Taking an Anti-Sacrificial Stance: The Essentializing Rhetoric and Affective Nature of Meat Consumption in Islam

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There is not an animal on earth, nor a two-winged flying creature, but they are communities like you. —Qur’an, Surah Al-Anam 6:38
Dressed in a green headscarf, to highlight the importance of environmental sustainability and vegetarianism for Muslims, and al-Khadrā [Arabic: حضرّة; green]¹ being color of Islam, Suraiyya Benazeer came in peace. Walking toward the Taj-ul-Masajid one of Asia’s largest mosques, with her fellow women PETA-India volunteers, all was well, at first. However, once Bhopal’s Muslims, who were attending Taj-ul-Masajid, understood what Benazeer and her colleagues were doing—holding signs that read “Make Eid Happy for All. Try Vegan” in Urdu and English—some reacted far from favorably. As Benazeer and the other volunteers approached Taj-ul-Masajid, a crowd gathered and started yelling at the volunteers, then tried to hit them. The police helped them escape being beaten by the crowd. After receiving death threats, Benazeer went into hiding and restricted her social media from public access (Ayub 2014; Fatah 2015; People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals 2014; Srivastava 2016).

While the attack on Benazeer and her fellow PETA-India volunteers illuminates the contentious nature of meat consumption as it relates to Islam, it also touches upon more subtle considerations of the identity politics of consumption, including nationalism and xenophobia,² challenges to the masculinist resistance to women’s advocacy and activism in the public sphere (Hong Tschalaer 2015; Kirmani 2009; Schneider 2009), and the cultural framing of meat consumption. This cultural framing has been called “meat culture” by Annie Potts (2016). Her work on veganism and vegetarianism, and that of Potts and Philip Armstrong (2016) on vegan intersectionality, situates these practices as markers of difference in relation to the dominance of carnism.

In this work, which has been informed by lived experience and field research in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA),³ we interrogate rhetorics of anti-veg(etarian) an discourses in transnational contexts. Building on the scholarship of Potts, Armstrong, Timothy Pachirat, Yamini Narayanan, and others, most notably feminist Sara Ahmed and her theorizing about emotion, we address the essentializing rhetoric of carnism and the affective nature of animal slaughter in Muslim religious practice, most notably for Eid al-Adha [Arabic: عيد الأضحى; Feast of the Sacrifice]. We critique specific discursive constructions and enactments
of the emerging Muslim vegan movement, and how the movement’s discourses re/imagine or resist the practices of and perceptions about Islam.

In our own efforts to reflect on our world views and practices, it is important to situate ourselves in this project. Our self-reflexivity, positionality, lived experience, and our respective pre-medical and pre-veterinary science studies and critical ethnographic research backgrounds inform our study. Nora is a Syrian-French-American pre-med undergraduate student who aims to specialize in surgery and serve in *Médecins Sans Frontières* in the MENA. She grew up on a variety of foods from both European and Middle Eastern cultures and, thus, knows there are alternatives to meat-centric diets. Nora notes that vegan eating in the MENA is nothing new. A wide variety of popular traditional dishes, such as falafel, lentil soup, hummus, and grape leaves, are vegan. After moving to her university house-share Nora found she was not eating much meat after moving out of her family home. She fully transitioned to vegetarian within her first year at university, shopping at the Middle East Market near her university.

Daniella is a biology student who plans on studying veterinary surgery. Animal malpractice is the primary reason she decided to abstain from animal products, as well as one of the many reasons she has entered the pathway to veterinary practice. She was born in London, one of the most progressive centers of veganism (Larsson 2019), where, this year, ethical veganism was ruled as a “philosophical belief,” and covered as one of nine “protected characteristics” by the UK Equality Act 2010 (Catholic Concern for Animals 2019). Daniella decided to convert to a plant-based diet at the young age of 12 and has been a committed vegan ever since. Her most recent international veterinary study focused on the illegal trade of exotic animals during a veterinary practicum in Belize (Fedak-Lengel 2019).

Lara grew up as a lacto-vegetarian in the 1970s never having heard that label—her primarily vegetable diet emerged from effect and aesthetics rather than politics—she just avoided eating things that looked, as she then called it, “gross.” Only later in her youth did she connect her disgust reactions to the grotesque nature of industrial animal agriculture. Peers, neighbors, and extended family were pronounced in their collective opinion that her diet was odd; one of her elementary school peers
went so far as to say she would die before she was 30. By that age she was not dead; rather she was living in the Mediterranean North African nation of Tunisia on a Fulbright Research Scholarship where she began, albeit in modest ways, advocating for plant-based diets and for environmental sustainability in the MENA. While her dissertation field research did not focus on either topic, rather on Arab Islamic women’s performativity, what she observed and experienced in-field, such as the use of ancient Roman cisterns in Carthage as make-shift garbage dumps, the overly enthusiastic serving of meat-centric meals by her various hosts, and her delight in discovering a restaurant that would serve her *couksi bil barsha sfinaria* [couscous with a large amount of carrots], inspired her commitment to MENA environmental sustainability and veganism. Since her field research she has been involved in university partnership building initiatives on women and the media and on environmental journalism in Tunisia and Algeria.

We bring together our own commitment to animal welfare, environmental sustainability, community-based initiatives, our specific scholarly areas of veterinary science, biological science, MENA gender and women’s studies, and work on Islamophobia and culturally sensitive healthcare approaches to analyze the discourses and perceptions of veganism and vegetarianism, particularly as they intersect with identity, culture, and power. In order to do so, we apply a methodological approach that blends, first, our own aforementioned field research, second, critical discourse analysis, and, third, a medical and health sciences case study approach. We are guided by researchers (see, for instance, Shirazi, cited in Animals in Islam 2013; Taylor and Robichaud 2004), who have conducted critical discourse analysis in Muslim and Middle Eastern contexts. For example, in his work on social movements in the Middle East, Farid Shirazi (2013) uses critical discourse analysis to analyze meanings, contexts, and processes of sense-making in discursive spaces “where agency and text, symbols, speech and other communicative objects are generated to better understand the meaning of discourse” (30). We draw from medical and health sciences research on vegan and vegetarian practice among Muslims because “the case study approach allows in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life settings” (Crowe et al. 2011, para 1). Units of analysis in our study include *Qu’ranic* verses pertaining to
animals, animal welfare, halāl practice; the entire corpus of media and news reports of Muslim veg(etari)anism in English and French languages, the entire corpus of comments to these reports, articles by Muslim veg(etari)an organizations, articles in individual blogs, and khutbah [خطبة; sermons or lectures presented by Imams] that have addressed meat consumption.

Our analysis of the discourse about Islam and consumption reveals several themes: Religious, historical, economic, contemporary cultural considerations; shifting conceptualizations of halāl and harām [Arabic: خَرَام; that which is forbidden under Islam]; intersectional Othering and affect-driven resistance to Muslim veg(etari)anism; and differing politics of resistance.

Religio-Historical Considerations

And the earth has He spread out for all living beings. (Qur’an, Surah Al-An‘ām 6)

Although numerous reasons for converting to a plant-based lifestyle exist, the most prevalent ones are those pertaining to animal welfare and environmental impacts. Religion, faith, and spirituality also impact the choice to be vegan or vegetarian. In “Drivers for Animal Welfare Policies in the Middle East,” Aidaros (2014) notes “One of the major components of Islamic thinking is consideration for non-human animals. As humans are considered to be speaking animals, we can understand how animals are highly esteemed in Islam” (86).

The Qur’an states that all living beings—humans, animals, even insects—are worthy of respect and care (Masri 2007; Nasr 2010; Tlili 2012) as indicated in verse 12 of Al-An‘ām [الأنعام], the sixth chapter of the Qur’an, that announces “the earth was not created for humans alone” (cited in Aidaros 2014, 3). Despite the Qur’anic requirement for respect for all living beings, there remains a strong meat-eating culture in Islam. While not essentially opposed to veganism or vegetarianism, many Muslims consider meat to be a vital element in Muslim foodways and, more broadly, of Muslim culture. Beef and lamb are at the center of a
tremendous amount of Muslim entrees; without meat, many consider meals as incomplete.

Historically, however, the centrality of animal-based entrees was not the norm. There are some Islamic religious leaders, such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, who note that “historically Muslims ate so little meat they were almost vegetarian. Meat is not a necessity in sharia [Islamic law] and, in the old days, most Muslims used to eat meat—if they were wealthy, like middle class—one a week on Friday. If they were poor—on the Eids” [high religious holidays]. Sheikh Yusuf reports the Prophet Mohammad did not advocate daily meat-eating as it could become addictive. The earliest Islamic religious leaders and scholars continually emphasized to their followers that “animals were to be cherished and treated in a humane manner, but many Muslims nowadays view animals as the dominion of people” (para. 4). Sheikh Yusuf argues, “The idea that animals are merely slaves to humans is not only abhorrent to animal-rights advocates, but seems to be at odds with the prophet’s teaching” (para. 6).

“A good deed done to an animal”: Is “Ethical Killing” Ethical?

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. (Hadith (cited in Rahman 2017, para. 7))

The Qur’an condemns acts of cruelty to animals, as indicated in the above hadith [tradition] and provides considerable support for conscientious attention to animal welfare, broadly, and animals for the purpose of consumption, specifically (Qur’an, surah Al-Anaam, verse 11). In “Drivers for Animal Welfare Policies in the Middle East,” Aidaros (2014) argues, “while non-human creation is subjugated to human needs, the proper human role is that of conscientious steward and not exploiter” (84). Dhabīḥah [or zabiha; Arabic: ذَبِيحَة] is the set of Islamic rules detailing the practice of ethical ritual slaughter of animals intended for human consumption and, thus, ḥalāl [that which is permissible under Islam]. The Dhabīḥah dictates that unnecessary suffering to these animals must
be avoided. First, animals must be in one of the categories permitted for Muslims to eat. The most well-known *harām* animal meat is pork which is specifically forbidden in the *Qur’an* (sura 2:173 and 16:115). However, most non-Muslims are unaware that the list of *harām* [not permissible] food includes, but is not limited to, dogs, predatory creatures which have sharp teeth and claws and talons, certain birds, and all reptiles and insects. Second, animals must be alive, healthy, and not hungry at the time of their slaughter. Then there is a specific set of procedures “intended to provide a quick, humane and relatively painless death” (84). The slaughterer, who must be Muslim, must first reflect on *niyya* [intent], offer water to the animal, and invoke God through a recitation known as the *tasmiyah* [تَسمية; naming, designation or calling], most frequently, “*Bismillah, Allahu’ akbar*” (“In the Name of God, God is most Great”), which dedicates the animal to Allah. Prior to slaughter, the sharp knife to be used must be hidden from the animal. The act of slaughtering must consist of a swift and deep incision to the jugular vein, carotid artery and windpipe (Taqi Usmani 2006). This should be done out of sight of other animals waiting to be slaughtered (Aidaros 84). An additional step in the process, in the Shi’i tradition, is to turn the animal to face Mecca before slaughter (Robinson 2014, 278). The blood of the slaughtered animal must be completely drained, because *halāl* dietary restrictions specifically forbid a Muslim to consume carrion, blood, swine, and animals dedicated to other than Allah (*Qur’an*, Surah 5; al-Ma’idah, ayah 3).

*Halāl* practice has been widely studied in numerous disciplines. Most researchers and animal agricultural practitioners argue that *halāls* slaughter is one of the more humane methods in the meat industry and the only acceptable method for Muslim consumers. However, Aidaros (2014) argues “[c]urrent practices that are not in accordance with these religious teachings may cause great suffering to animals” (85). “Unfortunately,” he notes, “many Muslims and Islamic religious leaders are not aware of the suffering that is inflicted on animals during handling, transport, lairage and slaughter itself” (87).

Although there are numerous privately owned butcher shops which provide *halāl* meat following all steps of the *dhabīḥah*, the rising Muslim population worldwide has led to increased demand. Similar to the industrial practices in the U.S. that have placed profit over animal welfare,
some of the enterprises cut corners on halāl and tayyib [permitted and wholesome] dhabīhah practice. Of all small and medium enterprises in Malaysia, for example, 90% do not have halāl certification (Aqidah Azizi 2019). This is disconcerting given that 62% of the population in Malaysia, or 19.5 million people, are Muslim adherents (Aqidah Azizi 2019). While all meat produced in and exported from India is advertised as halāl, a team from PETA India observed widespread breaches of dhabīhah (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals 2020).

A particularly egregious breach of halāl and dhabīhah practice occurs in numerous self-identified halāl slaughter houses that claim to properly engage in the tasmiyah prayer before slaughter. Slaughterhouse owners and managers claim is central to Islam’s humanity when animals whey they are killed for food. “This may have been true historically, but in today’s ‘halal’ slaughterhouses, a pre-recorded prayer often blares nonstop as the animals are lined up and killed. That is a cop-out from what Islam teaches about ‘humane’ slaughter” (Mayton 2010, para. 7). Sarah Robinson’s field research and interviews with laborers and others in the industry revealed the additional questionable practices such as the “same machine and blade used to kill pigs and halal animals, potentially rendering the halal-certified meat haram (not permissible) if the knife was not properly cleaned” (278). Further, in a practice Robinson names “‘drive-by’ halal certification” a shaykh recites a blessing as he drives past a slaughterhouse, “which is far from slaughtering by hand with the name of God on one’s lips” (278).

Far from ethical killing has been discovered by Animal Aid, whose investigation and undercover filming in a North Yorkshire, England halāl abattoir, revealed “gratuitous violence and contempt” in the treatment of animals prior to and during dhabīhah, lead to four slaughter men having their licenses suspended by the UK Food Standards Agency (Morris 2015). The film was released just days after a petition demanding the banning of slaughter without pre-stunning exceed 100,000 signatures, adding pressure on British politicians to tighten regulations that would mitigate inhumane practices in slaughterhouses, be they halāl, kosher, or secular.
Consistent with Pachirat’s (2011) “politics of sight,” Muslim advocates argue that more awareness of the lack of *halāl* practice would lead to a rise in vegetarianism and veganism. Pachirat argues the “organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden and to breach, literally or figuratively, zones of confinement” can “bring about social and political transformation” (15). Given the lack of consistency in *halāl* practice, it is difficult if not impossible to determine whether or not the meat that is being consumed is certified in the name of God. “That is a cop-out from what Islam teaches about ‘humane’ slaughter” (Mayton 2010, para. 7).

**Questioning the Sacred**

Meat is almost sacred in the Arab world. (Nada Elbarshoumi, United Arab Emirates-based author of the blog, “One Arab Vegan”)

In her study of anthropatriarchy and Hindu nationalism, Yamini Narayanan (2019) asks, “How can insights from feminist and animal geographies politicize spaces of ‘sanctuary’ and refuge for animals repatriated from incarceration, exploitation, and violence?” (195). We apply Narayanan’s question, which she posed regarding Hindu religio-cultural contexts, to Muslim contexts in order to ask how can we politicize the process of *Eid al-Adha* “so that animals are not only saved from the gendered, sexual, and disposal (slaughter) violence” of slaughter, but also “from being coopted as political, sociocultural, and religious symbols?” (Narayanan 195).

We realize this is treacherous terrain to tread. The affective nature of religion, already powerful, intensifies during times of high religious celebrations. As evidenced by the attack on Suraiyya Benazeer and her PETA India counterparts, contesting or resisting normative practices during religious celebrations can result in vicious, even violent response by those who claim they are devout believers and those who weaponize and politicize religion for various reasons (Anderson 2009; De Matteis 2018). Sarah Ahmed’s work (2010, 2014) on affect studies and the “emotionality of texts” is relevant to this analysis. Her work traces how texts move and generate impact, a phenomenon known as affective resonance.
Islamophobia has thrived on the strategic rhetorical acts of misinformation, disinformation, or merely highlighting something while ignoring broader religio-cultural contexts. The case of the *halāl* “exclusive” alleged exposé by *The Sun* illustrates this. On May 7, 2014, the UK newspaper had blazoned on the front page of its tabloid a massive, meme-style headline superimposed on a color photo of a pizza—“Halal Secret of Pizza Express.” *The Sun* claimed it was revealing that the well-known pizza chain served *halāl* chicken. A wave of affective resonance materialized by a social media-driven call to #BoycottPizzaExpress immediately ensued. #Halal ascended to one of the top trending terms on UK social media, as did #HalalHysteria. Other media organizations, such as the BBC and *The Guardian*, pointed out that Pizza Express had not kept any such “Halal Secret”; the company included information about the use of *halāl* chicken in their website FAQ page and had tweeted about it previously. It had also been mentioned in news articles. Nevertheless, *The Sun’s* attempt to serve up a slice of Islamophobia had its desired affective response.

Ahmed’s critique of the “emotionality of texts” is also useful to analyze one of the most affect-laden Muslim practices—the slaughter during *Eid al-Adha*. This Muslim holiday, which occurs on the tenth day of the last month of the Muslim year, commemorates one of the central stories of the *Qu’ran* which illustrates the willingness of the Prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God. According to scripture, seconds before Ibrahim engaged in the sacrifice God replaced the boy with a lamb. Muslims reenact this story by sacrificing a lamb or goat or another mammal such as a cow, or less commonly a camel, on *Eid al-Adha*. The meat of the offering is divided into parts—the largest portion is given to the poor, the second largest to the person’s relatives, and the smallest portion to the person’s own family.

*Eid al-Adha* is often the turning point for Muslims who choose veganism and, in particular, for Muslims who commit to “affective feminist practice that views animal others as grievable, vulnerable, and valuable” (Jenkins 2012). Reflecting on her childhood experiences of her family’s *Eid al-Adha*, Nada (2014) writes:

> When I was growing up, my family performed this almost every year. My brother and I would cower in the back of the garden watching a butcher
read a blessing over a sheep he had hauled over in the back of his rickety truck. As per Halal requisites, he would feed it some water, say Bismillah (in the name of God) and swiftly slit its [sic] throat. I sometimes find it odd that I never really questioned the practice while growing up—or that I continued to eat meat for years after, but something about seeing the ritual year-on-year from such a young age left me desensitized in a sense. It wasn't till I started eschewing meat altogether that I started to question this unnecessarily brutal ritual, which stood out to me like a sore thumb in a religion that preached compassion, love and understanding for all living beings. (para. 4)

Nada and many others, recalling the blood on the streets, their fathers slicing the neck of an animal that they considered a pet, advocate for alternatives and highlight a central argument: “Despite the fact that it is a ritual occurrence in our religion and culture; many don’t realise that sacrifice is NOT a pillar of Islam” (para. 5). Nada (2014) goes on to note “Historically, pre-Islamic Pagan Arabs, Jews and Christians all offered some sacrifice in the hopes of attaining protection, acceptance or material gain from God—but the notion of ‘vicarious atonement of sin’ (that is absolving one’s sins through the blood of another) is not mentioned at all in the Qur’an. Neither is the idea of gaining favor by offering the life of another to God—all that is demanded is one’s personal willingness to submit one’s ego and will” (para. 6). Rather than vicarious blood atonement through ritualized slaughter, Eid al-Adha is “the act of thanking God for one’s sustenance and the personal sacrifice of sharing one’s possessions and valuable food with fellow less fortunate people. The ritual itself is NOT about the sacrifice—it was about sharing the best of what you had” (para. 8). Nada argues:

There are several Qur’anic verses that highlight the true purpose and objective behind sacrifice—but of all of them allude to the same thing. The act of animal sacrifice is pertinent to the role animals played in Arabian society at the place and time. Humans were commanded to give thanks to God and praise Him for the sustenance provided by him by sacrificing something of value to themselves to demonstrate their appreciation for what they have been given. (para. 9, our emphasis)
Similarly, the Regional Animal Welfare Strategy (RAWS) for the Middle East, developed jointly by the l’Organisation Mondiale de la Santé Animale (OIE) Regional Representation and Member Countries in the region, supports the development of national programs for “raising awareness of animal welfare and educating key players, particularly veterinarians, livestock owners, animal handlers, religious and community leaders and other key groups, such as schoolchildren and women” (87). These organizations raise awareness that Muslims, and practitioners of other religions, do not need to kill animals, even during Eid al-Adha. Hakim and others in the Initiative, instead, focus on the ethical mission underlying Eid al-Adha—to help those in need.

Re-Examining the Contradictory Cultures of Meat, Blood, and Othering

To show your sincerity
on how much you want to help the poor,
there are many other ways;
you can give them plant-based foods,
you can give them money.
I think this practice (sacrificing an animal) has to be re-examined. (Sammar Hakim, The Vegan Muslim Initiative)

Recall Pachirat’s (2011) “politics of sight,” in which contemporary society hides the horrific from view. With rare exceptions, most notably Pachirat’s ethnography of slaughterhouse in Iowa, large-scale industrial animal slaughter is conveniently invisible. Indeed, Lever (2019) argues, “[a]cross the secular West, the slaughter of animals for food has become an almost clandestine activity” (889). Compared to secular or Christian practice, Eid al-Adha provides scope for a clear politics of sight. Many Muslim vegans and vegetarians recall the horror of the slaughters they witnessed as children. What is seen, hidden from view, or separated from others was evident in historical practices of Eid al-Adha. For instance, the Prophet Umm’Atiyyah Al-Ansaariyyah shared with followers a command
from the Messenger of Allah that women, adolescent girls, menstruating women, and virgins be “brought out” on *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*. However, menstruating women were to stay away from prayer; instead they “were to witness goodness and the gathering of the Muslims”. Despite the preponderance of slaughtered animals’ blood on *Eid al-Adha*, women who, too, were flowing blood “were to stay away from the prayer” pushed, quite literally, to the margins.

Such contradictions contribute to the skewed view of Eid al-Adha by non-Muslims which, arguably, has fueled Islamophobia and the Othering of Muslims. It is not surprising that center- to far-right media organizations such as *The Sun* (UK), of *ḥalāl* expose fame, report on *Eid al-Adha* with affect-driven headlines like “BLOOD ON THE STREETS: Eid Al-Adha animal sacrifice festival sees roads turn red with blood as cows are beheaded” (Sullivan 2018). However, there are a myriad of non-Muslim religious practices and religio-cultural norms worthy of interrogation. There is evidence of Christian animal sacrifice in the village of Taybeh, near Jerusalem, for instance. The care of animals by those who self-identify as Christian certainly warrants critique. In his essay, “An Islamic Perspective Against Animal Sacrifice,” Shahid ‘Ali Muttaqi (2020) notes the hypocrisy of “Western ‘Christian’ countries that malign the Muslim world for sacrificing animals, yet have institutionalized factory farming and worldwide environmental destruction” (para. 5). The politics of sight, again, is relevant here. Rarely, if ever, is there discussion of “mass slaughter” of turkeys at Thanksgiving and Christmas. There is no such affective rhetoric. The “processing” is kept from view, even codified through “ag-gag” laws not only silence animal welfare advocates and whistleblowers who attempt to call out inhumane animal agricultural practices, but open them to be prosecuted as “terrorists” (See Sanders 2019; Strong 2019).

*Eid al-Adha* is increasingly divisive within Islam, sparking debates about continuing the practice of slaughter as it is “at odds with the prophet’s teaching” (‘Ali Muttaqi 2020, para. 5). Key points in the debate include, first, the argument that the story of Ibrahim/Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is interpreted in differing ways, most notably that the message was delivered to Ibrahim in a dream. Further, there is no definitive indication that the dream came directly from God. Those
contesting this argument claim that dreams are a part of revelation. A second argument indicates that animal sacrifice on Eid al-Adha does not enhance Muslims’ spiritual development. Third, to make the case against sacrificing animals, Muslims cite the Tafsir al-Jalalayn [تفسير جلال الدين] which states, “Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you” [al-Hajj 22:37] (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought 2017). Finally, Muslims who are opposed to animal sacrifice, like The Vegan Muslim Initiative’s Sammar Hakim, argue there are a myriad of strategies to help those in need, from giving people plant-based meals to investing in long-term projects to enhance economic justice. Similarly, Zain Syed Ahmed (cited in Fida 2019b) donates funds to the International Development and Relief Fund, an Islamic not-for-profit organization that connects donors from Canada with Muslim communities abroad to provide long-term and emergency aid. All of these endeavors adhere to the scriptural call “to change the condition of a people” (Quran 13:11).

One of the most reasoned discussions arguing to not abandon the practice of slaughter at Eid al-Adha is from Hira Amin (2013), a British Muslimah of Pakistani descent. She acknowledges the likelihood that the demand placed on ـــال ـ� ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�ـ�&l

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Questioning the Centrality and Gendered Construction of Meat in Islam

Vegetarianism is halal.
Meat is not compulsory.
Any food is permissible provided it is not harmful.
Muslims are free to eat whatever they want provided it is halal.
It is like wanting to eat a certain fruit and not the other. (Honorable Sayyid Fadhlullah21)

Given that some Muslims equate eating meat with close adherence to Islam, Muslim vegans report that their family and friends tell them “you can’t be vegan and Muslim.” Those opposed to veganism claim God created animals for, among other things, food for humans. Many such Muslims, like anti-vegans more broadly, question the sustainability of a plant-based diet. Such questioning is consistent with the often ill-informed notions about sustainability and nutrition more broadly.22

Despite these qualms, veganism is gaining increased attention among Muslims within and outside the MENA. Support from prominent persons, such as Prince Khaled bin Alwaleed bin Talal of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, has helped. Prince bin Alwaleed bin Talal has been publicly vocal about his choice to be vegan, encourages others in the Kingdom and throughout the MENA to embrace plant-based diets, and is expanding the San Diego-based Plant Power Fast Food vegan restaurants throughout the MENA region (Starostinetskaya 2019). The Prince also has critiqued the animal agriculture industry, particularly in its contribution to the climate crisis, and is investing in companies who are finding a more sustainable ways to source protein for people (cited in CNBC International 2020).

While Prince bin Alwaleed bin Talal’s leadership in shifting the culture toward veganism is encouraging, it tends to obscure the decades’ long work of Muslim vegan women advocates and activists. Nevertheless, as veganism continues to carry emasculating cultural codes, the Prince’s identity as the “leading man” of Muslim veganism will likely be influential to other men. Sammar Hakim notes that when people learn he is
vegan, “[t]hey say, ‘Oh, you are doing some feminine, New Age move- 
ment’” (cited in Fida 2019b para. 19). Hakim reports that people ask him, “Why do you have to do this to yourself?” although, he notes, “[b]ut that’s a very small percentage of people. Most people take it at face value.” However, when resisting the animal sacrifice of *Eid al-Adha* men, in par- 
ticular, report strong negative responses. Hakim (cited in Fida 2019b) 
hears that “I’m an apostate, (I’m) trying to change Islam, (I’m) mis-
guided” (para 19).

Several Islamic theologians have provided religio-scholarly opinion 
suggesting those who claim that Muslim vegans are apostate are the ones 
who are misguided. There are several *fatwa* on vegetarianism and veg-
anism, such as that of Sayyid Fadhlullah above, by *ulamā* [scholars 
trained in Islam and Islamic law], *mutakallimun* [theologians], *muftis* 
[group of theologians or canon lawyers], *qadis* [judges], professors, and 
*Sheikh al Islam* [the highest-level state religious official]. Mufti Ebrahim 
Desai, for instance, issued the following *fatwā*: “A Muslim may be a veg-
etarian. However, he should not regard eating meat as prohibited.” 
Muzammil Siddiqi’s *fatwā* states, “Muslims do recognize animal rights, 
and animal rights means that we should not abuse them, torture them, 
and *when we have to use them for meat*, we should slaughter them with a 
sharp knife, mentioning the name of Allah” (our emphasis). The Prophet 
(SAAWS) said, “Allah has prescribed goodness (ihsan) in everything. 
When you sacrifice, sacrifice well. Let you sharpen your knife and make 
it easy for the animal to be slaughtered. So, Muslims are not vegetarian-
ists. However, if someone prefers to eat vegetables, then they are allowed 
to do so. Allah has given us permission to eat meat of slaughtered ani-
mals, but He has not made it obligatory upon us.” Sheikh M. S. Al-Munajjid 
announces, “there is nothing wrong with being a vegetarian or not eating 
animal products, but you need to be aware of the following: You should 
not think that these things are Haraam (forbidden), because Almighty 
Allah says: ‘O ye who believe! Make not unlawful the good things, which 
Allah hath made lawful for you, but commit no excess: for Allah loveth not 
those given to excess.’ (Al-Maa‘idah 87).” Sheikh Al-Munajjid also shares 
the following scriptural passage: “Say: who hath forbidden the beautiful 
gifts) of Allah, which He hath produced for his servants, and the things, 
clean and pure (which He hath provided) for sustenance? Say they are, in
the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgment thus do we explain the Signs in detail for those who understand.’ (Al’-Araaf 32).’” Finally, Muslim jurist Ayatullah Shirazi, concludes, “Being vegetarian is OK and halal, and in fact we have hadith in Islam that encourages us to eat less meat” (cited in Ali Muttaqi, Shahid 2020).

Difference and resistance are tremendously important factors in veg(etari)anism for Muslims, as the “meat culture” within Islam remains extremely strong (see Ali 2015; Dahlan 2019; Dahlan-Taylor 2012). The affective nature of dominant consumption patterns fuels affective responses: “Because you are dealing with a lot of deep rooted traditions cultures and dogma in some cases, there has been strong opposition” (cited in Fida 2019a, para. 21). We see intersectional Othering as a marginalized group within a marginalized group. There are multiple layers of intersectional difference for Muslim women vegans who resist what Erika Cudworth (2016) calls a “carnist discourse of naturalization, necessity and normalization” (237; see, also, Cudworth 2008). Contemporary foodways are central to cultural identity, at the individual and group levels. Elbarshoumi (cited in Kavaler 2019) argues, “I think the barriers to veganism in the Arab world are largely cultural–there’s a perception of plant-based diets as being inferior from a nutritional point of view, and a notion that not eating meat makes you inherently less ‘Arab’” (para. 12).

Anti-vegetarian and anti-vegan discourses abound. In a comment on a May 2019 Jerusalem Post article on veganism in the Arab world, one reader wrote, “Veganism is a new religion in the West. Some fanatics combine veganism with climate change and try to enforce their obscure views on others…It seems that the Arab world is happy to embrace the craziest Western ideas, but reject the good ones” (Gabor Ujvari 2019, comment to Kavaler 2019). This response illuminates the resistance to a more progressive Islam, and a critique of its anti-Westernism, a rejection of what some believe to be Islamic principles. Such rejections of non-dominant foodways take various forms, for various reasons. It might begin with a polite expression indicating confusion or concern, or an emasculating chuckle,24 but can quickly escalates to nefarious Othering and Islamophobic outbursts on social media.
Attention to public health and environmental sustainability concerns in the MENA are vital. While Muslim health, wellbeing, and dietary practices are growing areas of research, this research is still not abundant. In Europe, the U.S., and other industrialized nations, goals of ecological sustainability usually focus on “the need to maintain better balances between economic growth and social needs, while protecting local ecologies and reducing the negative impact of growth on the global environment” (Elegendy 2011, 10). The balance between primary development goals of economic and infrastructural stability and higher-level goals of environmental and social justice is still a tremendous challenge for many areas in the MENA and other developing regions. Elegendy (2011) argues the need to address more “basic developmental challenges, such as eradicating poverty, means that “other environmental and social aspects are considered a luxury a developing nation cannot afford” (10). However, there are advocates who support vegan and vegetarian practices for development and environmental sustainability strategies, along with their commitment to and compassion for human and animal health and wellbeing for animals. The groundbreaking Vegan Muslim Initiative is at the forefront of this advocacy. Founded in 2016 The Vegan Muslim Initiative’s mission is “to help educate and inform Muslims and their communities about Veganism and the immense impact it can have on their lives. We aspire to relay a better understanding about how food choices affect their health, the animals and the impact on the environment.” Co-founder Sammer Hakim (cited in Pevreall 2017) argues, “It’s not a necessary thing to do, killing so many animals…at a time when this
very act is directly contributing to so many critical environmental issues is highly irresponsible” (para. 4).

Additional sustainability problems in the MENA include high population densities in urban areas, a large youth population, non-“green” building methods, lack of infrastructure for renewable energy systems, deforestation, the stress of high heat for animals (Caulfield, Cambridge, Foster and McGreevy 2014), food and environmental safety (Ghareyazie 2012; Moosa 2009), and loss of habitat for wildlife. Recently there have been new problems. Advocates, activists, experts, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations in the MENA that are focused on ecological and environmental sustainability are increasingly under attack, with authorities threatening to shut down their activities and silencing them (Schwartzstein 2019). The UN Environment Programme (2019) reports this trend is similar in other parts of the world. Between 2002 and 2013 a total of 908 environmental advocates were killed across 35 countries. This has been escalating at an alarming rate: 197 environmental activists and advocates were murdered in 2017 alone, which is five times the rate of deaths of environmentalists from just a decade ago. This is a particularly dreadful concern in the areas south of the Sahara Desert where, for decades, environmental activists have been murdered for their efforts to restrict the poaching of endangered animals. Now, even campaigning for water security or climate change action can lead to advocates being imprisoned, albeit for unrelated, spurious charges (Schwartzstein 2019).

There are encouraging developments, however. NGOs including the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature, Arab Office of Youth and Environment, Middle East Network for Animal Welfare, Ras Al Khaimah Animal Welfare Center, Middle East Children’s Alliance, Alliance for Water Justice in Palestine, Emergency Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Group (EWASH), have increased civil society efforts. EcoPeace Middle East (2017) includes Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israelis who advocate for cooperation for the sake of their shared environment, particularly water scarcity in the Jordan river.27
Future Directions

We have aimed here to critique religious discourses surrounding meat consumption by Islamic scholars and examine contemporary discourses about veg(etari)anism as they construct cultural, religious and ethno-national identities, practices, and ideologies. In our efforts to do so, we have found surprisingly little scholarship on Muslim veg(etari)anism, or on Muslim women's activism for animal welfare and environmental sustainability. We have tried to fill this gap by assessing the few, newly emerging Muslim advocacy efforts for limiting meat consumption, drawing upon religious discussions concerning meat consumption that highlight, social and economic justice, health, environmental, and animal welfare concerns. But there is much more work to be done to analyze Islamic scripture, *fatāwa*, and *hadiths* regarding veganism and vegetarianism, critique the rhetorical framing of *ḥalāl*, particularly in Islamophobic mediated and other popular discourses, and unpack the intersectional Othering and affect-driven resistance to Muslim veg(etari)anism.

The contentious and affective nature of dominant and resistant forms of consumption is central to essentializing and Othering processes. Recall the violent, gendered backlash of anti-veg(etari)an Muslims who attacked PETA-India activist Suraiyya Benazeer in Bhopal. Through analyzing these forms of Othering, the anti-vegan and anti-vegetarian rhetoric in Islam, and the few, newly emerging efforts to advocate for veg(etari)anism for Muslims, scholars can trace the nuanced religio-cultural dialogues concerning consumption and identity that underlie and inform animal welfare concerns, public health considerations, and social, environmental, gender, and economic justice.

It is vital to continue to analyze the differing politics of resistance to dominant cultural and consumption practices, not only of food, but all resources. In particular, it will be important to evaluate the impact of Muslim leaders, most notably Prince Khaled bin Alwaleed bin Talal, as they continue to advocate for plant-based diets and invest in vegan food system infrastructures in ways that highlight intersections of health, social, environmental, and economic justice.
More also needs to be done to protect the environment, people, animals, and biospheres in the MENA (EcoPeace Middle East 2017; O’Regan 2011). Highlighting environmental sustainability-centered approaches to veganism, vegetarianism, and nutritional health should be central to any analysis of vegan/vegetarianism in the MENA and in Islamic communities outside the MENA. Arguing for sustainability, MENA researchers and leaders like Prince bin Alwaleed bin Talal raise concerns that the growing demand for livestock for human consumption, coupled with the devastating impact of climate change, threatens food security and rural livelihood in the region. They also are concerned about how climate change, deforestation, water supply concerns, and various types of harmful human intervention are all threatening many wildlife species in the region. Such approaches, however, are challenging within strongly faith-based Muslim communities, as many Muslim religious communities’ leaders and organizational members maintain conflicting attitudes and beliefs about veganism and vegetarianism, perceptions of the need to consume meat for both health and religious purposes. This is not surprising given that public knowledge about veganism and vegetarianism has received significantly less attention in Muslim communities than in other faith-based communities and cultures.

More knowledge about nondominant foodways can help to dismantle the hegemonic discourses of social, cultural, and religious norms. Knowledge can also dismantle the affective resonance that situates nondominant practices as Otherness. Tracing how the emotionality of texts concerning nondominant cultural practices move and generate impact, can illuminate the emotionality of Othering, whether the subject of analysis is resistant praxis, Islamophobia, or the gendered, classed and raced nature of consumption practices. We call for others to continue analyzing the discursive, cultural, and socio-political nuances of Muslim health, wellbeing, and dietary practices, the anti-veganism and vegetarianism rhetoric in Islam and the newly emerging efforts to advocate for sustainable, ethical plant-based food systems for Muslims. The future of the Middle East and North Africa, other Muslim-majority nations, and the entire world will rest, in large part, on resisting hegemonic normative thought and unsustainable practice.
Notes

1. The color green is also known as *Akhdar* in Modern Standard Arabic.
2. An analysis of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and increasing Islamophobia in India, specifically, is beyond the scope of this study. For more on these topics, please see Anand (2007); Sinan Siyech and Narain (2018); Schneider (2009).
3. See Lengel (1998).
4. See Abdul-Aziz (2019); Abdul-Aziz, Smidi, and Lengel (in press); Fedak-Lengel (2019); Fedak-Lengel, and Abdul-Aziz (2019); Abdul-Aziz, Lengel, and Smidi (in press); Lengel, Atay, and Kluch (2020).
5. Alphabetical order of authorship indicates equal contribution from each author.
6. For work on “disgust responses” see Fessler, Arguello, Mekdara, and Macias (2003); Hamilton (2006); Twine (2010).
7. See Abdul-Aziz (2019); Abdul-Aziz, Smidi, and Lengel (in press); Fedak-Lengel (2019); Fedak-Lengel, and Abdul-Aziz (2019); Abdul-Aziz, Lengel, and Smidi (in press); Lengel, Atay, and Kluch (2020); Lengel and Smidi (2019); Smidi and Lengel (2017).
8. Arabic translation into English is conducted phonetically resulting in variances in spelling. See Ryding (2005). We have used diacritic marks in Arabic terms throughout, with the exception of Arabic terms in direct quotations which are as included here precisely as written in the original cited texts.
9. It is also widely known that pork is also forbidden in the Jewish faith, according to Jewish laws and traditions of eating *kosher* meat. There is an exception in the *Qur’an* indicating that if a Muslim is starving and there is nothing else to eat but pork, Allah will allow for this.
10. See, for instance, Belhaj (2018); Benkheira (1995, 1999, 2000); Bergeaud-Blackler (2004); Bonne and Verbeke (2008); Burt (2015); Campbell, Murcott and MacKenzie (2011); Dahlan (2019); Dahlan (2012); Fischer (2009, 2010, 2011); Franck, Gardin, and Givre (2015); Friedenreich (2011, 2014); Hashimi and Mohd Salleh (2012); Lever (2013); Lever and Miele (2012); Lockerbie (2017); Tieman (2014); Yusoff and Sarjoon (2017).
11. A comparison of *Dhabīḥah* to *Shechita* [the religious slaughter of mammals and birds done in accordance with the Jewish dietary law] or “con-
ventional slaughter technology,” as Abdullah, Borilova and Steinhauserova (2019) call it, is beyond the scope of this study. See Aghwan and Reggenstein (2019).

12. Analysis of the nuances of Dhabīḥah and of the debates about and critiques of stunning of animals before slaughter is beyond the scope of this study. For analyses of Dhabīḥah without stunning, see Fuseini, Knowles, Hadley and Wotton (2016). For the recent ruling in Belgium requiring stunning before slaughter, which has incited a debate about religious freedom, see Zaragovia (2019).

13. While the Qur’an does not name Ibrahim’s son, Muslims interpret the text to indicate that God ordered Ibrahim to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. In Abrahamic religions, the prophet Abraham is an important patriarch for the spiritual development of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The story is also prominent in both Judaic and Christian traditions, with the father named Abraham and the son named Isaac. For more details, see Hughes (2012).

14. Given dromedary camels (Camelus dromedarius) are considered the most common source of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV), measures to control the spread of MERS-CoV in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region have included herd screening and isolation of infected camels, regulation of camel movement, use of personal protective equipment by handlers and, in some cases, a ban on the slaughter and consumption of camel meat and unpasteurized camel milk (see Azhar et al. 2014; Hemida et al. 2014, 2017; Schnirring 2019; Wong et al. 2020; Zumla et al. 2016).

15. For historical analyses of animal sacrifice in Afro-Brazilian, ancient Greek, ancient Roman, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sámi religious beliefs and practices, please see, for instance, Arcari (2010); Cosmopoulos and Ruscillo (2014); Hutt (2019a, b); Oro (2006); Salmi, Äikäs, Spangen, Fjellström, and Mulk (2018). For analyses on contemporary animal sacrifice practices, including coverage on attempts by self-identified Jewish activists to sacrifice goats and sheep on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, please see Boaz (2019); Gilad (2016); Halperin (2019); Lazarus (2019); and Van Der Schyff (2014).

16. Sammar Hakim, The Vegan Muslim Initiative, cited in Fida (2019a para. 14).

17. See, also, Tulloch and Judge (2018, 1), for an application of Pachirat’s “politics of sight” and “the pedagogy of conscientization” to the New Zealand dairy industry.
18. See Safi (2016) for a brief video on the blood in the streets in Dhaka, Bangladesh during Eid al-Adha. See Selby (2018) for responses of Muslim women and girls about the stigmatization of menstruation.

19. Like Pachirat (2011), Hamilton and Taylor (2013) for analysis on the discursive practices in slaughterhouses, for example, animals as “units” and their deaths as “processing” that aids “the ideological obfuscation of them [animals] as embodied subjects…Language is used here to sanitise and justify their deaths” (79).

20. In contrast to the U.S. animal agriculture companies who have pushed “ag-gag” laws to keep their work out of public view, Al Safa, a Canadian company that supplies frozen halāl products to grocers, maintains an open-door policy allowing anyone to visit its facilities unannounced (ElBoghady 2005).

21. The Honorable Sayyid Fadhlullah, December 1, 2001, cited in “Fatwas on Vegetarianism.”

22. One example emerges from Lara’s field research year in North Africa. On more than one occasion she was questioned for drinking water during a meal. At the home of a host family who invited her to dinner, the male head of household explained to her that drinking water while eating bread will expand the food in one’s stomach, causing weight gain. See, also, our earlier discussion of the use of Roman cisterns as trash receptacles.

23. Fatawā is the plural of fatwā, an Islamic religious ruling and a scholarly opinion on a matter of Islamic law. See Aljahli (2017).

24. See Bruce Feirstein’s Real Men Don’t Each Quiche. Published in 1982, this book was one of the first, albeit satirical, analyses of the gendered politics about consumption.

25. See, for instance, Dehghani Bidgoli (2019); El-Sayed and Galea (2009); Fischer (2010, 2011); Padela, Killawi, Forman, DeMonner, and Heisler (2012); Padela and Zaidi (2018).

26. See, for instance, Abiad and Meho (2018); Bahn, El Labban, and Hwalia (2019); Burlingame and Dernini (2011); Dehghani Bidgoli (2019); El Labban (2017); Elmi, Alomirah, and Al-Zenki (2016); Seed (2015).

27. In addition to the efforts of these NGOs, new university programs increase possibilities for enhancing health, wellbeing, and ecological sustainability in the MENA. These programs include the dual degree program in Biology and Environmental Science at Qatar University where students focus on biology-centered topics in environmental science such
as biodiversity, remediation, environmental health, and toxicology (Potts 2011), and the first master’s degree in environmental journalism at l’Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l’Information (IPSI) at l’Université de la Manouba in Tunis, Tunisia. The latter is directed by Dr. Hamida El Bour, a feminist journalist/scholar who has been at the forefront of environmental advocacy in the nation and the region. See Cassara, Brendlinger, and Lengel (2008).

28. See, also, Trein (2017). For studies on affect and veganism, see, for instance, Fuller (2016).

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