Religion and Lamb Consumption

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Introduction

It is a pleasure for me to have the opportunity to talk about some aspects of my religion, Islam, and their impact on economy in the US in this symposium. The title of the lecture may seem “funny” for some and may seem “serious” for others. Anyhow, it is serious.

What I will try to do in the following is to give a very brief introduction about Islam in US and Islamic rituals and their relation to lamb consumption, then I will give some figures about the economic impact of Muslims consumption of lamb and goat on the US economy. Finally, I will give some recommendations for those who would like to approach the lamb market in Muslim communities whether in US or internationally.

Muslims: market size

The number of Muslims all over the world is estimated as about 1.5-1.8 billions according to different estimates [1-2] and constitute at least 26% of the world population. This population is distributed with different proportions all over the world. The highest densities of Muslim population are in Africa and Asia. Also, Muslims are from all the ethnic groups on earth e.g. Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, Jews, white Americans and Europeans, Africans, Indo-Paks, etc. Islam annual growth rate (1994-1995) from UN [2] is 6.4%, which indicates a very rapid growth rate. The estimates of Muslims in US range between 5-10 millions [1-2] according to different criteria of estimation and their percentage is about 2%-3.8% according to the previous estimates. The above figures are important to indicate the market size for lamb consumption whether in US or internationally. Unfortunately, we do not have estimates for the lamb consumption on Muslims in US but we can have some assessment by relating Muslim population percentage in US to that of UK because we have reliable estimates for the consumption in UK. Although Muslims make up just five percent of the population in UK, they consume an estimated 20% of all lamb and mutton produced in UK [3]. If we make a simple relation between the above estimate and the worldwide level, we may say that Muslims consumes around 85% of the world lamb and mutton production and that around 16% of the US consumption of lambs is by Muslims.

Why and when Muslims consume lambs?

Islam requires from its followers some few obligations, which are called “pillars of Islam” these are:
1- Testimony that there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Messenger.
2- Five prayers a day.
3- Fasting one month a year i.e. “Ramadan”.
4- Paying a yearly tithe from your earning which depends on the type of earnings.
5- Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca once in your life upon capability.
In the fifth pillar, it is required by all who attend Hajj to sacrifice a lamb or mutton during these days (estimates for the number of performers of Hajj annually are about 2 millions). Also, it is strongly recommended that all other Muslims who could not go to Hajj to sacrifice also in the same time period every year, (which represent a huge percentage of consumption annually). This recommended practice is done in one of the Muslims religious feasts called “Eidul-Adha” or the feast of sacrifice, which glorifies the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) of his elder son Ishmael (Ismael). The sacrificed animal is called “Udhiya”.

Another religious practice in which Muslims sacrifice a lamb, goat or mutton is the birth of a new baby, male or female. It is strongly recommended in such an occasion to sacrifice at least one lamb, goat or mutton. These are the primary practices in which Muslims consume lambs, goats, or muttons.

What are the requirements for animal slaughtering to be accepted islamically?

The accepted animal slaughtering in Islam is called sometimes “Zabyha” or generally “Halal” meat.

Here are strict requirements for the slaughtering of animals, The Prophet Mohammed (peace be on him) said "Allah has ordained kindness (or excellent) in everything. If slaughtering is to be done, do it in the manner, and when you slaughter, do it in the best manner by first sharpening the knife and putting the animals at ease".

Islamic Rules of the Slaughtering [4]

The laws are translated into practice, as follows: "According to the Islamic (Shariah) law" the legal purification of the flesh of animals requires that the following conditions be met.

1) Slaughterman must be mature and pious Muslim of sound mind who understands fully the fundamentals and conditions relating to Halal slaughter and be approved by the religious authorities. According to another considerable opinion in Islamic Shariah the slaughterman maybe from the People of the Book (Christian or Jew) and not necessarily a Muslim.

2) The Halal animals and birds species for which approval is sought, these animals and birds will be slaughtered by an authorized Muslim slaughterman in accordance with the Islamic Law. The means by which the animals and birds will be rendered unconscious (whilst ensuring that they are NOT KILLED prior to the slaughter ritual), should be slaughtered by a sharp knife, which is capable of making the animal bleed by severing blood vessels, respiratory tract and esophagus.

3) NO name other than Allah's should be mentioned over the animal at the time of slaughter.

4) The name of Allah should be mention while slaughtering. This is clear from Qur'anic texts and ahadith, Allah Ta'ala say: Then eat of that over which the name of Allah has been mentioned, if you believe in His signs. (6:118) And do not eat of that over which the name of Allah has not been mentioned for truly that is impiety (6:121)
The name of Allah at slaughtering is "Bismillah, Allahu Akbar"
5) Specifications must also include the checks required by the slaughterman supervisor or Halal inspector. These will include the type and frequency of inspection of the stunning apparatus to be carried out by the works electrician, or mechanical aspects. The frequency of checking on the operating skill of stunner, Muslim slaughtermen and how often an animal will be removed from the process before sticking to ensure it has been properly stunned.

6) Specifications must also include the cleanliness, Halal slaughter laws are based on cleanliness, sanitation, and purity. All utensils must be clean and free of contamination from any unlawful or harmful substances.

7) Any by-product or derived ingredients must also be from duly animals to be for Muslim consumption.

The above conditions are the strict guidelines. There are some disputes in some of them that may relax some of these conditions like what I have pointed out in the first condition. Anyhow, the best way to check this is to cooperate with the local religious authorities for local distribution or with the international religious organizations for international distribution and they will welcome such cooperation so much.

Sheep and Goats in US and Halal Slaughter

In one of their circulation, the US Department of Agriculture stated the following concerning the importance of Halal slaughter to Sheep and Goats industry in US: [5] “Contrary to the overall declining trend in the United States’ lamb, mutton, and goat consumption, there is a growing, high-value market to be found among the American Muslim population.

Entrance into this particular market, as well as Muslim markets overseas, requires Halal certification. Halal is an Islamic religious term used to describe food that is “lawful” to eat. It is similar to Kosher in the Jewish religion in many ways. Many slaughterhouses in the United States already meet the standards set by the American Muslim community for Halal status. The USDA has had a policy on Halal labeling in effect since 1996. Halal requirements are not difficult to meet, and the USDA believes that any American slaughterhouse should be able to comply with the new Halal policy. The general requirements for Halal slaughter state that the animal must be humanely treated en route to and at the slaughterhouse. The throat must be slit in a certain way, while the word “Allah” (God) is said. The blood must then be drained from the body. It is vital that the sheep carcass does not come in contact with pork, or anything that has ever touched pork, at the slaughterhouse.

The U.S. government is negotiating with several major Muslim countries to gain acceptance of U.S. Halal standards as equivalent to their own. This will open more markets to U.S. lamb and mutton exporters, as at least twenty Muslim countries require Halal certification for meat. There are 1.5 billion Muslims throughout the world, so the potential market for Halal meat is very large. Currently the United States is negotiating with Saudi Arabia (any agreement would extend to the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain), Egypt, and Malaysia.
There is a market in Saudi Arabia every year for live sheep that meet Halal standards for sacrifice: over the age of six months, in good health, and showing no defects. Between one and two million sheep are sacrificed at the end of the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) every year. New Zealand and several Middle Eastern and African states currently dominate the live export market to Saudi Arabia.

A good example of the benefits of Halal certification is New Zealand's export lamb and mutton industry. New Zealand, which does not have the incentive of a domestic Muslim population like the United States, has had an official Halal program since 1983. “Today New Zealand is the largest exporter of Halal slaughtered lamb and mutton in the world. As their markets in Muslim countries increased, New Zealand expanded Halal production. In 1991 there were 29 approved Halal slaughtering plants, and by 1998 the number increased to 42. Approximately 78 percent of all sheep slaughter (and 50 percent of beef) in New Zealand is Halal certified today. They ship Halal meat to both Halal and non-Halal markets. New Zealand found Halal slaughter to be so easy and so profitable that it was cost effective for them to send animals to Halal slaughterhouses regardless of whether the meat would be exported to a Halal market or not.”

I used this long quote to point out the importance that US Department of Agriculture foresees in the Muslim markets whether domestic or international and the New Zealand experience concerning that market.

What to be done to get into the Market?

The following are some recommendations concerning the entrance of the local and international markets:
1- Try to get contact with religious authorities in your area to have their advice on the size of the market and the best way to meet the Islamic regulations concerning lambs, goats and muttons.
2- Once you know the way publicize as much as you can.
3- Give facilities to the individuals and the whole sales as well.
4- Be flexible in accommodating the different needs to your customers.
5- It would be of advantage to hire Muslim slaughterman as part of your team.

References

1- Institute of Islamic Information and Education (IIIE) estimates based on CIA World FactBook
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2- http://islamicweb.com/begin/results.htm
3- The Muslims Council of Britain
   http://www.mcb.org.uk/links/leftmenu1.php
4- Australian Halal Food Services
5- United States Department of Agriculture