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Modern Halal Food: Islamic Ethics, Global Standards, and Emerging Challenges

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Abstract

The global halal food system has become a central concern for religiously observant consumers, policymakers, and multinational food corporations. Halal, as defined in Islamic jurisprudence, encompasses not only dietary prohibitions but also broader ethical considerations such as animal welfare, cleanliness, and the integrity of the supply chain. In an era of globalization, industrial-scale food production, and complex international trade networks, maintaining the authenticity of halal products presents multifaceted challenges. This paper critically examines the principles of halal from both classical Islamic sources and contemporary interpretations, highlighting their practical application in modern food processing, certification, and distribution. The study explores the diverse frameworks of halal certification across different countries, revealing significant variations in standards, auditing processes, and consumer trust mechanisms. It analyzes case studies from both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority regions, demonstrating how cultural, regulatory, and economic factors influence the implementation of halal standards. Furthermore, the paper addresses contemporary challenges such as traceability in global supply chains, fraud prevention, technological integration in halal verification, and consumer awareness in a rapidly evolving market. The ethical dimensions of halal consumption are emphasized, linking religious compliance with broader objectives of sustainability, social responsibility, and public health. Finally, this research provides strategic recommendations for policymakers, certification bodies, and industry stakeholders. By harmonizing international halal standards, leveraging technological innovations for supply chain transparency, and promoting awareness among consumers, the global halal food ecosystem can achieve greater credibility, efficiency, and sustainability. The paper underscores that the halal food system is not merely a religious requirement but also a framework for ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible consumption in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *Halal Food, Islamic Jurisprudence, Global Standards, Certification, Supply Chain Transparency, Consumer Awareness, Sustainability, Ethical Consumption, Food Industry, International Trade.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The concept of halal (lawful) food occupies a central position in Islamic law and daily life, governing not only dietary habits but also ethical consumption and spiritual well-being. In the modern globalized world, the halal food system has evolved from a purely religious requirement into a significant economic and regulatory domain, influencing

international trade, certification industries, and consumer markets. The global halal food market is estimated to be worth trillions of dollars, reflecting its growing importance beyond Muslim-majority societies.¹

With increasing Muslim populations in Europe, North America, and other non-Muslim regions, halal food has become a transnational phenomenon. This expansion has raised critical questions regarding authenticity, standardization, certification, and compliance with Islamic principles in diverse socio-legal environments.² The intersection of religion, economics, and globalization has thus transformed the halal food system into a complex and multi-layered structure.

From an Islamic perspective, halal consumption is not limited to the permissibility of food items but encompasses broader ethical values such as cleanliness (ṭahārah), wholesomeness (ṭayyib), and justice in production and trade. Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Baqarah:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا.

"O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good."

(Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:168)

This verse highlights that halal is intrinsically linked with ṭayyib (wholesome and ethical), suggesting that the halal food system must address not only legality but also quality, safety, and ethical integrity.

1.2 Research Problem and Rationale

Despite the rapid growth of the halal industry, several challenges persist in aligning modern food production systems with authentic Islamic principles. One of the key issues is the lack of uniform global standards for halal certification. Different countries and organizations apply varying criteria, leading to inconsistencies and consumer confusion.³

Moreover, industrial food processing, genetic modification, and mass production have introduced complexities that classical Islamic jurisprudence did not directly address. Questions regarding stunning methods in slaughter, cross-contamination, and the use of additives and enzymes require contemporary ijtihād (independent reasoning) and scholarly engagement.⁴

Another critical concern is the commercialization of halal, where economic interests may overshadow religious authenticity. The rise of halal branding has, in some cases, reduced the concept to a marketing label rather than a comprehensive ethical system. This necessitates a critical re-evaluation of the halal food system from both Islamic jurisprudential and global regulatory perspectives.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyse the foundational Islamic principles governing halal food.
2. To examine global halal certification standards and regulatory frameworks.
3. To identify contemporary challenges in the halal food industry.
4. To propose a harmonized and ethically grounded model for the halal food system in the modern world.

1.4 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the core Islamic principles that define the halal food system?
2. How do global halal certification standards differ, and what challenges arise from this diversity?
3. What are the major contemporary issues affecting the integrity of halal food?

4. How can Islamic ethical principles be integrated into modern food production and regulation systems?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways:

- It provides a comprehensive analysis of the halal food system from both Islamic and global perspectives.
- It contributes to academic discourse by integrating fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) with modern regulatory frameworks.
- It offers practical insights for policymakers, halal certification bodies, and industry stakeholders.
- It highlights the ethical dimension of halal, emphasizing its relevance in addressing contemporary issues such as food safety, sustainability, and consumer trust.

2. Islamic Principles of Halal: Qur'an, Sunnah, and Juristic Foundations

2.1 Concept of Halal and Tayyib

The Islamic concept of halal extends beyond mere permissibility and is deeply rooted in a comprehensive ethical and spiritual framework. It governs not only what is lawful to consume but also how it is produced, processed, and acquired. The Qur'anic directive combines halal (lawful) with tayyib (pure, wholesome, and ethical), emphasizing that lawful consumption must also meet standards of quality, safety, and moral integrity. Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Baqarah:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا.

"O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth that is lawful and good."

(Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:168)

This dual requirement highlights that a product may be technically lawful but still fall short of Islamic ideals if it lacks ethical or hygienic integrity. The contemporary scholar Professor Muhammad Hashim Kamali argues that tayyib includes considerations such as environmental sustainability, humane treatment of animals, and transparency in food production.⁵

2.2 Qur'anic Foundations of Halal Food

The Qur'an provides clear guidelines regarding permissible and prohibited foods, forming the foundation of the halal food system. It explicitly prohibits certain categories, including carrion, blood, pork, and animals slaughtered without invoking the name of Allah. Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Mā'idah:

حُرِّمَتْ عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَيْتَةُ وَالْدَّمُ وَلَحْمُ الْخِزْيِيرِ.

"Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, and the flesh of swine." (Surah

Al-Mā'idah, 5:3)

These prohibitions are not arbitrary; rather, they reflect both spiritual and physical wisdom. The classical exegete Al-Qurṭubī emphasizes in his commentary Al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'an that such dietary laws aim to preserve human health, dignity, and moral consciousness.⁶ Additionally, the Qur'an encourages moderation and prohibits excess. Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-A'rāf:

وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا.

"Eat and drink, but do not be excessive." (Surah Al-A'rāf, 7:31)

This principle connects halal consumption with broader ethical values such as sustainability and responsible consumption.

2.3 Sunnah and Prophetic Guidance

The Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) provides detailed guidance on halal practices, particularly in matters of animal slaughter (dhabīḥah), cleanliness, and ethical conduct.

The Prophet emphasized mercy and compassion toward animals, establishing ethical standards that remain highly relevant in modern industrial food systems.

The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, as recorded in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ الْإِحْسَانَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ.

"Indeed, Allah has prescribed excellence in all things." (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Hadith No. 1955)

This ḥadīth underscores the obligation to ensure humane treatment of animals during slaughter, including minimizing suffering and ensuring proper handling. It also reflects the broader Islamic principle of iḥsān (excellence), which extends to all aspects of food production and consumption.

The Prophet (ﷺ) also emphasized the importance of lawful earnings and ethical sourcing. He said, as recorded in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ طَيِّبٌ لَا يَقْبَلُ إِلَّا طَيِّبًا.

"Allah is pure and accepts only that which is pure." (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Hadith No. 1015)

This highlights that halal is not limited to the physical nature of food but includes the ethical integrity of its entire supply chain.

2.4 Juristic Interpretations and Schools of Thought

Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) has developed detailed rulings on halal food through the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The four major Sunni schools of thought Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbalī, generally agree on core principles but differ in certain details, such as the permissibility of specific slaughtering techniques or seafood categories. For example, the Ḥanafī school adopts a more restrictive view on seafood, while other schools permit a broader range. Similarly, juristic debates exist regarding modern practices such as pre-slaughter stunning, machine slaughter, and the use of food additives derived from non-halal sources.⁷

The great scholar Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī emphasizes in his work Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn that lawful consumption contributes to spiritual purification (tazkiyah) and moral discipline, linking dietary practices with broader ethical development.⁸

2.5 Objectives of Shariah (Maqāṣid) and Halal Food

The halal food system aligns with the higher objectives of Islamic law (Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah), particularly the preservation of:

- Life (Ḥifẓ al-Nafs): Ensuring food safety and health.
- Religion (Ḥifẓ al-Dīn): Upholding divine commandments.
- Intellect (Ḥifẓ al-'Aql): Avoiding harmful substances.
- Wealth (Ḥifẓ al-Māl): Promoting fair trade and lawful earnings.

By integrating these objectives, halal transcends ritual compliance and becomes a comprehensive ethical system that addresses both individual well-being and societal welfare. As Professor Kamali observes, "The maqāṣid framework provides a dynamic methodology for addressing emerging halal issues while remaining faithful to Islamic principles."⁹

3. Global Halal Standards and Certification Systems

3.1 Emergence of Halal Certification

As the demand for halal products expanded beyond Muslim-majority countries, the need for standardized certification and global recognition became critical. Halal certification ensures that products meet not only Islamic dietary requirements but also international food safety standards.

Countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia pioneered structured halal

certification frameworks, which now serve as benchmarks for global trade. The system involves inspection of the entire supply chain from sourcing and processing to packaging and distribution ensuring compliance with Islamic principles.¹⁰

3.2 International Organizations and Standards

Several organizations play pivotal roles in developing halal standards:

- The Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC): Established to harmonize halal standards across OIC countries.
- Halal Food Council of Europe (HFCE): Provides guidance and certification in European markets.
- ISO/TC 34/SC 17 Halal Food Standard: International efforts to standardize halal practices globally.¹¹

These standards encompass hygiene, slaughtering practices, ingredient verification, traceability, and labelling, thereby providing assurance to consumers worldwide.

3.3 Certification Processes and Challenges

Certification involves several critical steps:

1. Audit of Ingredients: Verification that all raw materials are halal and ethically sourced.
2. Inspection of Slaughtering Methods: Ensuring compliance with dhabīḥah principles, including invoking Allah's name and humane treatment of animals.
3. Processing and Packaging Control: Preventing cross-contamination with non-halal substances.
4. Labelling and Traceability: Maintaining transparency for both consumers and regulatory authorities.

Challenges include inconsistencies between certifying bodies, varying interpretations of halal, and the cost of certification for small producers. Additionally, technological developments such as artificial meat and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) pose new ethical and regulatory questions.¹²

3.4 Regional Case Studies

Malaysia

Malaysia has one of the most advanced halal certification systems, regulated by the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM). It integrates strict religious compliance with international trade requirements, making Malaysian halal products highly competitive globally. As researchers Bhat and Fayaz note, "Malaysia's centralized system has become a global benchmark for halal certification integrity."¹³

European Union

In Europe, halal certification is decentralized. Different countries follow varied standards, creating challenges for cross-border trade. Organizations like HFCE aim to harmonize practices but face obstacles due to differing national regulations and consumer expectations.¹⁴

Middle East

Saudi Arabia and the UAE focus on both religious compliance and market expansion, exporting halal products worldwide. Their certification authorities often collaborate with international partners to ensure global acceptability.

3.5 Ethical and Economic Implications

Halal certification is not only a religious obligation but also an ethical and economic mechanism. Certified halal products ensure consumer confidence, uphold religious and moral principles, and open lucrative markets in non-Muslim countries.

Economically, the global halal food market is estimated at over USD 2 trillion, with significant growth in Europe and North America. Ethical considerations include humane treatment of animals, environmental responsibility, and fair labor practices, reflecting the broader Islamic ethical paradigm.¹⁵

4. Contemporary Challenges in Halal Food Systems

4.1 Modernization and Industrialization

The global food industry has undergone significant industrialization, which poses unique challenges for halal compliance. Mass production, automated slaughtering, and mechanized processing can sometimes conflict with traditional Islamic practices, particularly concerning the humane treatment of animals (dhabīḥah). Ensuring religious observance in large-scale operations requires stringent monitoring and certified supervision.¹⁶

4.2 Supply Chain Complexity

Global halal supply chains involve multiple stages: sourcing, processing, packaging, transportation, and retail. Complexity increases the risk of contamination with non-halal substances, especially in countries where halal-specific logistics infrastructure is limited. This creates challenges in traceability and requires comprehensive auditing mechanisms.¹⁷

4.3 Emerging Technologies

4.3.1 Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)

GMOs present ethical and religious questions in halal compliance. For instance, if a food ingredient is derived from non-halal sources or involves enzymes from non-permissible animals, its halal status may be compromised.¹⁸ Scholars and certification bodies continue to debate the permissibility of GMOs under Islamic dietary law.

4.3.2 Lab-Grown Meat and Alternative Proteins

Advances in cellular agriculture have introduced lab-grown meat as a potential solution to sustainability challenges. However, its halal status depends on the origin of the cells and the process of cultivation, making certification complex.¹⁹

4.4 Regulatory and Standardization Issues

While countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have centralized halal certification authorities, regions like Europe face decentralization. Differing national standards lead to inconsistencies, affecting trade and consumer trust. Harmonization initiatives, such as those led by SMIIC, aim to create global consistency but must navigate political, cultural, and commercial interests.²⁰

4.5 Consumer Awareness and Trust

Consumer confidence is critical to the growth of halal markets. Mislabelling, lack of transparency, or low awareness about halal standards can undermine trust. Companies must invest in education, clear labelling, and third-party verification to maintain credibility.²¹

4.6 Sustainability and Ethical Considerations

Modern halal food systems are increasingly evaluated through the lens of sustainability. Ethical sourcing, environmental responsibility, animal welfare, and fair labor practices are not only compliance requirements but also enhance the moral and economic value of halal products. Integrating Islamic ethics with contemporary sustainability norms can strengthen the global halal brand.²²

5. Case Studies: Regional Halal Practices

5.1 Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia

Southeast Asia represents a mature halal market with well-established certification

frameworks.

- Malaysia: The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) provides centralized halal certification, ensuring compliance across production, import, and retail. Malaysia has developed a global reputation for halal integrity, integrating Islamic principles with modern food safety standards. ²³
- Indonesia: The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) oversees halal certification, mandating labelling for both domestic and imported products. Consumer awareness campaigns enhance trust in halal labelling, although regulatory enforcement varies across regions. ²⁴

These countries demonstrate successful integration of Islamic jurisprudence with contemporary food technology and international trade standards.

5.2 Middle East: United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia

- UAE: The Emirates Authority for Standardization and Metrology (ESMA) enforces halal standards aligned with GCC regulations. The UAE leverages halal certification as both a religious obligation and a strategic economic tool to expand global halal trade.
- Saudi Arabia: The Halal Certification Department ensures compliance with Shariah law, emphasizing dhabīḥah and ethical sourcing. Religious authorities collaborate with international exporters to maintain credibility in global markets. ²⁵

Middle Eastern practices highlight the balance between religious rigor and commercial scalability in halal food systems.

5.3 Europe: Germany, United Kingdom, and France

Halal practices in Europe illustrate the challenges of decentralized regulation and multicultural consumer bases.

- Germany: Halal meat is mainly supplied by private certification bodies. While consumer demand is growing, the absence of a unified national framework leads to variability in halal quality and compliance. ²⁶
- United Kingdom: The Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC) provides supervision for slaughterhouses, focusing on dhabīḥah and animal welfare standards. Consumer education initiatives are crucial to trust-building.
- France: Halal certification is fragmented, with both religious and private bodies issuing certificates. Compliance challenges exist due to differing interpretations of Islamic dietary law. ²⁷

These case studies underscore the necessity of harmonized standards, transparent supply chains, and cross-cultural understanding in non-Muslim majority regions.

5.4 Global Lessons from Regional Case Studies

1. Centralized vs. Decentralized Certification: Centralized authorities (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia) facilitate trust and international trade, while decentralized systems (e.g., Europe) require greater consumer awareness and transparency.
2. Integration with Modern Standards: Successful regions combine Islamic principles with global food safety and traceability standards.
3. Economic and Ethical Synergy: Halal certification can be both a religious compliance measure and an economic strategy, enhancing ethical production practices and international trade competitiveness.

6. Recommendations and Policy Implications

6.1 Strengthening Halal Certification Standards

1. Harmonization of Global Standards: Islamic authorities and international food safety organizations should collaborate to develop unified halal certification

guidelines. This will reduce confusion in export markets and enhance consumer trust.²⁸

2. **Transparency in Supply Chains:** Mandatory traceability of halal products from slaughterhouses to retail points ensures integrity and prevents fraudulent labelling.²⁹
3. **Regular Audits and Compliance Checks:** Certification bodies must conduct periodic inspections, especially for exporters, to maintain credibility and alignment with both Shariah and international food safety standards.

6.2 Consumer Awareness and Education

1. **Public Education Campaigns:** Governments and religious authorities should educate consumers about halal principles, certification processes, and their ethical significance.
2. **Digital Platforms for Verification:** Mobile applications and online databases can provide consumers real-time access to verified halal products and certification details.³⁰

6.3 Integration with Modern Food Technologies

1. **Ethical Innovation:** Encourage halal-compliant innovations in biotechnology, food additives, and processing techniques without compromising Islamic principles.
2. **Sustainable Practices:** Promote environmentally responsible practices in livestock rearing and food processing while adhering to halal standards. This synergy aligns ethical production with sustainability goals.³¹

6.4 Policy Recommendations for Non-Muslim Majority Countries

1. **Government Recognition of Halal Standards:** Non-Muslim majority countries should formally recognize credible halal certification to facilitate trade and protect consumer rights.
2. **Cross-Cultural Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between local authorities, religious organizations, and industry stakeholders to address interpretation differences in halal practices.
3. **Support for Research and Innovation:** Policymakers should invest in halal food research, including nutrition, supply chain optimization, and market expansion strategies.

6.5 Future Research Directions

- **Impact of Digital Verification Tools:** Examine how blockchain and AI-based platforms enhance halal supply chain transparency.
- **Consumer Trust Dynamics:** Study socio-cultural factors influencing halal consumption in multicultural societies.
- **Sustainability and Halal Ethics:** Analyse the integration of halal principles with sustainable food production systems globally.

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