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The Quran and Killing for Food: When Moral Intuition Faces Complex Realities

Killing for food is one of the most persistent ethical conundrums in human history. At least on the surface, depriving one creature of its life to satisfy one's craving for meat does not seem to be intuitively consistent with the principle of justice. Despite the legitimacy of this concern and the centrality of the notion of justice to Islamic doctrines, among the world's faith traditions Islam remains to date among the most resistant to vegetarianism. This is not to imply that the tradition has been indifferent to the problem. Indeed, the broader theme of animal suffering and the subtheme of killing for food have preoccupied Muslim theologians, qur'anic exegetes, and other thinkers; nonetheless, vegetarianism has almost never been one of their proposed answers.

Against this backdrop, the last couple of decades have witnessed the emergence of a small but growing number of scholars and lay advocates who have been striving to demonstrate the compatibility of moral vegetarianism with Islamic doctrines. Although in most cases this group's aim is merely to carve a place for vegetarianism without questioning the basic permissibility of animal products, some argue that a vegan lifestyle is more consonant with Islamic teachings. One of this presentation's aims is to examine and evaluate this position. Although I agree with its egalitarian underpinnings and share the view that this egalitarian stance is rooted in the Qur'an, the case for Islamic vegetarianism is poorly conceptualized. More importantly, I would like to argue that although it may appear paradoxical, killing for food is indeed more consistent with the principles of egalitarianism and justice. This is partly because vegetarian and vegan diets also involve a cost in life, though one that tends to be less noticeable or dismissed as underserving of ethical consideration. Moreover, if carried to its logical conclusion ethical vegetarianism is bound to raise serious conceptual and empirical problems, including ones affecting the underprivileged within the human context and the very animals it seeks to protect. To build this argument, I will mainly be in conversation with three authors whose work captures the main arguments in favor of Islamic vegetarianism. These are Richard Foltz, Kecia Ali, and Zinnira Shaykh.



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Dr Sarra Tlili is a scholar of Arab and Islamic studies. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization. Her primary research interests are stylistics of the Qur'an, animals in Islam and Arabic literature. Among the courses she has taught are The Quran as Literature, Arab Woman, and Arabic-English Translation. Her areas of interest is Quran studies, animals in Islam, Arabic literature and civilization; environmental studies. Dr Tlili is the author of '*Animals in the Qur'an*', Cambridge University press, 2012.