's population, live among large numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, Shamanists and Sikhs, and have to watch what they eat in order not to accidentally consume the non-halal foods of other religious communities. Such a risk does not exist in uniformly Muslim Turkey.

The halal standard is a step that would not only make Turkey look less like itself, but also turn life's simple pleasures of eating and especially drinking into combustive social issues. Turkey needs to use its newfound confidence to promote itself, not to emulate others.

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