

Olav Elgvin

Temasektion

Regulations in flux: Theology, politics, and halal slaughter in Norway

Nøgleord:

Islam in Norway, halal food, Islamic slaughter, sharia regulations

Abstract When it comes to sharia regulations – or the question of Islamic norms more broadly – there are few areas which are of more direct relevance for the daily life of Muslims than the question of what to eat. For meat to be halal, several Islamic theologians have claimed that animals must be conscious at the time of slaughter. This method of slaughter, however, is not allowed under the laws of Norway, which require animals to be stunned before they can be killed. This creates a dilemma for Muslims who wish to live in accordance with Islamic norms. Is it permissible to eat meat which is not slaughtered according to strict interpretations of Islamic law? Various answers have been given, both in Norway and elsewhere. This article describes for the first time the history of the halal debate among Muslims in Norway. I show that the content of halal regulations in the country has been influenced by theology but also by politics, in various bids for influence and status. The approach of the Islamic Council of Norway, the principal organization dictating halal regulations, has shifted no less than four times: from acceptance of stunning, to skepticism, to acceptance, to skepticism, and finally to renewed acceptance. Theological concerns among Muslims have played a role in this process, but social context and politics have been just as important. The debate over the regulation of halal slaughter may provide a window onto broader debates on how Muslim communities adapt Islamic norms to life in societies in which the ethical norms of non-Muslim majorities are often dominant.

Halal slaughter is a hugely controversial topic among Muslims. What kind of meat is actually *halal*, that is, allowed, for Muslims? The traditional mode of performing Islamic slaughter is by killing with a cut to the throat to a living animal, while invoking the name of Allah. Animals must be healthy, and conscious at the time of slaughter, and the blood must be subsequently drained from the carcass. This method, however, is not allow-

Olav Elgvin is a post-doctoral researcher employed on the Cancode project at Bergen University, and an adjunct associated professor at MF -Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society

ed under the laws of Norway (and some other European countries), which require animals to be stunned before their throat can be cut. This creates a dilemma for Muslims who wish to live in accordance with Islamic norms. Is it permissible to eat meat which is not slaughtered according to this interpretation of Islamic law? Various answers have been given, both in Norway and elsewhere (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 125). Some have claimed that Muslims may eat meat from animals that have been slaughtered by Jews and Christians, that is, the people of the book. Others have rejected this claim, but have said that pre-stunning can be accepted as long as the animal does not die when it is stunned, and that the slaughter takes place under an Islamic invocation. Still others have rejected both alternatives, and have maintained that the only meat that is acceptable to eat is from animals which have not been not pre-stunned.

Why do some of these interpretations prevail for specific communities at specific times? This question is of interest not only for the study of halal slaughter in itself, but also for the broader development of Islamic communities and Islamic thought in Europe. When it comes to sharia regulations – or the question of Islamic norms more broadly – there are few areas which are of more direct relevance for the daily life of Muslims than the question of what to eat. Thus, the debate over the regulation of halal slaughter may provide a window onto broader debates on how Muslim communities adapt Islamic norms to life in societies in which the ethical norms of the non-Muslim majorities are often dominant.

This article describes for the first time the history of the *halal debate* among Muslims in Norway: what kind of meat can Norwegian Muslims eat, and how should this meat be provided? I do this by looking at the “interrelated working of religious doctrine, and economic and political factors”, as Yakin, Christians and Dupret have recently called for in a thorough volume on halal debates (2021, 10). Halal regulations in Norway have been influenced by both theology and politics, in the broad sense of the word. The approach of the Islamic Council of Norway has shifted on several occasions: from acceptance of stunning, to skepticism, to renewed acceptance, to skepticism, and again to acceptance. Theological concerns among Muslims have clearly played a role in this process, but politics and power have also mattered. The juridical and political opportunity structures in Norwegian society have laid out the limits for possible approach-

es to Islamic slaughter, but halal regulations have also been influenced by internal power struggles among various actors and factions in the Islamic field in Norway, who have contested each other's interpretations in bids for influence and status.

Islamic slaughter in Norway and the issue of stunning

Is Islamic slaughter an important issue to study for researchers of Islam in Europe? In 2014 I began research for my PhD, which ended up being about the Islamic Council of Norway (often shortened as IRN in Norway and in this article), the main umbrella organization for mosques in the country. As I prepared questions for the initial round of interviews, I had some ideas about what would constitute the most important or controversial issues. I assumed that these would be related to issues which were perceived as contentious in society at large in Norway: the role of women, homosexuality, how to deal with violent extremists, and so on. But during several interviews it emerged that some of the most important internal issues preoccupying the organization had nothing to do with the issues perceived as most pressing in the media. Questions relating to the Islamic holiday calendar and how to determine prayer times had been important. Another prominent issue had been Islamic slaughter or the requirements of halal meat. An interaction from an interview with a prior board member of the IRN about his time in the organization in the early 2000s shows how this could play out:

Me: Ok, tell me about more about your time in the organization. Were there any issues which were controversial, which created discussions, etcetera?

Interviewee: Not that I recall actually. Or, you know, the halal controversy of course, but I'm sure you already know all about that.

Me: Ah, the halal controversy, interesting, please tell me more.

(Interview conducted 16.04.2019)

I had actually never heard about the halal controversy he mentioned before this interview. In the published research on Islam in Norway there was not much to be found about the issue of halal or Islamic slaughter (for some representative examples, see

Bangstad and Linge 2013; Jacobsen 2010; Østberg 2003; Vogt 2008). But this and other interviews made it clear that disagreements about halal food had been one of the most important disagreements in the organization – and perhaps more broadly among Muslims in Norway – in the 2000s and 2010s.

The major issue, it seemed, was the issue of stunning. Was it permissible to eat meat if the animals had been stunned before being killed? In a recent reference work on the history of the Islamic approaches to halal food, Febe Armanios and Bogac Ergene outline three main positions regarding the permissibility of pre-stunning: “1. Permitted with no limitations, if performed by the ‘people of the book’; 2. Permitted with limitations; 3. Not permitted” (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 125).

Pre-stunning did not exist in pre-modern times, so there was no clear answer to be found among the classical jurists. The lenient approach, which has been championed by modern scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, is based on the long-standing principle in Islamic law that Muslims may buy meat from Jews and Christians, even if the animal has not been slaughtered according to Islamic regulations. In pre-modern times, this appears to have been the dominant approach both theologically and socially in Sunni-dominated areas, but not among Shiite scholars. It has led some scholars, like Florence Bergeaud-Blackler and Francois Gauthier, to claim that the modern preoccupation with halal slaughter is an invented tradition that has more to do with drawing social boundaries than with theology (Bergeaud-Blackler 2017; Gauthier 2021). As Armanios and Ergene note, however, the preoccupation with the correct way of slaughter does not seem to be a novel concern for Muslims. They cite Carsten Niebuhr, a late eighteenth-century traveler to the Middle East, who noted that “Arabians’ had an aversion for hunting wild game because if their prey was killed improperly – that is, not according to halal slaughter prescriptions – their labor would be wasted” (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 397). Furthermore, as they note, most Muslims generally ate very little meat in pre-modern times due to scarcity, so the question was not as pressing as it has become today.

The second approach accepts stunning under some circumstances, but only if one can be certain that stunning does not lead to death. For scholars and groups who advocate this position, it is generally not acceptable to eat the meat slaughtered by “the people of the book” in contemporary times, not least if the

slaughter is not performed according to Islamic regulations. The animal must be slaughtered by a Muslim who invokes the name of God, and the stunning must use a method that minimizes the chance that the animal will die from the stunning. The third approach is the most skeptical, and rejects pre-stunning under all circumstances. The reasoning is not necessarily that pre-stunning can never be allowed, but that it is impossible to be sure that pre-stunning does not lead to immediate death (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 128–29).

For Muslims in many European countries, this is, to a certain degree, a choice. Given that the law allows the performance of ritual slaughter without stunning in countries like the UK, France, and Germany, that seems to be the preference among an increasing number of Muslims in these countries (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 135). In countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and parts of Belgium, however, stunning is not allowed. Ritual slaughter without stunning was banned in Norway in 1929, after a debate in which anti-Semitic arguments were common (Snildal 2014). At the same time, Muslims and Jewish communities are allowed a certain quota for the import of non-stunned halal and kosher meat from abroad, which makes eating meat much more expensive – and rare – than buying locally produced meat. How should the Muslims of Norway deal with this situation?

My interviews with actors in the Islamic Council of Norway revealed a fascinating story: since the early 2000s, their position with regard to the requirements of Islamic slaughter seemed to have been reversed back and forth no less than four times. Why did this happen? This is the question I intend to answer in the rest of the article.

Methodological approach

I will assess this by re-using data from my PhD thesis – a longitudinal, historical study of the Islamic Council of Norway, the central Islamic umbrella organization in the country and the actor that has been most closely involved in regulating halal slaughter. While it addressed a somewhat different set of questions, it contains ample material concerning halal slaughter. Methodologically, the article adopts a form of process tracing: identifying the extent to which certain historical developments

fit with particular theories, perspectives, or social mechanisms (Beach and Pedersen 2013). I use data from written sources, oral interviews, and fieldwork observations. The written sources cover thousands of items, and include contemporaneous newspaper records from the central Norwegian media archive *Atekst/retriever*, all the written statements by the Islamic Council of Norway on their website and on social media since 2000, scholarly literature on Islam in Norway, and the private archive of Prof. Oddbjørn Leirvik, who was instrumental in prompting the creation of the IRN and initiating formal dialogue between it and the Church of Norway. I complemented these written sources with 29 qualitative interviews with key actors in the IRN and external interlocutors which were conducted between 2015 and 2019. The analysis is also informed by fieldwork in various Islamic organizations in Norway, from 2008–2018.

When working with this article in 2021 and 2022, I collected additional material specifically related to the issue of halal slaughter. I conducted a new search through the Norwegian media archives in order to find out more about the history of Islamic slaughter in Norway prior to the 2000s, and halal-relevant material from later years which I might have overlooked in my initial data collection. I surveyed the academic literature on Islam in Norway once again in order to find more about halal slaughter, and found three additional publications: one article on the coverage of halal food in two Norwegian newspapers (Thomas and Selimovic 2015), one blogpost based on a research project on the governance on Islam in Norway (Bangstad 2017), and most significantly, a thorough report on the markets for halal and *schechita* (kosher) meat in Norway, which was only published as an appendix to a larger cross-national report and therefore had been difficult to discover (Lever et al. 2010; Vramo 2010). I then constructed an historical storyline which describes how the approach to halal slaughter has developed and changed in Norway over time. Finally, I attempted to make sense of these changes: What can explain the different stances that the Islamic Council of Norway took on halal slaughter?

The early phase (70s-90s): Uncontroversial accommodation

The story of halal slaughter in Norway seems to begin in the 1970s. The Muslim population in Norway began growing in the

early '70s, following labor migration from Pakistan and other Muslim countries. This influx instigated the first phase of halal slaughter in Norway, wherein accommodation with pre-stunning seems to have been relatively unproblematic. The newspaper sources mention the issue of meat and slaughter twice in the 1970s: in 1974 and 1976 (Jansson 1974; Magnus and Aaserud 1976). Both articles describe slaughterhouses which had begun to cater to Muslims by slaughtering using methods they regarded as halal. The second of these articles goes into some depth on the issue. Most of the 9000 "Muhammedans" in Norway would not eat meat which had not been "blessed", according to the article, which reportedly left many of them "undernourished" (Magnus and Aaserud 1976). The article describes what most of the Muslims in Norway regarded as requirements for meat to be edible: the animal had been slaughtered by a Muslim, who had to invoke the name of Allah. Otherwise, the article points out, the slaughtering process was common to "ordinary" slaughter, with the animal being stunned prior to getting killed.

According to the article, Islamic slaughter was often performed on an ad hoc basis during these years. Muslim butchers would occasionally go to butcheries and conduct the ritual slaughter of sheep, cows, and chickens. The article also notes that there were shops in some of the larger cities where Muslims could buy blessed meat.

Given the scarcity of sources, we cannot know whether these two newspaper articles paint an accurate picture of the social reality among Muslims at the time. Was it the case that most Muslims in Norway only ate meat which had been blessed, or was this more of an ideal which Muslim spokespersons claimed publicly? We cannot know for sure. It is nevertheless reasonable to infer that there was, at the very minimum, a discourse among Muslims regarding the need to avoid eating meat which was not slaughtered according to Islamic rules. This is interesting in itself, given Florence Berneaud-Blackler's assertion that the preoccupation with halal slaughter was largely an invented tradition which only gained steam at a later stage (Bergeaud-Blackler 2017). Even though these Muslims "could" in principle eat regular meat, according to several theological authorities, there were apparently many among them who chose not to do so. But during this period, it also seems as if pre-stunning was not perceived as controversial.

The next milestone came in 1984. According to a newspaper

article from 1987, this was the year when the major association of Norwegian meat farmers decided to institute Islamic slaughter on a regular basis in one of their butcheries (Bisseberg 1987). The initiative reportedly came from one of the employees in the association, who more or less single-handedly created this arrangement, and therefore was “regarded almost like a saint in Muslim circles”, according to the article. In the 1980s, it seems that pre-stunning was no longer regarded as completely uncontroversial. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Islam became increasingly institutionalized in Norway; several mosques had been established employing imams who came from abroad (Vogt 2008). In the article, it is stated that an agreement was established between the Norwegian veterinary authorities and the Muslim “priesthood” which necessitated lengthy negotiations: “It took a whole day to convince the priests that the blood will come out just as quickly even though the animal is stunned” (Bisseberg 1987). The article also mentions that there were discussions about pre-stunning and death. The Muslim representatives demanded that the animal should be able to regain consciousness if it were not killed after being stunned, and by applying a current of 240 volts – the method of stunning at the time – “there is a theoretical possibility for that” (ibid.).

This episode has many interesting aspects. To the best of my knowledge, the agreement between the Muslim imams and the Norwegian veterinary authorities from 1984 represents the first agreement of this kind between Norwegian public authorities and Muslim religious authorities. It is probably also the first time Islamic leaders came together to produce a written standardization of Islamic rules in the Norwegian context which was seen as binding across Islamic groups. The agreement lent religious credentials to the Norwegian way of slaughter, using pre-stunning. But the agreement also implicitly recognized the Muslim imams – the “priesthood” as stated in the article – as *de facto* authorities who could speak on behalf of Muslims. Furthermore, the fact that prolonged negotiations were necessary also implies that the issue of stunning was not uncomplicated by 1984; stunning was accepted, but it *was* an issue which had to be taken seriously. This once again speaks against the hypothesis that the preoccupation with Islamic slaughter was merely a later invention.

Still, an agreement was reached. In the following 15 years, there is not much information in the media archive about this issue. In the published research on Muslims (and Pakistanis) in

Norway, the issue of halal food also appeared relatively muted. In her thorough treatment of Islam in Norway in the '80s and '90s, Kari Vogt briefly mentions that the Islamic Council of Norway – which was created in 1993 – established a halal committee in the 1990s (Vogt 2008: 220), tasked with coordinating and overseeing the issue of halal meat in Norway. She mentions that some were strict concerning what meat to eat, whereas others had a more relaxed attitude (Vogt 2008: 197). But whereas Vogt describes in depth several conflicts and disagreements related to various theological topics, she does not mention slaughter or stunning as a source of disagreement. All of this indicates that the issue of stunning did not appear to be much contested during most of this period.

Back and forth in the 2000s

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the first signs emerged that the issue of stunning was becoming controversial, with occasional mentions in the newspaper archive that there were Muslims who were unhappy with pre-stunning. In 1996, it emerged that the police in Western Norway were investigating a network which was illegally slaughtering and selling meat to Muslims (Frafjord 1996). It is not clear from the newspaper coverage what the main motive was, but the article does note that the illegal meat was slaughtered by Muslims so it would comply with Islamic norms. The article also said that not all Muslims in Norway were willing to eat meat from pre-stunned animals (Frafjord 1996). In 2001 there was a mention that the veterinary authorities in the Eastern part of Norway had come across a case of a Muslim who had slaughtered sheep without stunning (Johansen 2001). Yet the instances of illegal slaughter appear to have been rare, as there are not many confirmed cases in the newspaper archive. What these cases do indicate, however, is that at this point there was no unanimous agreement among Muslims in Norway that pre-stunning was acceptable.

Vramo's report on the halal market from 2010 also indicates that doubts about Norwegian halal food were present in the early 2000s. In 2002, the Islamic Council of Norway set up its own brand of halal food together with Gilde, the major association for Norwegian meat farmers. This brand – Alfathi – was to sell sausages, pizzas, and so on (Riaz 2002). According to Vramo's

report, the brand came about as the initiative of a Somali man whose vision was that Alfathi should “produce real and serious halal products which customers could trust” (Vramo 2010: 66). But this process had not been easy, partly because of the difficulty of finding a slaughtering method that the various “Muslim groups/communities could agree upon and which the Food Safety Authority would validate”. The Food Safety Authority was not interested in dialogue, which made the whole project difficult, and may have lessened trust among the Muslim interlocutors that their concerns were being addressed. The initiator of Alfathi therefore “spent long evenings with different Imams in Norway in order to explain, create and convince them that Alfathi halal was trustworthy” (Vramo 2010: 66).

Interestingly, though, there are no traces of this uncertainty regarding the Norwegian method of stunning and slaughter in the official information from the Islamic Council of Norway. When mentioning the theological issue of stunning and halal slaughter on the IRN website in 2003, there were only two theological documents which were referenced: a classic work by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and a report in Norwegian written by the Norwegian convert and academic Nora Eggen for the Islamic Information Society (Al-Qaradawi 2013; Eggen 2000). Both of these works hailed from a post-Islamist Wasatiyya tradition, which had a lenient view of halal slaughter and stunning. The more restrictive perspectives on stunning, which apparently could also be found among the mosques, were not referenced on the IRN website.

An important backdrop to all this was that the Islamic Council of Norway had until this point been heavily dominated by a couple of mosques which were connected to Islamist movements – the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and the Jameat Islami in Pakistan (Elgvin 2020:140–202). In the Norwegian context, these mosques developed in a markedly post-Islamist direction, emphasizing dialogue and soft stances. The largest group of Muslims in Norway, the Sufi-oriented Pakistani Barelwi, did not have a strong presence in the leadership of the Council.

In 2007, however, signs emerged that the dominance of the post-Islamists was not as firm as it had been. The summer months of 2007 would be the first time that actors in the Barelwi mosques began to challenge the primacy of the post-Islamists in the public sphere. During the spring of 2007, uncertainty was beginning to spread among some Muslims in Norway concern-

ing whether the halal-marked chicken they bought was indeed halal. The reason was that the largest supplier of halal and non-halal chicken in Norway – Nortura – had changed its method of stunning fowl. Previously, it had relied on electric stunning but, increasingly, it had begun to stun chickens with gas. Some were concerned that the chicken would die directly from the stunning and would thereby not be halal for consumption.

Uneasiness about this issue among some Muslims was first reported in March, in the rural-oriented newspaper *Nationen*, which frequently writes about issues of interest for farmers (Brandvol 2007). In June, the newspaper *Aftenposten* reported that the Islamic Council of Norway had asked the Norwegian food safety authorities to investigate the slaughtering of chickens, in order to verify how many died after being stunned with gas. The food safety authorities promptly turned this request down, saying that their sole concern was animal welfare, not religious issues; if chickens indeed died from stunning it was not their concern (Engström 2007). Then, at the end of July, chaos erupted within the Muslim communities. The newspaper VG reported that the Islamic Council of Norway now wanted to boycott all Norwegian chicken. Apparently, an SMS was circulating and widely shared in several Muslim communities:

JOINT DECLARATION FROM ULEMA/IMAMS IN NORWAY!!

After a systematic and thorough investigation, all the Ulema and Imams in Norway have concluded that chickens which are being sold in Norway or on the border to Sweden, ARE NOT HALAL!!

Buying and selling of these is not allowed according to Islamic law, even though it reads HALAL on them. All Muslims are encouraged to avoid eating these.

Sign: - THE ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF NORWAY
- AHLE-SUNNAT IMAM COUNCIL
- JAMIAT ULAMA-E NORWAY

For more information you may contact those mentioned above. PS! Send this to all the Muslims you know

(Kirknes and Widerøe 2007)

In VG's article, the representative who articulated this demand was Ghulam Sarwar, who was the administrative leader of the Barelwi Ahl-e-Sunnat mosque and did not sit on the IRN board.

The only problem, it would soon emerge, was that it was actually not the case that “all the ulema/imams” in Norway had agreed to this, and it was unclear whether this was something that the board of the Islamic Council of Norway really wanted. *Aftenposten* reported two days later that there were several important mosques that had not signed the declaration, including the Deobandi or post-Islamist Islamic Cultural Centre – which had been important in the IRN – and Idara Minhaj ul-Quran, an important Barelwi/Sufi mosque (Riaz 2007, 2007). According to sources I spoke to in 2018 and 2019, neither had the Bosnian imams nor the Rabita mosque. This meant that most of the mosques which were dominant in the IRN at the time were against the declaration. Nevertheless, at the time, the IRN did not claim that they were against it, so the issue was left ambiguous.

Furthermore, the imam network which had signed the boycott declaration was actually not formally connected to the IRN. For a long time, the IRN had an imam committee, where the imams in the member mosques could meet to discuss theological issues. But a different imam council existed in Norway alongside this committee, one which mostly stayed out of the media spotlight. It was called the *Ahle-sunnat Imam Council* at the time and convened imams from mosques in the Barelwi tradition. It is reportedly a council whose members meet to discuss issues of common interest between themselves. For many years they mostly stayed out of the spotlight, until they changed their name to *Norges imam råd* (“the Norwegian Imam Council”) in 2018, and created a public Facebook page in 2019 (Norges Imam Råd 2019). The halal controversy in 2007 was the first instance when the council took a clear public stance on a contested issue.

This controversy caused substantial insecurity among Norwegian Muslims: Was it permissible to eat Norwegian halal chicken, or not? This question created problems for several Muslim restaurants that relied on halal chicken for their business. It was a provocation for Nortura, which up until then had cooperated well with the IRN and now risked losing many customers. It also created a headache for the IRN’s board. By associating themselves with the declaration, they were actually empowering a network of imams who were operating outside the confines of the IRN. Furthermore, the drastic move of boycotting all halal chicken in Norway had happened without the approval of several of the most important mosques.

What had happened? When I conducted interviews regard-

ing this issue in 2018 and 2019, there was much confusion among my interviewees concerning what had actually transpired, and it appeared that the involvement of some committed individuals during the summer months had been crucial. Although there was considerable internal disagreement and confusion on the IRN's board, the organization did not officially retract their support for the chicken boycott. In November, for example, *Aftenposten* wrote a new article on the issue, in which the journalist stated that the “leader of the IRN, together with 25 imams, has signed a declaration that the chicken in Norway and Sweden are not slaughtered in an Islamic way. A minority of imams have not signed the declaration. They think it is ok to eat chicken” (Riaz 2007). This makes what the IRN actually thought about the declaration somewhat uncertain – a perception of ambiguity that seems to have been shared by key actors inside the IRN. About one year later, in September 2008, the IRN finally announced that it had reached an agreement with the chicken producer Nortura (IRN 2008b) in which the IRN essentially accepted the slaughter method some of the mosques had rejected since the previous summer. Nortura would still use gas to stun the chickens before killing them. According to an article from *Aftenposten*, what had convinced the IRN to accept this was Nortura's promising to employ more people in their slaughterhouses to shorten the waiting period between the stunning and the slaughter (Riaz 2008).

Within the course of one year, then, the organization had publicly backed a rather dramatic statement against Norwegian halal chicken, before retreating and accepting once again the old way of doing things. This back and forth movement seemed to be partly related to genuine theological concerns but it also had a lot to do with power relations within the organization and the Islamic field in Norway more generally. The Barelwi mosques, which were not the most powerful within the Islamic Council of Norway, had attempted to make their voices heard. In the end, however, the post-Islamist mosques dominated the official position regarding halal meat.

Halal food as a field of symbolic power in the 2010s

It the early 2010s, halal slaughter would become a subject which would generate even greater controversy in the Islamic field in

Norway. The IRN once again shifted its emphasis in a more skeptical direction, even though it continued to condone stunning. New people joined the leadership of the IRN in 2010 and 2011, and they had new ideas about how the organization should be run. Whereas the IRN had long sought to reach many of their goals through external dialogue and soft means, the organization increasingly sought a more independent profile. It also strived to empower the Muslim community from within, rather than relying on external recognition (Elgvin 2020: 291–322).

One of their most important projects was a large initiative on the certification of halal meat. The IRN attempted to become a body with the sole right to declare various undertakings halal – both meat products and the businesses which sold them. In the late 2000s, the IRN had largely outsourced the halal business to an external company, which was involved both in certification and the distribution of halal meat (interviews with actors in the IRN, April and October 2018; Sleipnes 2010). The IRN's new leadership wanted to do things differently and one of the actors on the new board set in motion numerous projects relating to halal. The first thing the organization did, he said in our interview, was to contact the imams in almost all of the member mosques to conduct a review of the theological legitimacy of the Norwegian method of halal slaughtering:

In 2012, for the first time, we wrote a theological and technical document which was a *halal-standard* for Norway. It wasn't just the IRN saying "this is ok"; it was an elaborate document which we had worked with internally for a long time. I had discussed it with the imams in Norway, I had involved imams abroad, we had looked at fatwas, we had considered that mechanical slaughter and stunning was a challenge. But we reached a compromise, based on the rules of exception [from the traditional theological requirements] the imams could agree to.

(Interview with actor in the IRN, 30.11.2018)

I was not able to procure the full and complete document from the IRN, but the Internet Archive had saved the first part of it from the IRN's website (Mushtaq 2012). The essence of it was not very different from what the IRN had previously agreed to: namely, to accept stunning before slaughter, as long as the animal did not die from the stunning procedure itself. The diffe-

rence seems to be that this document was more extensive in its regulation of the slaughtering process and was more comprehensive than the statement the IRN had made earlier. Theologically, it seems to have had a more restrictive starting point, even though it arrived at the same conclusion as before. Instead of saying that stunning animals before killing them was not problematic, this document said that it was not ideal, but could still be acceptable given the societal circumstances in Norway.

Another difference was that the document seemed to be more strongly accepted by a larger group of mosques, particularly among the Barelwis. As previously discussed, the IRN was put in a difficult position in 2007 when a group of mosques and imams boycotted chicken meat more or less on their own initiative, without the full involvement of the IRN organization. But this time, the IRN – where Barelwis now had leadership roles – managed to get Barelwis, Deobandis, Somalis, and Arab post-Islamists on board with the halal approach they were promoting.

After they had secured the backing of the mosques, the IRN embarked on an ambitious project to secure complete control over halal certification in Norway. As has been discussed by some scholars of Islam in Europe, controlling the right to pronounce something halal or not confers great symbolic power. The person who can say that something is halal is effectively asserting a claim to speak for Islam. In France, for example, there are several different bodies, all of which compete for the right to certify meat as halal (Arslan and Adraoui 2013, Ch. 10). There is a similar situation in other countries, such as Poland and Denmark, where researchers have recently described a competition over the right to pronounce meat as halal (Fischer 2022, Pędziwiatr 2021). When they claimed the right to certify halal, the IRN was also laying claim to symbolic power.

After the new halal standard had been approved, the IRN made provisions for certifying businesses or restaurants as halal in exchange for a fee which, it was said, would cover the costs associated with certifying that the enterprise was indeed halal. For example, did the kitchen serve anything non-halal on the same plates, even though only halal meat was used for the halal dishes? At the beginning of the process, the IRN employed a fairly harsh tactic: if a business did not want to be certified because they did not want to pay the certification fee, the IRN might publish a piece on their website or on Facebook which said that this or that restaurant was *not* halal. When a restaurant

or business chose to become halal-certified, on the other hand, the IRN would often publicize this, perhaps with a statement to the effect that “the Muslim consumer can now safely enjoy the good food that is served by this restaurant” (Mushtaq 2013).

Quite understandably, perhaps, this hard-nosed approach created friction and resistance. Several business owners thought that it should suffice that they only used halal-certified meat on their premises, and had difficulty understanding why they needed to pay a fee to the IRN for the IRN to ensure that they did what they were already doing. The argument from the IRN’s side, on the other hand, was that the Muslim consumer had no way of knowing this. Yes, the individual Muslim restaurant owner could have a clear conscience, but how could the Muslim consumer actually know who conformed to the halal requirements and who did not? By creating a system of certification, they were enabling the consumers to make informed and safe choices: they would *know* that the business in question was halal.

After the initial period of resistance, the IRN succeeded in its endeavor. Increasing numbers of businesses, stores, and restaurants owned by Muslims came to the IRN for certification. This began to generate a substantial source of revenue for the IRN, allowing it to employ two full-time employees – who worked exclusively with halal certification and halal agreements – and to relocate to new and more representative premises in 2016. The IRN had succeeded in becoming the *de facto* certifier of halal in Norway, a feat that gave it no small amount of symbolic power among Muslims.

Renewed complications – late 2010s and 2020s

In the late 2010s the IRN would once again quietly reverse its course on halal meat, before yet another U-turn in the early 2020s. The background was that the IRN experienced a split and a public fall from grace in 2018 (I have covered this at length elsewhere, see Elgvin 2020). During the 2010s deep conflicts developed within the organization. One faction advocated a dialogue path, with an emphasis on soft rhetoric and external outreach, while another advocated a community path, which aimed at strengthening the internal solidarity of Muslim communities. After a prolonged conflict, the advocates of the commu-

nity path won the power struggle, and the proponents of the dialogue path broke out and created a competing organization. The remaining IRN organization subsequently lost public sympathy and, with it, its public funding. As a result, its main partner in the halal project, the meat manufacturer Nortura, also broke off relations.

This was a dramatic development for the organization, as it had built much of its economic and symbolic power during the 2010s on the halal project. What should it do now? The next stage in the halal business mostly happened below the radar, but was still significant. When the halal certification agreement crumbled, the IRN quietly began another undertaking. It set up a daughter company which began importing non-stunned halal meat from abroad, selling it under the brand name Nawal (Proff 2020). Presumably, this was done because the organization wanted a new source of income. Nawal wrote on each of its products that it was “slaughtered by hand without stunning” (Matpunkt 2020). On some of its postings on social media, it used the slogan “No doubt, only enjoyment” (Nawal 2020). From a legal point of view, this is not controversial. Norway allows a certain quota of imported kosher and halal meat each year, and the IRN has the same right as other actors to import and sell meat under this quota. But by engaging in this undertaking, and associating halal meat slaughtered in Norway with the word “doubt”, IRN arguably began to undercut the theological agreement on halal slaughter it had so painstakingly worked out in 2012, indirectly sowing doubt in the minds of Norwegian Muslims as to whether it was Islamically defensible to buy meat from Norwegian halal producers.

But a couple of years later, the IRN had once again changed course, renewing its project of halal certification using meat slaughtered in Norway. It emerged in 2021 that the organization had resumed its dealings with several Norwegian slaughterhouses and were again certifying stunned meat as halal (Capar 2021). Once more the organization seemed to have come a full circle back to its original position.

Conclusion: Understanding the patterns

The overall pattern in the approach of the Islamic Council of Norway – the main body in charge of halal certification in

Norway – has thus been as follows: during the first years, it accepted stunning before slaughter without much ado. Then it made a dramatic and public turnaround in 2006, and said that Norwegian chicken that was sold as halal was actually not halal to consume. Two years later, in 2008, it reversed course and said that the chicken was halal after all. In 2012 the organization put in place more stringent controls on the certification of halal meat, but continued to accept stunning. In 2018 the organization quietly changed course again, implying in their messaging that stunned halal meat was maybe not to be trusted, and in 2020 there was the final change to date when the organization made a renewed commitment to halal meat with stunning.

How can we make sense of these shifting stances? The first thing to note is that the way the Islamic Council of Norway has produced sharia-compliant regulations in the halal field is clearly impacted by juridical and political opportunity structures in Norwegian society. Stunning has simply been illegal. A quota system for importing non-stunned meat from abroad was there as an option, but the quota was so small that the meat imported would become both expensive and rare. Halal meat without stunning can thus be thought of as “sour grapes”, using Jon Elster’s framing (Elster 2016): it was unavailable, and the IRN therefore claimed that it was in any case not *that* important.

At the same time, theology has mattered. One of the underlying reasons that stunning has at times been controversial has to do with important debates in Islamic theology. From the early stages of the Islamic presence in Norway in the 1970s, there seems to have been a preoccupation among Muslims with buying meat that was “blessed”, as it was phrased in a newspaper article from the time. This religious concern does not seem to be only an invented tradition, or only a way of differentiating between Muslims and non-Muslims. Religious ideas about right and wrong clearly came into the picture.

But theology cannot in itself explain the variation one can see in the stances of the IRN. The level of religious concern among Norwegian Muslims, or among key actors in the IRN, probably did not change a lot between 2006 and 2008, or between 2018 and 2020. What rather seems to be at play are internal power dynamics in the Islamic field. When Barelwi actors challenged the stunning of chickens in 2006, it happened at a time when they were not in power in the organization. When Barelwi imams publicly accepted stunning in 2012, they were

closer to power in the Islamic Council of Norway and probably stood to gain more from a halal certification scheme taking place on their watch. The two rapid changes in the stance of the IRN in 2018 and 2020 also do not seem to have a lot to do with theology; rather, they seem to be related to the financial interests of the organization, with its adopting the stance on each occasion that could provide it with a sorely needed source of income. Yet the controversy and repeated U-turns detailed in this article constitute the field of halal regulations as one of complexity and considerable importance to Muslims and Muslim organizations. Understanding the processes that underlie such negotiations may, therefore, help us to understand wider processes of change in Islamic norms in Europe.

Funding

Work for this article has been partly funded through the Can-code project, TMS grant TMS2020STGo1.

Bibliography

- Armanios, Febe, and Boğaç A. Ergene. 2018. *Halal Food: A History*. Oxford University Press.
- Arslan, Leyla, and Mohamed-Ali Adraoui. 2013. *L'Islam en France pour les Nuls*. Actus.
- Bangstad, Sindre. 2017. "Going under the Radar: Halal Controversies in Norway." *Religion: Going Public*. Retrieved May 2, 2022 (<https://religiongoingpublic.com/archive/2017/going-under-the-radar-halal-controversies-in-norway>).
- Bangstad, Sindre, and Marius Linge. 2013. "IslamNet – Puritansk salafisme i Norge." *Kirke Og Kultur* 117(03):254–72.
- Beach, Derek, and Rasmus Brun Pedersen. 2013. *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. University of Michigan Press.
- Bergeaud-Blackler, Florence. 2017. *Le Marché Halal ou l'invention d'une Tradition*. Le Seuil.
- Bisseberg, Aslaug. 1987. "Lam på islamsk i Hallingdal." *Aftenposten*, October 27.
- Brandvol, Ivar. 2007. "Strid om avlivingsmetode for kylling." *Nationen*, March 16.
- Capar, Robin-Ivan. 2021. "Islamic Council of Norway Certifies Several Slaughterhouses." *Norway Today*, July 26.
- Elgvin, Olav. 2020. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place : The Islamic Council of Norway and the Challenge of Representing Islam in Europe." University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway.
- Elster, Jon. *Sour grapes*. Cambridge university press, 2016
- Engström, Josefin. 2007. "- Dør på feil vis." *Aftenposten*, September 6.
- Frafjord, Ståle. 1996. "Slakter ulovlig for muslimer." *VG*, March

- 19.
- Fischer, Johan. "Material Muslim Authority: Danish Debates about Religious Markets." *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 11.1 (2022): 106-123.
- Gauthier, François. 2021. "The Halalisation of Islam." *Sociology of Islam* 1(aop):1-21.
- Jacobsen, Christine. 2010. *Islamic Traditions and Muslim Youth in Norway*. Brill.
- Jansson, Terje. 1974. "Bønn for broilere." *VG*, November 3.
- Johansen, Knut. 2001. "Advarer mot ulovlig halal-slakting." *Moss Avis*, January 11.
- Kirknes, Hanne, and Rolf Widerøe. 2007. "Muslimer vil ha kylling-BOIKOTT - Mener de ikke er slaktet på ekte halal-vis." *VG*, July 22.
- Lever, John, Maria Puig De La Bellacasa, Mara Miele, and Marc Higgin. 2010. *From the Slaughterhouse to the Consumer: Transparency and Information in the Distribution of Halal and Kosher Meat*. Wales: Dialrel.
- Magnus, Jon, and Ivar Aaserud. 1976. "Velsignet saueslakt." *VG*, October 21.
- Matpunkt. 2020. "Kylling naturell - curry cut 16+ biter u/skinn, singelfryst, ca.1kg." *Matpunkt™ Halalmat levert på døra*. Retrieved May 31, 2020 (<https://matpunkt.no/produkt/kjott-og-kylling/kylling-1/curry-cut-16-biter-over-1kg-2>).
- Mushtaq, Irfan. 2012. "Halalkjøtt og halalslakting i Norge - Muslimposten." *Www.Irn.No*. Retrieved September 29, 2019 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20121231204719/http://www.irn.no/siste-nytt-om-halalmat/entry/halalkjott-og-halal-slakting-i-norge>).
- Mushtaq, Irfan. 2013. "Villedende bruk av Halalmerking." *Www.Irn.No*. Retrieved September 29, 2019 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160612080309/http://www.irn.no/entry/villedende-bruk-av-halalmerking>).
- Peđziwiatr, Konrad. "Halal Certification as a Source of Intra- and Inter-group Tensions among Muslims in Poland." *Rethinking Halal*. Brill, 2021. 241-264.
- Nawal. 2020. "Nawal posting 24.01.2020." Retrieved May 31, 2020 (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1331564160380297&id=1046681272201922).
- Norges Imam Råd. 2019. "Norges Imam Råd | Facebook." Retrieved May 13, 2020 (https://www.facebook.com/NorgesImamRad/?ref=py_c).
- Østberg, Sissel. 2003. *Muslim i Norge: Religion og hverdagsliv blant unge norsk-pakistanere*. Universitetsforlaget
- Proff. 2020. "Norwegian M Import AS - Oslo - roller og kunngjøringer." Retrieved May 31, 2020 (<https://www.proff.no/roller/norwegian-m-import-as/oslo/kj%C3%B8tt-og-vilt-engros/IF8SJ7D1oOV/>).
- Riaz, Wasim. 2002. "Urnorske Gilde på muslimsk markedsjakt." *Aftenposten*, November 8.
- Sleipnes, Per A. 2010. "Skjeggerød blir storprodusent av halal-produkter." *Kjøttbransjen*, March, 10.
- Snildal, Andreas. 2014. "An Anti-Semitic Slaughter Law?: The Origins of the Norwegian Prohibition of Jewish Religious Slaughter c. 1890-1930."
- Thomas, Paul, and Amina Selimovic. 2015. "Sharia on a Plate? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Halal Food in Two Norwegian Newspapers." *Journal of Islamic Marketing*.
- Vogt, Kari. 2008. *Islam på norsk: moskeer og islamske organisasjoner i Norge*. Cappelen damm.
- Vramo, Lill Margrethe. 2010. *The Norwegian Market for Halal and Schechita Meat Products*.
- Yakin, Ayang Utriza, Louis-Léon Christians, and Baudouin Dupret. "Rethinking Halal: Critical Perspective on Halal Markets and Certification." *Rethinking Halal*. Brill, 2021. 1-22.