



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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RITUAL SLAUGHTER

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

By Zack Udin, Researcher

Overview

Dietary laws pertaining to the slaughter of animals are integral religious mandates for many, in particular for Jews and Muslims who are required to eat meat certified as *kosher* or *halal*, respectively. To ensure proper certification, an animal must be slaughtered according to methods of *shechita* and *dhabihah*. *Shechita* refers to the process of slaughter handed down by oral tradition and codified in *halakha* (Jewish religious laws). Among a number of requirements, the person performing the ritual (*shochet*) must cut the neck with a knife in a back and forth motion and sever the trachea and esophagus of the animal. *Dhabihah*, prescribed by Islamic law from the Quran, involves using a well-sharpened knife to make a swift, deep incision that cuts the carotid artery, trachea, and jugular veins but leaves the spinal cord intact. Dietary laws such as these traditionally serve a variety of functions for adherents, including fulfilling health, philosophical, ethical, and spiritual needs.

Complicating the ability of Jews and Muslims to comply with these religious practices are laws across Europe restricting ritual slaughter. Animal rights activists and others contend that *shechita* and *dhabihah* are inhumane methods of slaughter, and as a result have sought to limit the practice by requiring stunning the animal at certain points in the process or banning the practice outright. Some countries have laws that require an animal be stunned before the cut is performed (“pre-cut stunning”), after the cut is performed (“post-cut stunning”), or at the same time as the cut (“concurrent sedation”).

These laws force individuals to abandon deeply held religious doctrine and imply a message of exclusion to all those who seek to follow their religion's dietary requirements. While some Islamic authorities accept certain types of stunning in ritual slaughter, there is virtually no such allowance by Jewish authorities. The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Elan Carr called such restrictions “disgraceful.”

Regulations against religious slaughter have existed in Europe since the 19th century. Switzerland, the first country to institute a ban on ritual slaughter, allegedly did so as a response to increased immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe in the late 1800s. Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and Sweden enacted similar bans in the lead-up to World War II.

This factsheet shows the spectrum of restrictions on ritual slaughter in European countries and provides information on select countries' regulations of the practice.

Legal Standards

The freedom of religion or belief is protected by Articles 18 of both the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#). The freedom of religion or belief includes the right to manifest religion or belief. This right extends to the observance and practice of religion or belief, which, as explained in the UN Human Rights Committee's [General Comment 22](#), includes customs such as the observance of dietary regulations. Any limitations on manifestations of religious freedom must be narrowly construed and based on grounds specified by Article 18 of the ICCPR. [Limitations](#) must not be discriminatory, destroy guaranteed rights, or derive from a single tradition alone.

Within the European human rights framework, Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) enshrines the principle of equality and the prohibition of discrimination based on religion. Article 9(1) of the ECHR protects the freedom of religion or belief, including the practice and observance of religion. Article 9(2) allows

limitations on this right when prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society to further a specified interest. In [Chàare Shalom Ve Tsedek v. France](#), the European Court of Human Rights reviewed a French law that required slaughters occur in slaughterhouses. In 2000, the majority upheld the law, holding that the freedom of religion or belief guarantees the ability to consume meat that conforms to ritual slaughter rules, but the right to participate in ritual slaughter or the certification process can be narrowly [limited](#) pursuant to Article 9(2). The court found that the denial of a permit to a Jewish association to perform ritual slaughters was not a violation of the right to practice religion, as the association was not stopped from obtaining and consuming ritually slaughtered meat. A minority of seven judges dissented, finding that France had violated the association's rights.

The 1979 Council of Europe convention, "[European Convention for the Protection of Animals for Slaughter](#)," and the European Union's [Council Regulation 1099/2009](#) require stunning before slaughter but authorize countries to make their own regulations concerning "slaughtering in accordance with religious rituals." The Convention applies to all European Union (EU) countries and has been [ratified](#) by other countries that are members of the Council of Europe, including Switzerland.

Current Restrictions in Countries that are Members of the Council of Europe¹

Restriction	Countries
No Stunning Required (72%)	Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus*, Czech Republic, France*, Georgia, Germany*, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg*, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain*, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom
Post-cut Stunning Required (9%)	Austria, Estonia, Greece, Latvia
Concurrent Sedation (2%)	Finland (halal slaughter performed) ⁺
Pre-cut Stunning Required (15%)	Belgium (Wallonia and Flanders)*, Denmark (halal slaughter with prior sedation performed) ⁺ , Iceland*, Liechtenstein (except chicken) ⁺ , Norway*, Sweden*, Switzerland (except chicken) ⁺
All Ritual Slaughter Banned (2%)	Slovenia ⁺

* Permits and/or prior authorization required

⁺ Unstunned meat may be imported

1 Sources: [Library of Congress Report on Legal Restrictions on Religious Slaughter in Europe](#) and [Department of State's 2019 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

Illustrative Laws (from least to most restrictive)

No Stunning Required

Germany: German law [prohibits](#) the killing of animals without anesthesia. However, a Federal Administrative Court decision allows permits for trained persons to kill animals without anesthesia in an accredited slaughterhouse under observation of the local veterinary inspection office if the meat is for consumption only by members of religious communities with special dietary laws.

Cyprus: In previous years, the Department of Veterinary Services granted exemptions to the EU's directive for the pre-cut stunning requirement. However, [Jewish representatives](#) complained in 2019 that officials denied exemptions from the pre-cut stunning requirement. The Jewish community is able to import *kosher* meat, but at a much higher cost than if it were locally available.

Post-cut Stunning Required

Greece: A 2017 [Joint Ministerial Decision](#) implementing the EU Council Regulation 1099/2009 permits religious slaughter in accordance with *kosher* and *halal* principles, but the procedure must include stunning immediately after cutting (except for poultry) and [must take place](#) in a slaughterhouse rather than in private residences or in public.

Concurrent Sedation

Finland: The Finnish Animal Protections Act [requires](#) that animals be stunned prior to cutting. However, the Act allows for stunning the animal at the same moment as the cut for religious slaughter. Islamic authorities in Finland certify meat prepared in this manner as *halal*, but Jewish community leaders do not consider this method *kosher*, causing Jews to import permissible meat at high prices. [A 2018 bill](#) in the Finnish parliament would have required pre-cut stunning before slaughter in all cases, but the new parliament in 2019 did not take up the legislation.

Conclusion

The right to manifest religion or belief, including by adhering to dietary regulations, is enshrined in numerous fundamental human rights documents. By limiting the ability of Jews and Muslims to follow these regulations, countries cast these communities as “others” and place undue burdens on them to source permissible meat. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) calls on European countries to review their domestic laws to guarantee their citizens this right.

Pre-cut Stunning Required

Denmark: A regulation banning ritual slaughter of animals without pre-cut stunning [went into effect](#) in February 2014, but there is no restriction against importing permissible meat. Islamic authorities in Denmark allow unstunned meat to be certified *halal*. All religious slaughter that does occur [must take place](#) at slaughterhouses registered with the Veterinary and Food Administration. Failure to abide by the law results in fines or up to four months in prison.

Belgium: In 2017, two of Belgium's three regions, Wallonia and Flanders, [adopted legislation](#) to prohibit unstunned slaughter. These bans went into effect on January 1 and August 31, 2019, respectively. As a result, permissible meat is harder to acquire and often more expensive than [in the past](#). Violations are punishable by fines between €52 and €2,000. The Brussels region allows unstunned slaughter.

The Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations in Belgium filed a lawsuit in Belgium's Constitutional Court to challenge the ban on ritual slaughter in Wallonia and Flanders. The Constitutional Court [requested](#) assistance from the EU Court of Justice, and a [ruling](#) on the case is expected later this year.

All Ritual Slaughter Banned

Slovenia: As amended in 2012, Slovenia's Animal Welfare Act [banned](#) all ritual slaughter. In 2018, the Constitutional Court [unanimously upheld](#) the Act, stating that the constitution prohibits suffering to be inflicted on animals without a justified cause and that the law does not “excessively interfere with the right to freedom of religion.” The Islamic Community of Slovenia [provides](#) certificates to companies producing meat from stunned animals, confirming the meat as *halal*. The Jewish community imports *kosher* meat from neighboring countries.



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