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Date: 4/4/2012

GAIN Report Number: FR9094

France

Post: Paris

Ritual Slaughtering and Presidential Elections

Report Categories:

Special Certification - Organic/Kosher/Halal

Livestock and Products

Market Development Reports

Agriculture in the News

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Report Highlights:

With the presidential election in France nearing, Halal, the prescribed method of slaughtering animals for human consumption per Islamic law, was spotlighted when National Front and Union for a Popular Movement party members questioned the custom in efforts to court voters. Their statements revealed that a significant share of ritually slaughtered meat that is not consumed for religious dictates, is sold in France to the general public without specific tags or religious labels. With the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, France's Halal sales reached \$8 billion in 2011. According to the Ministry of Agriculture's Food Directorate, twenty-six percent of all cattle and sheep slaughtered in France were ritually slaughtered, for 14 percent of the meat produced, which is well above the demand for ritual red meat, estimated at 7 to 10 percent of the total red meat market.

General Information:

Ritual Slaughtering and Presidential Elections: when religion, economics, and politics collide

Politics

With the first round of the presidential race in France this month, Halal, the prescribed method of slaughtering animals for human consumption per Islamic law, has been spotlighted to court far right voters. In late February 2012, a French TV show indicated that in the Paris region, all four remaining slaughterhouses (slaughtering cattle and sheep) were conducting ritual only (in this case under Halal rules) slaughtering. The weekend that followed the show, Marine Le Pen, presidential candidate of the extreme right political party, National Front, charged that non-Muslims in Paris were unwittingly eating animals slaughtered in accordance with Islamic law. Ms. Le Pen's statement gained a lot of media attention.

Sitting right-wing (Union for a Popular Movement party) President Nicolas Sarkozy initially criticized his opponent's Halal-related assertion; calling it frivolous. After polls reflected consumers' sensitivity on the issue, President Sarkozy suddenly pledged to protect consumers from unknowingly eating Halal meat. He suggested to adopt a request for legislation requiring all meat labels to note the slaughtering methods used.

The political controversy lasted a couple of weeks in March 2012, but subsided after Prime Minister Francois Fillon said he personally believed that religions should rethink maintaining traditions that are no longer relevant given today's science, technology, and health concerns. The comment was denounced by Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. Interior Minister Claude Guéant also touched on the subject when he linked a Socialist Party (major party of the left) proposal to allow non-EU members to vote in local elections with the introduction of compulsory Halal food in school meals.

Ms. Le Pen reopened the debate on April 5, following the publication of a European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) [report](#) on antimicrobial resistance in zoonotic that highlighted the increase in *E. coli* and *Campylobacter* contamination in meat. She linked the rise to Halal slaughtering which involves cutting the animal's esophagus at the same time as its carotid, potentially allowing bacteria present in the gastric content and digestive track to mix with the blood and contaminate the carcass. In non-ritual slaughtering, the esophagus is usually clamped to prevent such contamination. Ms. Le Pen highlighted that *Campylobacter* contamination, while present in both meat and poultry, is higher in poultry than in pigs and linked this difference to the high levels of Halal poultry slaughtering.

FAS/Paris contacts at the French Ministry of Agriculture confirmed that they are aware of the higher sanitary risk posed by ritual slaughtering. The risk is enhanced by the fact that front carcasses, the most prone to bacterial contamination, are also used for production of ground meat. This risk assessment was one of the bases for the restriction of ritual slaughtering to approved slaughterhouses set by the December 29th Decree (mentioned below).

Economics & Religion

The four relatively small slaughterhouses provide less than 5 percent of meat consumption in the Paris

region of 12 million inhabitants. At these establishments, ritual only slaughtering is done for economic reasons, as the cost of shifting from ritual to non-ritual slaughtering, especially in cleaning the killing rooms, makes the switch uneconomical. The controversy is regarding the part of the carcass of ritually slaughtered animals that cannot be consumed due to religious dictates (such as the rear half of a carcass for kosher foods), is sold without the religious labels.

In France, as in all other EU member states, it is compulsory to stun animals before slaughtering (EU directives 74/577/EC and 93/119/EC). EU regulation 1099/2009/EU (and French regulation R214-70), however, grants a waiver to this obligation when stunning is not compatible with religious dictates. France regulates ritual (i.e., without stunning) slaughtering as the following:

“It must be undertaken in an approved slaughterhouse, the animal must be immobilized and all applicable regulations pertaining to animal welfare must be implemented. Ritual slaughtering is done for both kosher (under kosher rules) and Halal (under Halal rules).”

France published a decree on December 29, 2011, which limits ritual slaughtering to approved slaughterhouses and sets a registering system linking ritual slaughtering to Halal and kosher orders and sales. It states that it will improve the welfare situation for ritual slaughtering and reduce the volume of ritually slaughtered meat sold unmarked on non religious markets. The approval of a slaughterhouse for ritual slaughter is granted by the local Veterinary Directorate (DDS(CS)PP) and can be withdrawn if the slaughterhouse does not comply. The decree becomes applicable July 1, 2012.

As a consequence of this new decree, an assessment of slaughterhouses is mandatory. Only slaughterhouses under Categories 1 and 2 (normally the larger facilities) will be certified compliant, the smaller, local or temporary facilities (which are set-up mainly during the Muslim feast of Aid-el-Kebir) will be excluded. The certificate of competence will impose a minimum time of 90 seconds for religious slaughtering against the current 45 seconds. This implies a slow-down in the production chain and profit margins; since Halal meat demand is steadily increasing, it is likely that France will be forced to turn to imports.

Animal welfare groups, such as the one headed by French actress Brigitte Bardot ([Fondation Brigitte Bardot](#)) and the Organization for Slaughter Animals ([OABA](#)), have petitioned for decades for an abolition of the ritual slaughtering waiver. They launched in January 2011, an advertising campaign against ritual slaughtering. The Government of France has always opposed, even at the EU level, such initiatives in order to preserve religious freedom and to prevent stigmatization of any religious community.

An [official report](#), which went relatively unnoticed until the Halal debate erupted, written by the Ministry of Agriculture’s Food Directorate stated that in 2010, 12 percent of adult cattle (158,000 MT), 42 percent of sheep (44,000 MT) and 13 percent of calves (24,000 MT) were ritually slaughtered. Altogether, twenty-six percent of all cattle and sheep animals slaughtered were ritually slaughtered, for 14 percent of the meat produced. This is well above the demand for ritual red meat, which is estimated at 7 to 10 percent of the total red meat market.

With the largest Muslim population in Western Europe (an estimated 5 to 7 million, nearly a tenth of the total population), France’s Halal market sales were \$8 billion in 2010. That same year, organic market

sales were valued at \$4 billion dollars, half of the Halal market. As the most rapidly-growing segment of the food market, annual Halal sales have risen by 7 to 15 percent since 1998. This formerly niche market now represents 13 to 18 percent of the French food market, with a potential to reach \$26 billion in the next five-ten years.

Meat analysts believe that this issue will remain acute for the coming years. Any impact of the controversy on meat consumption has yet to be assessed but preliminary information shows a further decline in red meat consumption in France, a move enhanced by high red meat prices in the context of a sluggish economy combined with health-related concerns, an increase in poultrymeat consumption, in addition to increased Halal meat consumption due to the growing number of second and third generation French Muslims consumers. Butchers have reported increased questioning by consumers on slaughtering processes. At least one slaughterhouse from southern France is now marketing its meat with additional tags stating “[traditionally slaughtered guaranteed](#),” guaranteeing that the animals have not been ritually slaughtered.

Reacting to the recent political hoopla over Halal, a Paris restaurant now serves French cuisine cooked with Halal meat – the first of its kind. The owner of this restaurant stated publicly that the debate wasn't really about meat, but about the far right trying to attract votes in advance of the election. Word has spread among the young Muslim crowd of the French-Halal fusion cuisine. Supermarkets and food distribution chains are capitalizing on young Halal consumers' desire to have the same choices as non-Halal consumers, increasing opportunities for U.S. suppliers offering beverages, grocery, and frozen products. Certification of grocery products is not as stringent as it is for meat products.