

Purity and Protection Islamic Standards in Halal Certification and Food Safety

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Abstract

Halal certification, in its ideal form, is not merely a commercial label but a sacred trust grounded in the Islamic principles of ṭahārah (purity), ḥalāl (lawful consumption), and ḥifẓ al-naḥs (protection of life). As food systems globalize and consumers become increasingly conscientious of what they eat, the significance of reliable, standardized, and ethically informed halal certification has grown. However, inconsistencies in certification procedures, fragmented regulatory frameworks, and the commodification of halal labeling threaten the sanctity of the concept itself. This article critically examines the current landscape of halal certification and food safety by drawing on Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic traditions, fiqh-based rulings, and modern fatwas. It evaluates the divergences between certifying bodies across regions, the limited integration of food safety science with Islamic legal reasoning, and the exploitation of halal labels for market advantage. The study also includes comparative case analyses from Malaysia, Pakistan, the Gulf, and Western countries to identify regulatory gaps and best practices. By advocating a holistic framework that integrates Islamic jurisprudence, scientific food safety protocols, and ethical accountability, this research calls for a unified, transnational standard of halal certification. Such a framework would not only preserve religious integrity but also protect consumers from harmful practices and misinformation. The article concludes with policy recommendations for religious authorities, governments, and halal-certifying bodies to restore consumer trust and uphold the spiritual, ethical, and public health dimensions of halal.

Keywords: Halal Certification, Islamic Food Ethics, Ṭahārah and Ḥalāl, Food Safety, Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh)

Introduction

The term ḥalāl (حلال), derived from the Arabic root ḥ-l-l, signifies that which is “permissible” or “lawful” according to Islamic law (Sharī'ah). In traditional Islamic jurisprudence, ḥalāl dietary principles were developed to protect faith (ḥifẓ al-dīn), life (ḥifẓ al-naḥs), and purity (ṭahārah), forming part of a broader ethical-legal framework. These principles cover not only the ingredients of food, but also the methods of animal slaughter (dhabaḥ), processing, hygiene, handling, labor ethics, and even the intention behind food production.

However, the evolution of food systems under global capitalism, industrialization, and cross-border trade has significantly transformed how food is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Today's halal food industry exceeds USD 2 trillion, encompassing not only meat but also dairy, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, nutraceuticals, and fast food.¹

Despite this massive expansion, Muslim consumers now confront a crisis of trust and clarity:

1. Can a product with a halal label be trusted if it lacks transparency regarding animal welfare, ingredient sourcing, and contamination risk?
2. Is ritual slaughter alone sufficient to designate something halal, even if it is chemically unsafe or produced through unethical labor practices?
3. Who holds the religious and legal authority to define ḥalāl in a scientifically complex and commercially driven era?

These questions are not merely theoretical; they touch upon the spiritual, ethical, and physical well-being of over 1.9 billion Muslims worldwide. The fragmentation of halal standards across countries, the existence of unregulated or contradictory certifying bodies, and the rise of “halal-washing” (commercial misuse of the label) threaten to erode the sacred trust (amānah) that underpins Muslim consumption.

This article argues for a holistic re-examination of ḥalāl—one that transcends minimalist legalism and integrates three essential dimensions:

Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh):

Classical rulings on halal and haram, adapted responsibly to contemporary contexts.²

Prophetic Ethics (Akhlaq al-Nabawiyyah):

Emphasizing compassion, honesty, moderation, and justice in food production.

Scientific Food Safety: Ensuring food is not just lawful, but also hygienic, safe, and free from harmful contaminants.

Only by merging these three pillars can the Muslim ummah move toward a trustworthy and spiritually grounded halal food system—one that aligns with both divine injunctions and public health imperatives in the 21st century.

Qur'anic Foundations and Prophetic Teachings

The Qur'an offers a profound ethical framework for dietary consumption that transcends ritual legality. In Surah al-Baqarah, Allah commands:

“O mankind! Eat of that which is ḥalāl (lawful) and ṭayyib (good/pure) on the earth...”³

This verse establishes a foundational duality in Islamic food ethics: ḥalāl (legally permissible) and ṭayyib (pure, wholesome, beneficial). The divine injunction does not limit itself to formal permissibility but demands qualitative goodness—a criterion often underemphasized in modern halal certification practices.

Thus, food must not only be free from religiously prohibited elements like carrion, blood, or pork, but also:

1. Hygienic and safe: free from microbial or chemical contamination.
2. Free from ḍarar (harm): including additives, toxins, or unsanitary production.
3. Ethically sourced: involving fair labor, animal welfare, and ecological responsibility.
4. The broader Qur'anic framework associates moral accountability with physical well-being:

“Do not kill yourselves [or one another]. Indeed, Allah is ever Merciful to you.”⁴

This verse has been widely interpreted to include the prohibition of self-harm through negligent or harmful consumption. It suggests that endangering one's health through impure

food or deceitful practices is a moral and spiritual violation, not just a technical lapse.

Prophetic Sunnah and Ethical Consumption

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provides an applied ethics of consumption rooted in transparency, compassion, and purity:

Honesty in trade:

The Prophet ﷺ condemned dishonesty in food markets. In one well-known hadith, he inserted his hand into a mound of wheat and found it damp underneath. He said:

“He who deceives us is not one of us.”⁵

Prohibition of gharar (deception): Any ambiguity in ingredients, origin, or quality of food violates the Prophetic principle of consumer trust.

Mercy in animal slaughter:

“Verily, Allah has prescribed excellence (iḥsān) in everything. If you kill, kill well; and if you slaughter, slaughter well.”⁶

This reflects the Islamic demand for humane and ethical treatment of animals, including proper tools, minimal suffering, and invocation of God’s name.

Cleanliness in food handling: Numerous hadiths emphasize personal hygiene, clean utensils, and public sanitation, laying the foundation for what today we call food safety and hygiene protocols.

In summary, both the Qur’ān and Sunnah provide a multi-layered framework for halal: one that insists on legality, purity, ethics, and safety. This framework challenges modern Muslims to go beyond labels and align consumption with divine guidance, scientific awareness, and moral integrity.

Halal Certification: Principles and Processes

Halal certification is the formal attestation that a product or process complies with Islamic dietary laws as derived from the Qur’ān, Sunnah, and juristic consensus (ijmā’).⁷

It is not merely a religious stamp but a multi-dimensional assurance system encompassing legality, purity, and ethics.

A certified halal product must:

Exclude ḥarām ingredients: such as pork, blood, carrion, alcohol, or any substance derived from impermissible sources.

Use only halal-approved additives: including emulsifiers, flavorings, and enzymes—especially those derived from microbial, plant, or halal animal sources.

Follow Islamic slaughter principles: including tasmīya (invocation of Allah’s name), humane technique, and slaughter by a sane, adult Muslim.

Avoid cross-contamination: ensuring that production lines, utensils, and facilities are sanitized and segregated from impure (najis) substances.

Adopt ethical supply chain practices: aligned with Islamic values such as transparency, trust (amānah), and avoidance of exploitation.

In short, halal certification is a moral, legal, and procedural guarantee rooted in Islamic theology and contemporary quality assurance mechanisms.⁸

Core Components of Certification

A robust halal certification framework integrates several interdependent domains, each with explicit Islamic legal and ethical criteria:

Component	Islamic Requirement
Slaughter (Dhakāt)	Must be conducted by a Muslim, invoking Allah’s name; animal must be healthy and slaughtered with a swift, humane cut (per Prophetic practice).
Ingredients	All ingredients and additives must be free from najāsah (ritual impurity) and ḥarām derivations (e.g., gelatin from pigs).
Processing Equipment	& Production tools and facilities must be clean, free from cross-contact with najis elements, and undergo purification (ṭahārah) if contaminated.
Packaging Labeling	& Transparency is obligatory; labels must be truthful, verifiable, and include traceability of source and certifier.
Supply Chain	Must reflect Islamic commercial ethics: free from gharar (deception), ribā (usury), and exploitation of labor or environment.

This structure not only operationalizes Islamic principles but integrates modern quality assurance with fiqh-based oversight, creating a holistic ethical standard.

Roles of Certifying Bodies

In the global halal industry, a wide array of independent certifying bodies has emerged. Some of the most prominent include:

1. JAKIM – Department of Islamic Development, Malaysia
2. MUIS – Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, Singapore
3. SANHA – South African National Halal Authority
4. HFA & HMC – Halal Food Authority & Halal Monitoring Committee, United Kingdom
5. IFANCA – Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America

While these organizations perform essential gatekeeping functions, the absence of universal halal standards has led to fragmentation and consumer confusion.

Key challenges include:

Inconsistent Criteria: Some bodies allow mechanical slaughter (e.g., JAKIM), while others (e.g., HMC) strictly prohibit it. Disparities also exist in alcohol tolerance limits, GMO rulings, and synthetic additives.⁹

Commercialization and Loss of Integrity: Halal certification has become a billion-dollar industry. In some cases, profit motives compromise ethical oversight, leading to superficial audits or “rubber stamp” certifications.

Politicization of Halal Markets: In regions where state-backed religious authorities control certification, political interference may restrict competition or exclude minority interpretations of Islamic law.

In summary, while halal certification serves a crucial function in today’s complex global food system, it must evolve toward standardization, accountability, and ethical coherence. Rooting these processes in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Prophetic ethics, and scientific rigor is essential for preserving the sanctity of halal, building consumer trust, and advancing public health.

Islamic Jurisprudential Foundations

Halal dietary regulations are deeply embedded in the fabric of Islamic law (Sharīʿah), encompassing both ritualistic and ethical dimensions.¹⁰

The jurisprudential framework governing halal is not limited to prohibitive lists but is grounded in a sophisticated moral-legal tradition that aims to protect the holistic well-being of individuals and society.

Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah and Halal Food

The Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah—the higher objectives or intents of Islamic law—provide a normative lens through which halal regulation acquires profound moral significance.¹¹

Key objectives directly relevant to halal food governance include:

Ḥifẓ al-naḥs (Protection of Life):

Islamic law mandates the preservation of human life, which includes protection from physical harm caused by unsafe, unhygienic, or toxic food. Halal is not merely about permissibility, but also about ensuring public health and nutritional well-being.

Ḥifẓ al-dīn (Preservation of Faith):

Adhering to halal dietary laws reinforces religious identity and obedience to divine command. Ritual slaughter (dhakāh) and abstaining from haram substances are integral expressions of Muslim devotion.

Ḥifẓ al-ʿaql (Preservation of Intellect):

Ensuring that food is free from intoxicants, harmful additives, and deceptive labeling upholds the intellectual integrity and informed moral agency of the consumer.

Ḥifẓ al-māl (Preservation of Wealth):

Fraudulent halal labeling and unethical supply chains violate the consumer's right to lawful consumption and fair economic transactions.

In essence, halal regulation functions as an ethical safeguard that harmonizes spiritual compliance with health, safety, and socio-economic justice.

Schools of Thought and Contemporary Debates on Slaughter

While all major Sunni and Shi'i schools of Islamic jurisprudence agree on the obligatory nature of halal slaughter and the prohibition of haram ingredients, there exist nuanced differences on contemporary issues such as stunning, mechanical slaughter, and the permissibility of meat slaughtered by People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb).¹²

Stunning before Slaughter

Classical View:

Stunning is not discussed in classical fiqh due to its modernity. However, the concern centres on whether it causes death before the act of slaughter.¹³

Contemporary Fatwas:

The European Council for Fatwa and Research, Majma' al-Fiqh al-Islāmī, and other leading institutions have issued conditional permissions for stunning—provided:

1. It does not cause permanent harm or death before the actual slaughter (non-lethal and

reversible).

2. The animal is still alive at the time of cutting the throat.
3. Stunning is used to reduce pain and ensure humane treatment.

The Hanafi school tends to be more cautious, though exceptions are made in industrial settings under strict supervision.

Mechanical Slaughter

The increasing demand for halal meat has led to the use of mechanical blades, particularly in poultry slaughterhouses.

Points of Contention:

Whether the Basmala (invocation of Allah’s name) must be recited individually for each animal or collectively for a batch.¹⁴

The physical presence and intent (niyyah) of a Muslim supervisor.¹⁵

Major Opinions:

1. Some Maliki and Hanbali jurists permit batch invocation if the process is automated and overseen by a Muslim.
2. Hanafi scholars often insist on manual invocation for each animal, citing stricter requirements for dhakāh.
3. The IFANCA and MUIS models permit mechanical slaughter under strict regulation, while HMC (UK) prohibits it entirely.
4. Slaughter by Ahl al-Kitāb (People of the Book)

Qur’anic Basis:

“The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you...”¹⁶

Traditional Interpretation:

Permissible, provided the slaughter adheres to monotheistic principles and avoids haram practices (e.g., strangulation, clubbing).¹⁷

Modern Concerns:

In many Western contexts, meat is slaughtered without invocation or ethical standards, often by atheists, agnostics, or secular workers, complicating the applicability of this ruling.¹⁸

As a result, most contemporary scholars urge stringent verification before accepting meat from Ahl al-Kitāb under modern industrial systems.¹⁹

In summary, the diversity of opinion across Islamic legal schools reflects the adaptability and richness of fiqh. However, the complexity of modern food systems necessitates updated ijtihād (legal reasoning), institutional consensus, and transnational regulatory harmonization to ensure that halal certification remains both authentic and practical.

Food Safety and Hygiene: A Sharī‘ah Imperative

Islamic dietary law is inherently aligned with modern food safety protocols. The Prophetic tradition promotes comprehensive hygiene practices—such as handwashing, food covering, cleanliness in utensils, and avoidance of contamination—all of which mirror the principles

embedded in contemporary global standards like:

1. HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points)
2. ISO 22000 (Food Safety Management Systems)
3. Codex Alimentarius (FAO/WHO food standards)

These modern mechanisms operationalize risk prevention, traceability, and consumer safety—values already underscored in Islamic tradition. Hence, Islamic food ethics do not stand in opposition to modern science but rather anticipate and complement it.²⁰

Challenges in Halal Certification

The rapid commodification of halal certification has diluted its ethical foundation. Common issues include:

1. Unregulated logos and symbols with little legal accountability-
2. Monetization of certification without moral oversight or thorough inspection-
3. “Halal-washing”—where companies exploit the term for marketing without genuine compliance-
4. This has led to consumer distrust, particularly in pluralistic or non-Muslim-majority markets.

Lack of Global Standardization

1. The absence of a unified, globally recognized halal standard results in:
2. Contradictory rulings across countries (e.g., mechanical slaughter, stunning)
3. Difficulty in mutual recognition of certificates
4. Intra-Muslim disputes (e.g., Sunni vs. Shi’a interpretations)
5. This dissonance undermines consumer confidence and impedes the development of a robust global halal economy.

Transparency and Traceability Gaps

1. Current halal systems often lack:
2. Clear documentation of ingredient sourcing
3. Full disclosure of additives (e.g., ambiguous “E numbers” or coded substances)
4. Reliable verification tools for imported or processed goods
5. These gaps compromise the credibility and spiritual integrity of halal-certified products.

Conclusion

Halal is not merely a ritual requirement—it is an all-encompassing ethical system that integrates spiritual purity, consumer safety, social justice, and environmental stewardship. The Qur’anic pairing of ḥalāl and ṭayyib mandates that food be both lawfully sourced and wholesome, reflecting the Divine values of mercy, transparency, and moral excellence.

In an era of globalized food chains, biotechnology, and ethical ambiguity, the Muslim world must move beyond fragmented certification toward a unified, principled, and scientifically sound halal framework. Such a framework will not only safeguard Muslim consumers but also present Islam as a model of responsible and ethical consumption to the world.

True halal is not just lawful—it is pure, safe, dignified, and God-conscious. Anything less is a betrayal of divine trust.

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