



Certified Halal in the USA



Ken White/State Department

Halal restaurants are booming in the United States, from kabob shops to food trucks. South Asian and Middle Eastern cuisine is appreciated by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and most such restaurants feature halal meat.

As the U.S. Muslim population increases, more authorized organizations certify food as halal — conforming to Muslim standards. Consumers who see one of these organizations' symbols on a package know that the food is free from pork or anything *haram*, or forbidden. Certification ensures that Islamic guidelines for the slaughter and processing of meat have been observed.

Early Muslim immigrants to the United States formed informal associations to preserve religious customs surrounding birth, death and daily life. Muslim migrants to

California early in the 20th century kept their traditions in small, local groups. This was repeated throughout the United States, in places like Cedar Rapids, Iowa, home of the first U.S. mosque, where observant Muslims have resided since the 1880s.

According to Hajj Habib Ghanim, president of the USA Halal Chamber of Commerce and director of Halal Certification at the Islamic Society of the Washington Area (ISWA) in Silver Spring, Maryland, Muslim student associations sparked demand for halal food in the 1960s, a demand that increased as the Muslim population grew.

Also, American businesses exporting food to Muslim countries needed a reliable way to demonstrate that their food was halal. Ghanim's organization started when he was working for the U.S.

Arab Chamber of Commerce, which helps businesses complete paperwork and certification requirements for exports to the Middle East. Those concerned about halal called the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to find out about halal-certified foods, but the USDA monitors food health and safety rather than compliance with religious requirements, so people turned to the U.S. Arab Chamber of Commerce.

"I would refer some of these people to local centers to have somebody do the slaughter and issue the paper and I would stamp it to show it was in compliance. It was very scattered and very informal. So that is how we got started in 1987," Ghanim says.

More certification organizations sprang up. Today, besides ISWA, there are several main certifiers



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operating in the United States, among them the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America, Islamic Services of America, the Islamic Society of North America's Halal Certification Agency and Halal Food Council International.

Until recently, most halal certification was for foods exported to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia, among other Muslim countries. But the domestic market is catching up.

“Business is growing so fast — like lightning. It amazes everybody. ... You have hospitals, schools, cafeterias, all the main chains like Kentucky Fried Chicken, Subway, Cheesecake Factory,” Ghanim says. The halal label attracts business too, he adds.

Halal certification organizations inspect restaurant and grocery

suppliers, the large and small factories that process meat. Large poultry producers Tyson, George's, Koch and Pilgrim are among ISWA's clients.

Ghanim says the halal certification business owes a lot to kosher food certifiers, who have performed a similar function for much

longer and know the industry. “We have learned from them. We have a good relationship with people like Star-K and others because of the similarities,” he says. “We learn from our Jewish cousins who have been doing it for years. We are learning and we are getting a lot of support from them.”

The United States government is not involved in religious matters, which is why agencies such as the USDA do not certify halal or kosher foods. That must be done by religious authorities or those they sanction. USDA does inform exporters of other countries' import standards and directs exporters to U.S. halal certifiers approved by destination countries. ISWA is among those internationally recognized halal certifiers.

Besides being halal, food must be *tayyiban*, or wholesome, meaning clean and free from contamination, to be certified. “The USDA does half of our work there,” Ghanim says, referring to strict USDA hygienic standards.



Customers crowd a Falls Church, Virginia, halal butcher shop ahead of Ramadan.

Robyn Beck/AFP/Getty Images

ISWA inspects factories to make sure that halal meats are processed separately from nonhalal meats, on equipment that has not been used for pork. Small factories may set aside special days for halal processing. Larger factories that export to foreign markets have dedicated halal processing facilities.

ISWA certifiers cooperate with USDA agents and on-site veterinarians. They also verify that individuals who oversee the halal slaughter and recite appropriate prayers are practicing Muslims of good standing. ISWA guarantees all procedures are followed.

ISWA staff offer training for food industry personnel and programs to increase cultural understanding. As a co-founder of the World Halal Council, ISWA works with a network of halal certification organizations to promote unified, global halal standards. “We are trying to do more education programs with trade missions and get people to recognize and trust the halal symbol,” Ghanim says.

ISWA certified this halal meat sold in a Dearborn, Michigan, Wal-Mart. ©AP Images

