

PROPER APPLICATION OF HALAL SLAUGHTER

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Summary: *Until now, in many countries of the Middle East the understanding of animal welfare, especially during slaughter, has generally been expressed in terms of religious precepts and humane ethics rather than through regulations and legislation. The OIE's international standards are compatible with the requirements of Islamic Sharia, which call for the protection of animals against cruel practices and make specific provisions for humane slaughter; therefore, it is practical to support the proper application of halal slaughter, since it will be easily accepted by the public.*

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1. Introduction

Animal slaughter in the Middle East region needs to be improved. Slaughterhouses in most Middle East countries need to make huge efforts to achieve better animal welfare and food safety. In spite of the fact that the majority of populations in the region are Muslim, halal slaughter is not being implemented as it should.

This report will not deal with the stunning of animals prior to halal slaughter as there are many far more important elements than stunning that could be prioritized to improve animal welfare.

The report covers the following topics:

- Halal slaughter and its objectives in Islamic Sharia;
- How animals should be treated according to Islamic Sharia;
- The reality of animal treatment during transport and slaughter;
- Rules for proper application of halal slaughter;
- Conclusion: Measures proposed to improve application of halal slaughter.

The majority of the populations in the Middle East region follow Islam, while others follow Christianity and Judaism. Religion is the foundation and major source of the culture and ethics in the region, and most people believe it is the main driver of all aspects of their lives. For example, Muslims believe that Islam provides guidance on food, culture, ethics, compassion, kindness, humanity, traditions and many other important values.

Until now, in many countries of the region the understanding of animal welfare, especially during slaughter, has generally been expressed in terms of religious precepts and humane ethics rather than through regulations and legislation.

2. Halal slaughter and its objectives in Islamic Sharia

In the region, religion constitutes the important major component of the personality of the people, irrespective of the religion in question; indeed, religion is the root and main source of the culture and ethics in the region. The majority of the population of this region follows the religion of Islam and others follow Christianity and Judaism [1], and most people, in particular Muslims, believe that religion is the main driver of all aspects of their lives.

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The OIE's international standards are compatible with the requirements of Islamic Sharia, which call for the protection of animals against cruel practices and make specific provisions for humane slaughter; therefore, it is practical to support the proper application of halal slaughter, since it will be easily accepted by the public. It is clear that the Islamic rules on the process of halal slaughter were intended to fulfil two main requirements: safe food for the consumer, and a quick, humane, and relatively painless death for the animal.

3. How animals should be treated according to Islamic Sharia

A deeper look at the teachings of the Qur'an and tradition will reveal teachings of kindness and concern for animals; nonetheless, the Qur'an, clearly supports the use of animals, including for food.

"We have made animals subject to you, that ye may be grateful". Surrah Al Haj 22:36

"There is not a moving (living) creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book, and then unto their Lord they (all) shall be gathered". Surrah Al-Anam 6:38

"While non-human creation is subjugated to human needs, the proper human role is that of conscientious steward and not exploiter" (Surrah Al-Anam, 11). Also, in Surrah Al-Anam, 12, the earth was not created for humans alone: *"And the earth has He spread out for all living beings".*

Ritual (Halal) slaughter is said to follow the principle of compassion for the animal being killed and food safety for the consumer. According to hadith literature, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him [pbuh]) said: "If you kill, kill well, and if you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters."

There is a rich tradition of the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) concern for animals to be found in the Hadith and Sunna. He cursed and chastised those who mistreated animals and gave praise to those who showed kindness. He also instituted radical changes against the practice of cutting off the tails and humps of living animals for food.

One Hadith quotes Muhammad (pbuh) as saying: "A good deed done to an animal is as meritorious as a good deed done to a human being, while an act of cruelty to an animal is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being". Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was especially vocal in his disapproval of the cruel practices of notching and slitting of ears of animals. He also said: "The worst of shepherds is the ungentle, who causes the beasts to crush or bruise one another."

For the slaughtering of an animal to be lawful, several measures must be taken by the person performing the slaughter. This is to ensure the highest benefit to both the animal and the consumer. In this regard, the Prophet of Islam said: "God has prescribed the most suitable way of doing everything [...]. Do it well, when you slaughter an animal for sacrifice, you should sharpen your knife, give comfort to the animal, slaughter it in such a way that its life departs quickly and it is not left to suffer for a long time". He also said "Do you intend inflicting death on the animal twice — once by sharpening the knife within its sight, and once by cutting its throat?"

4. The reality of animal treatment during transport and slaughter

In many cases, the way animals are handled before and during transport is cruel; they are marched on foot or transported in overcrowded trucks. Also, during the journey, animals lose weight and are beaten unnecessarily during handling procedures, and they are generally not fed or watered en route. Animals —whether young or old, big or small— are tied together in groups of two or four in order to reduce the number of animal minders or personnel needed on the journey; this is a source of injury and fatigue for the animals.

Animals are badly beaten while they are herded together and driven fast to reach markets and abattoirs on time. It is an excruciating sight to watch them stumble and fall, and then be whipped until they get up. Similarly, needless suffering is inflicted on animals that have to travel three or four days together in overcrowded, ill-ventilated, humid, hot trucks. Animals are often housed or confined in primitive conditions without proper shade and kept tightly tethered. They are treated as a commodity rather than as living, sentient beings.

In many cases, slaughterhouses are not equipped with an unloading ramp, the floors are slippery and many animals lose their footing as they move forward, there are not enough tools for controlling animals at the point of slaughter, animals are slaughtered in front of one another, and these are just some of the many defects. Animals are often struck and beaten to make them enter the slaughter facilities as they resist moving towards the point of slaughter, knowing that death awaits them — they are certainly “dying twice”. As already indicated above, it is clear that all too often animals are treated as a commodity rather than as living, sentient beings.

The question that we should ask, therefore, is this: do existing practices comply with Islamic principles?

5. Rules for proper application of halal slaughter

Islam has also laid down rules for humane slaughter, including that:

- Transport of animals to the slaughterhouse and their unloading should be comfortable;
- Animals should have a pre-slaughter rest and be well fed and well looked after at the point of slaughter;
- The animals must be healthy at the time of slaughter;
- Slaughter must be performed by a Muslim (who is of sound mind, mature, and fully understands the Islamic procedure and conditions for slaughtering of animals);
- Operator competence is of great importance in order to carry out satisfactory halal slaughter;
- Animals that are slaughtered should be securely restrained, particularly the head and neck, before cutting the throat;
- Slaughtering tools and other implements used must be for the slaughter of halal animals only;
- The knife must be long enough, razor sharp and without blemishes and damage; the animal's carotid arteries, jugular veins, trachea and oesophagus must be severed. The spinal cord should not be cut and the head should not be severed completely, so as to induce immediate and massive haemorrhage;
- Slaughtering must be done once only; the slaughtering implement must not be lifted from the animal during slaughtering; any lifting is construed as one act of slaughter; multiple acts of slaughter on one animal are prohibited;
- The animal is slaughtered in such a way that its life departs quickly and it is not left to suffer;
- Bleeding must be spontaneous and complete; animals should not be shackled and hoisted before bleeding is completed;
- Further preparation and dressing of the carcass must be delayed until all signs of life and cerebral reflex have disappeared.

6. Conclusion

Many current practices that are not in accordance with these teachings may result in great cruelty to animals. Unfortunately, many Muslims and Islamic religious leaders are not aware of the cruelty that is inflicted on animals during handling, transport, pre-slaughter and at slaughter.

Measures proposed to improve the application of halal slaughter

From the various points discussed above, one may conclude that progress could be achieved by taking the following measures:

1. Sensitise religious leaders and the relevant authorities with regard to the cruelty that currently occurs, especially during transport and slaughter.
2. At the regional level, the OIE Regional Representation for the Middle East and the Chief Veterinary Officers of Member Countries in the region should take the lead in promoting the proper application of animal slaughter in accordance with OIE standards, which also correspond to halal rules. Non governmental organisations (NGOs), religious authorities, producers, consumer associations and other stakeholders should also be included in this process.

3. At a national level, the issuing of legislation on animal welfare, including animal transport and slaughter, and its implementation, in accordance with OIE standards, is highly recommended.
4. Improve slaughterhouses by equipping them with all the facilities required for the proper implementation of animal welfare standards, including the following: correct design of the facility, unloading facilities and lairage; availability of feed and water; ante-mortem inspection; control of animal movement within the slaughterhouse; equipment for restraining animals; slaughter boxes.
5. Consumer associations should take the lead to highlight the regulatory partnerships for halal slaughter, animal welfare and food safety and quality.
6. Effective and continuous training and education for all personnel working in abattoirs, and especially slaughterers.
7. Publication of “Best practice for halal slaughter”, which should be made available to personnel in slaughterhouses and also to the general public.
8. Monitoring and auditing of the performance of slaughterhouses (facilities, personnel and management) should be a continuous process and should be carried out by the relevant authority.
9. Support for the organisations, institutes, NGOs and centres monitoring halal slaughter and animal welfare.
10. The OIE Regional Representation for the Middle East and the Member Countries are working jointly on the Regional Animal Welfare Strategy (RAWS), which represents the required action plan for the Region and includes the standards that Member Countries consider to be necessary to improve animal welfare in the Region. Proper application of halal slaughter is one of the main components.

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