In a Basiji Kitchen: Halal Jello, Biomorality, and Blessing in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Abstract: This article explores the political life of jello, or zheleh, among Basiji Shi’i families in the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the inception of the 1979 Constitution, Islamic laws concerning halal food, drink, and culinary etiquette have been heavily emphasized by state policy makers. This article focuses on jello, a popular gelatin dessert among state supporting Shi’i families (here members of the Basij, Iran’s paramilitary organization), to explore the scope and form of moral and religious foodways in the present-day Islamic Republic. I argue that jello reveals a complex milieu of sparring Western, cosmopolitan, national, and religious food practices that are connected with ideas and practices of (religious) citizenship. This article draws from fifteen months of ethnographic research in Fars Province of Iran and in Tehran, and from research of jurisprudence and popular media.

JELLO IS TREMENDOUSLY POPULAR IN post-revolutionary Iran. Made from a gelatin-infused powder available nationwide, jello’s unique capacity to be molded into creative, delicious, and colorful desserts captivates Iranian families. Indeed, jello is an art form so delicate that, on occasion, it requires an array of specialized tools, including such implements as a physician’s syringe (zheleh-ye tazriqi) for the injection of color or taste. Jello has also been the subject of numerous cooking shows and recipes in Iran, further testamente to its special popularity.

Jello first caught my attention during research in the West Tehran suburb of Ekbatan in 2010. For several months before I began long-term fieldwork in the household of state-supporting Shi’is in the provincial town of Fars-Abad in Fars Province, I lived with their kin in Tehran. My urban hosts, although not presently active in government officialdom, were devout Muslims and card-carrying members of the Basij, a voluntary paramilitary organization founded by the late Ayatollah Khomeini in 1980. The family was composed of Mahmud, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), his wife, Parvin, and their five young-adult children. Mahmud earned a living as a taxi driver. Parvin worked part-time as an accountant for her apartment complex. They owned their small apartment flat, which featured photos of the current Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, and his predecessor, the founder of the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini.

But one day, as I joined Haleh and two of her brothers in the family’s living room to watch an episode of the American TV series Lost (of all things!), jello also evoked some serious conversation: “What is it made of?” Haleh’s second-to-youngest brother, Kaveh, asked between spoonfuls. “Is it halal?” As he spoke, I could not help but glance at the display case in the opposite corner of their living room, which featured photos of the current Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, and his predecessor, the founder of the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. He added, “This is an American food, right?”

Beneath the seemingly innocuous, wiggling surface of jello are several provocative and ongoing debates, among both Iranian religious scholars and laymen. One key debate centers on the sometimes ambiguous origins of jello’s key component, gelatin, a product most often made of bovine or pig bone. At stake is the question of whether gelatin—as a substance that is also used in pharmaceutical injections, pill capsules, and...
surgical procedures—is halal, or “lawful,” for Muslims or whether it is harām, or “unlawful.” In Islam, harām items include carrion, blood, pork, food dedicated to someone other than Allah, and alcohol (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015; Regenstein et al. 2003). Since gelatin is often made of pig bone, this becomes an issue. In addition, the lawfulness of meat and other animal products depends on how they are obtained. When animals are ritually slaughtered, they must be killed in God’s name by making a fatal incision across the throat and the blood should be drained as completely as possible (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015: 3).

But distinctions between what is halal and what is harām are not as simple as they first appear. Ambiguous creatures such as lizards and eels have long been the subject of Islamic legal debate, for example (Cook 1986). Additionally, Islamic scholars have differing opinions about slaughtering practices, whether Muslims can eat food prepared by other “people of the book” (Jews and Christians), and what it means to eat food purchased in a “Muslim market,” among other things. Debates about halal food can also arise from new scientific findings of animal biology, agrobusiness (e.g., animal stunning), and biotechnologies such as the consumption of genetically modified crops (Fischer 2015).

Against this backdrop, key global organizations such as World Halal and the Halal World Institute are attempting to standardize and determine halal food items through certifications. Like kosher certifications, halal food certifications provide recognizable symbols to customers and are designed to establish trust in the system (Fischer 2010). These certifications are common, not only in Iran, but across the (Muslim) world, including in the United States and Europe. As recently as 2009, the global halal food market saw $632 billion in annual sales, and this number is increasing with the world’s growing Muslim population, which was estimated at 1.8 billion in 2016 (Izberk-Bilgin and Nakata 2016: 286).

Not surprisingly, though, different certifying bodies are promoting competing notions of what is halal (Lever and Miele 2012). In part, this is because Islamic dietary laws are formed through interpretation and deduction of the Qur’ān and Hadith (verified reports of the statements and actions of the Prophet and other early figures) by Muslim jurists, and particularly by the application of “systematic original thinking” or ijtihād. They are also formed through qiyas, or reasoning by analogy. These laws further differ according to the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali) and are also different in Sunni versus Shi’i Islam. In general, Shi’i Muslims, who are the vast majority of Iran’s Muslim population, tend to be more strict regarding their dietary laws than Sunnis, who make up the majority of the world’s Muslims (Cook 1986). As a predominantly Shi’i country, Iran has been attempting to standardize the production, availability, and processing of halal products according to the Jafari Shi’i legal school, but has still to make halal certification obligatory (Attar, Lohi, and Lever 2016). Yet for my Shi’i Basiji hosts, as well as for many other Iranians, debates about what to eat were about much more
than whether or not specific items were halal or certified as such. My hosts were also concerned with the potential ill effects of eating too much foreign, processed, or packaged food, both for their families and their society. Lamenting a loss of food cooked by mothers and wives at home and made from local, known, and trusted ingredients, they argued that eating not only halal food, but relatedly, “the right kind” of blessed food made at home was key to living a halal life, creating a family, and becoming closer to God (see also Atar, Lohi, and Lever 2016). As Ahmad, another Iran-Iraq War veteran and Mahmud’s brother, explained, “Food can change the soul, it can affect it.” He emphasized the powerful ways in which sharing the “right kind of food” could protect and alter the physical and spiritual health of his family (see also Janowski 2007 and Wellman 2017). Here, the significance of the characterization of food substance as halal was secondary to a more encompassing notion of halal as a right way of living in the world as kin and as citizens.

This is the other reason that jello, although popular, is a matter of contention at the Iranian dining spread, or sofreh. In addition to its suspect gelatin, jello is one of many food items currently available in Iran that are heavily processed and of ambiguous “Western” style or origin. As I will show, many of my state-supporting interlocutors did not completely trust these foods and saw them as antithetical to their aspirations to be good Shi’i Muslims and Iranian citizens. Others did not see such foods as problematic. But jello’s presence always evoked questions about what to eat at home and how to develop Islamic piety and Iranian citizenship through food more generally. At a time of post-revolutionary precarity, debates about jello were far from trivial. They were a window into the cultivation and contestation of family and piety, religious ethics, and citizenship.

**Iran as a Halal Nation-State**

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic and the inception of the 1979 Constitution (Mir-Hosseini 2010), Islamic laws (shari’ah) concerning halal food, drink, and culinary etiquette have been emphasized and enforced by state policy makers. Most obviously, these laws prohibit the export, import, and the production and consumption of “unlawful” substances—such as pork and alcohol—with and across Iran’s territorial borders. Although not all Iranian Muslims follow these rules and/or do so to varying degrees, the Islamic Republic is—at least theoretically—a state bound by halal imperatives. Dietary laws are legally enforced (Chehabi 2007).

The concept of halal in Iran, moreover, has applications far beyond the religious or legal sanctioning of particular foods. An entire range of acts may be classified as halal or its conceptual opposite, harām or “unlawful.” These include diet, sexual relations, daily habits and customs, marriage and divorce, family relations, public morality, occupation, income, and types of entertainment. Extending this further, my Shi’i hosts and their friends held that halal acts and foods are a form of spiritual “sustenance” (ruzi). They linked the embodiment of halal aesthetics, acts, and foods to Islamic purity, morality, and to life itself.

Nevertheless, certain foods are highly recommended by (Shi’i) jurisprudents and state media for their purifying and/or health-promoting effects. These include, for instance, dates, honey, and pomegranate, as well as blessed or holy foods derived from the kitchens of the Imams (e.g., the water of the Zamzam well in Mecca). According to anthropologist Diane Tober, “The focus of all of these prescriptions and proscriptions is the attainment of physical, emotional and spiritual health and well-being,” a “mind–body–spirit unity” that is particular to Iranian concepts of substance and personhood (Tober 2007: 6). These notions are notably distinct from the Cartesian dualistic perceptions of the West (ibid.). Yet since the buildup to the 1979 Revolution and beyond, what and how Iranians eat has also become a matter of politics and citizenship.

The influential Iranian sociologist Jalal Al-e Ahmad was one of the first to articulate these interconnections as they pertain to Iran. In Gharbzadegi [Westernstruckness], he critiques the increasing moral fragmentation of 1960s Iranian society as one aspect of “Westernstruckness”—a disease of the West symptomized by the influx of the machine, economic dependence on the West, rampant urbanization, and “empty” or “soulless” Western mimicry. He calls for Iranians to gain control over the machine and become a producer rather than a consumer, and he calls for a return to Islamic authenticity. In one part of the book, he writes:

Such a chronically starved individual [meaning a Westernized Iranian], who’s eaten bread and dugh [an Iranian yogurt drink] all his life in the village, once he’s filled his stomach with a sandwich in the city, will go to the barber and the tailor, then for a shoe shine, and then to the whorehouse … Mosques and altars have been forgotten … an entire city can’t be fed on donated American powdered milk or Australian wheat. (Al-e Ahmad [1962] 1997: 76)

It is no coincidence that Al-e Ahmad brings up the Western-style sandwich “from the city” as one catalyst of Iranian moral decay. The sandvieh-e kalbas, in particular, an imported sandwich not unlike the American “sub” or “grinder,” became a favored lunch for a whole generation of teenagers in the 1960s and continues to be popular today among young people: an easy form of fast food, as they call
it in conversational Persian. For the wry Al-e Ahmad, the consumption of such processed, Western sandwiches, made from Western-style plastic-wrapped bread and processed meats, signaled the first soulless stage of moral corruption and was a harbinger of the whorehouse.

The concept of Westernstruckness popularized by Al-e Ahmad was revived after the revolution and was part of the ethos of post-revolutionary state-led directives for citizen consumption of Islamic or halal food in opposition to harām food, or food of ambigious origins associated with the West and the Westernstruck. During this time companies such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and MacDonald’s were outlawed by the state and replaced with locally owned, more “Islamically” friendly versions such as “McMashallah” (Chehabi 2003). Iranian corporations similarly took up a model of Islamification. The Islamic cola company Zamzam, for instance, takes its name from the sacred spring in Mecca and is marketed as an Islamic alternative to Pepsi or Coca-Cola. In 2010, Zamzam held a nearly fifty percent market share of soft drinks in Iran. Notably, moreover, in post-revolutionary Iran the sandwich decried by Al-e Ahmad is available in a new guise: kalbās-e eslāmi or “Islamic kalbas” and is necessarily made with Islamic mortadella and thus halal beef.

In Tehran, my hosts’ sons often partook of these “Islamic” sandwiches when they were out and about, enjoying their tasty meat, tomato slice, pickles, and raw onion rings. Despite the new Islamic name of this sandwich, however, their parents were more reluctant to call these subs food. Real food, they said, must at the very least involve a substantial portion of rice to be filling. Moreover, they blamed their children’s acne and bad temper on overeating such cuisine.

Notably, though, these debates were not only about halal and harām foods per se. They were about food as halal sustenance. They were about food as a means of embodying a “good” Muslim self. And they were about food as a means of claiming independence and difference (from the West).

The Jello/Gelatin Industry in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Alongside this state-led Islamification of restaurants, the Islamic Republic has an increasingly thriving gelatin industry. Two main Iranian companies currently produce specifically halal gelatin for an internal market as well as for export. The first is Faravari Darooi Gelatin Halal (FDGH). Founded in 1999, this company claims to be the first manufacturer of halal gelatin for human consumption in Iran. Their website states: “The currently commercially available raw materials used in gelatin production around the world are pork skins and non-halal (non-Islamic slaughtered) cattle bones and hides. At FDGH we use only Islamic slaughtered healthy bovine bone fit for human consumption, approved by veterinary authorities and guaranteed by full documentation.” The second company is Aria Gelatin Co., established in 2001. This company also claims to be the first halal gelatin producer in Iran and further makes the case that it is a reliable manufacturer and exporter of gelatin, not only for foods and candies but also for pills, medical procedures, and vitamins. Aria Gelatin Co. argues that it is creating gelatin independence within Iran such that Iranians would not be required to import less trusted and unquestionably halal gelatin products.

Both companies receive halal certification from an organization called the Halal World Institute (HWI). Based in Tehran, HWI has been active since 2007. The institute works in cooperation with both the Islamic Chamber Research and Information Center and Iran’s government to offer a halal certification for food vendors. HWI’s website defines its main objective as preparing the necessary grounds for the distinguishing Halal goods and services from non-Halal ones. This objective is realized through setting proper procedures for production control, warehousing, transportation and consumption. To achieve this end, all scientific standards compliant with Islamic Shariah are employed in order to introduce Halal Standard as a superior standard to the world. This statement alludes not only to the HWI’s mission to define what is halal but also to its goal of ensuring that scientific standards are compliant with Islamic law (here the Jafari Shi’i Jurisprudence). It also claims an outward-facing directive: to introduce a specific “Halal Standard” to the world. Similar to the Kosher label on food goods or to World Halal, HWI certification has thus provided a way to standardize halal foods and halal labeling in Iran. HWI further meets the approval of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a group that describes itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world” and that includes fifty-seven member states, including Iran.

In addition to offering certification for particular food stuffs, moreover, HWI is now also offering certification for restaurants and hotels. Alireza Nourani, an official at the Organic Association of Iran, a group that works with HWI, for instance, told the Islamic Republic News Agency that “halal food” is not limited to the meat consumed by people or the slaughtering of animals; it is also about all kinds of food- and health-related activities. Indeed, HWI and its affiliates are now active in issues beyond food including tourism, banking, insurance research, and “culture building” (IRNA 2018).

Interestingly, although the HWI recognizes and encompasses both Sunni and Shi’i mainstream legal jurisprudence,
its web resources are available only in Farsi, English, and French—not in Arabic—the language of arguably a large portion of halal consumers and companies globally. Even further, the HWI’s list of alternative “credible halal institutes” does not include any halal certification organizations from within the Arab Muslim World, including World Halal, which is one of the most expansive halal branding organizations. By not including World Halal, the Iranian-based HWI seems to be marking its standards as different from, and perhaps stricter than, those of the Arab community, thus creating a food and trade boundary across Iranian borders.

**Debating Gelatin in Muslim Dietary Law**

In conjunction with this increasing standardization, certification, and marketing of halal items and processes within Iran, jurists and laymen are debating the particularities of what is halal. After the revolution, for instance, religious leaders classified Caspian Sea caviar as impermissible due to the apparent lack of scales on sturgeon. They further regarded the fish with suspicion because of its association with Western cuisine (Chehabi 2007). However, when scales were supposedly found near the sturgeon’s tail, several high-ranking clerics, including Ayatollah Khomeini, met with fishing experts and reversed the traditional ruling. Skeptics of this shift argued that these clerics simply thought that Caspian Sea caviar had become a superb money-making industry—a complaint that Khomeini himself vehemently denied. In the end, the sturgeon was declared halal (Chehabi 2007). The gelatin in jello offers its own sets of complications. Indeed, given its heavy industrial processing, which alters its substance dramatically, and frequent porcine origins, gelatin is one of the most controversial of all modern items (see also Regenstein et al. 2003). Among Shi’i jurisprudents in Iran, three main rulings pertain to gelatin. These rulings appear on the websites of both Aria Gelatin Co. and Faravari Darooi Gelatin Halal, as well as in the widely known and resourced question-and-answer websites on Islamic jurisprudence sponsored by the Islamic Republic. One such website is hadana.ir, which compiles the opinions and rulings of the key Islamic jurists or marjā’ such as Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, and Ayatollah Sistani, an Iranian Shi’a in Iraq who heads many seminaries in Najaf. My interlocutors and other Shi’i Iranians conceive of these jurists as sources of religious authority and reference, second only to the Qur’an, the hadiths, and the imams. They most often follow one particular religious leader, but they recognize that because of “systematic original thinking” (ijtihād), there are a diversity of available rulings and opinions.

The first juridical debate about gelatin concerns its initial origins and ingredients. According to most of the key Shi’i jurists, gelatin is permissible for consumption so long as it is derived from vegetable sources or an animal (other than pig) that is known to have been slaughtered according to divine law. Ayatollah Khamenei writes:

> The permissibility or impermissibility of gelatin is contingent on the material that is in it. If the gelatin is plant-based or from the bones of animals that have been slaughtered in the halal way according to the “Islamic law” (sharia), the gelatin is halal. But gelatin from the skin of an animal that has been slaughtered in a non-halal way is najes (Islamically impure) and is “unlawful” (harām). Gelatin from parts of animals that are harām is harām.18

According to Ayatollah Khamenei, jello made from vegetable products is halal as is jello made from halal meat, or bovine meat, that has been Islamically slaughtered.19 Given this ruling, it may seem that the easy solution for Iranian companies and consumers is simply to buy or make gelatin products produced from vegetable sources. However, these products are difficult to formulate and are often more expensive: within Iran, for instance, the science of producing vegetable gelatin, requiring the creation of “natural hydrocolloids,” or microparticulate substances that can be suspended in water as a thickening agent, is still being perfected. As a result, companies such as Aria Gelatin Co. produce gelatin mostly from cows.

The second question that is often raised about gelatin concerns the notion of the halal Muslim market. Here, too, the Shi’i religious leaders tend to agree: gelatin is permissible as long as it is purchased in a Muslim market and is known to be halal and Islamically pure. Relatedly, they indicate that one’s awareness of the ingredients of jello, as with other foods, is relevant. In other words, as long as one does not become aware that the gelatin within jello is harām or impure, it is permissible. Some even argue that if one buys jello from a non-Muslim market and is unaware of its ingredients (whether vegetable or animal), it is halal. In contrast, if one knows that gelatin is derived from animal components but has doubt as to whether these animals were Islamically slaughtered, it is harām.

Perhaps the most interesting debate concerning gelatin, however, concerns whether and how it transmutes during its processing and formation. Ayatollah Sistani and Ayatollah Nasr Marakem Shirazi, another prominent Shi’i religious leader, for instance, argue that gelatin is permissible regardless of its derivation source because it goes through a process of istihalā, a change in chemical composition that alters the substance sufficiently such that the original substance and the final substance are different categories. Thus, whereas the original substance might be considered harām, the final substance is halal. One example of this is the accepted
conversion of wine to vinegar. In their rulings, they draw from the work of chemists who study the conversion and production of gelatin to consider whether gelatin undergoes sufficient chemical conversion to be considered halal.20 For instance, Ayatollah Sistani argues:

If one has doubt as to whether [the gelatin] comes from a plant or from an animal, eating it is permissible. However, if we know that [the gelatin] has been extracted from an animal and the Islamic slaughter of that animal is not certain, it is not permissible, even if it is from the bones of an animal. Yet if we know for certain that the material has changed state through a chemical process, it is absolutely safe to eat and can be eaten. As it is possible to put some of it in another food, and it can be dissolved, despite the absence of certainty in the slaughter of the animal.21

Here, if the consumer is not sure of whether or not the gelatin comes from an animal or a plant, it is permissible. However, if he or she knows that gelatin has been extracted from an animal but does not know whether the animal has been correctly slaughtered, it is impermissible. Finally, if the material has changed states such that it can be completely dissolved in another food, even if the consumer is not certain of the correct slaughter of the animal, the gelatin is permissible. Ayatollah Shirazi makes a similar argument. He writes, “If the material has changed state such that it can be completely dissolved in another food, even if he or she is not certain of the correct slaughter of the animal, it is permissible.”22

In contrast to both Ayatollahs Sistani and Shirazi, however, Ayatollah Khamenei argues that gelatin does not change the state of its material enough during processing for it to be considered halal. He writes: “Turning harām or halal meat into gelatin does not sufficiently change the state of the material [for it to be considered halal]. But if the gelatin has sections that are halal and harām, and you do not know what section [the gelatin you are eating] is from, it is halal.”23

The consequence of this ruling is that Shi’as who follow Ayatollah Khamenei must be particularly cautious as to the animal origins of gelatin, unless they are unclear about which part they are eating. Thus while some jurists believe that gelatin undergoes sufficient change of state for consumption, other jurists and laymen may disagree and consequently follow a different set of rules. These disagreements and differences are part of what makes the standardization of foods such as jello so difficult.

But debates about halal gelatin and other foods are only part of the Islamic Republic’s shifting foodways. A broader sense of halal and halal aesthetics as well as what is “the right kind of food” encompasses juridical rulings and intersects with ideas of citizenship and religion. I now turn to how my hosts saw jello and other similar ambiguous, Western, and/or processed foods in the larger context of dwelling in the world as “good Muslims” and as state supporters.

**Halal Foodways, Cultural Aesthetics, and Citizenship**

When I left Tehran and began living with my hosts’ family members in Fars Province, Iran, I made a confession: “Members of my own family eat pork in America.” My hosts were shocked. “Do you eat pork in America? Does your grandmother eat pork? Your mother and father?” They seemed concerned to justify the actions of my pork-consuming kin. For example, when I admitted that my grandmother likes pork, Nushin, a mother of four and wife of a Basiji Iran-Iraq war veteran, rationalized: “Your grandmother is a Christian and good woman. I have heard that, if pork is cooked over a certain extremely high temperature…it will not affect her and the microbes are destroyed.” But her husband, Ahmad, added, “You should tell her not to, in any case.” Nushin was not the first person to mention that the extreme heating of pork could possibly transform it into a different substance. In Tehran, Parvin mentioned a similar rule—often referring to ideas of “microbes” or the transformation of the substance. In their local cultural logic, it seemed possible that impermissible foods could be fundamentally altered through heat or some other process.

Several of my interlocutors in both Fars Province and Tehran, however, expressed other, even more controversial opinions on this matter. Some said that eating wild boar—available for hunters in the hills around Fars Province—is okay because it is different from pig (khuk). Others, particularly young adults, confided that they would try pork, if they could, but since it was unavailable within Iran’s halal borders, they never had. However, for the most part, people seemed to think that pork was “dirty” (kanif) and “impure” (najes). They suggested that its consumption would cause cancer or even bad moral character, not only for themselves but for future generations! Consumption of pork, they said, might make otherwise moral persons sin.

In general, however, my hosts assumed a certain level of congruity between the borders and boundaries of the nation-state and the availability of halal food. Many took for granted the absence of items such as pork and alcohol in restaurants and markets. For example, a Tehrani grandmother, whom I call Mamanjun, told me, “Religiously impermissible food does not exist [within Iran’s borders]. Even the thought of such food does not exist.” One exception to this rule was the small number of food items that I had brought with me from the U.S. (in this case, some cough drops and gummy bear vitamins). Before trying these foods—an endeavor that very much
interested my hosts’ children, cousins, and other younger interlocutors—recipients would press me for a complete list of ingredients and my personal assurances as to the “sound” (salem) nature of the food. Of particular concern were the gummy vitamins. Often, when I explained that I was not an expert on gelatin products, even my hosts’ teenage children retracted their requests to have a taste.

My hosts were also aware of the concept that if food is purchased in a Muslim market that is known to be pure, it is halal. As a result, when consuming food bought in Iran, they rarely questioned its lawfulness. Instead, they emphasized three key points. The first point was the origins of food. Here, they made a clear distinction between processed foods and “home-cooked food” (khunegi). Home-cooked foods, in particular, found their immoral opposite in fast foods—including pizza or sandwiches—which were not only associated with Western spiritual corruption (gharbzadegi) but also with a deficient wife/mother. As one Tehrani mother explained, “If a woman’s cooking is not good, she is not good. A woman whose cooking is really good, they say that she is very good.” She continued: “Food is worthless’ (be dard nemikhoreh) if it is not made with love and pure intention.”

The second and related issue was the question of who had cooked, touched, or prepared food. If food was from outside the home, did it come from a trusted vendor who was from a good family? Also of importance was the pious character of the seller or outside cook. Indeed, both restaurant food and other items are purchased based on the perceived purity of the seller. “I like to buy bread from Hammed,” Nushin’s husband, Ahmad, in Fars Province explained, “Adam ast,” meaning he is a complete, cultured, and pious person.

Finally, the food that was the best was that which has reached an ideal form (nemuneh), something that many argued could only be achieved by a wife or mother in the kitchen at home. This meant that the rice was perfectly puffed and separated, that the soup was perfectly mixed together and neither too underdone nor overdone, and that the sugar and fruit syrup—measured in just the right amounts—were fully dissolved into the cool summer-day “beverage.” When such food has reached this state, it is described as “beautiful” and “tasty.” A wife is praised for her “skilled hand at cooking” (dast-e pokhtash ali ast). Homemade, trusted food “sticks better” to the body and positively affects the mental/spiritual state of a person (hal mideh), they said.

The opposite of homemade food was “processed food” (basteh bandi). During my research, I visited a food show in Tehran designed to create interest in the best Iranian-made canned foods, sauces, and microwavable, ready-made meals. At the crowded show, international companies like “Grandmother” advertised their “hand cooked” packaged foods. One sign, for instance, advertised Grandmother’s “natural honey,” “tuna,” and “pickles,” drawing on the image of a grandmother’s cooking—a theme that also evokes the category of “traditional food.” Other food items displayed at the show.
included pre-made/frozen meals from Iran’s “national menu,” nuts, chips, instant coffee, packaged and pre-cleaned lentils and beans, and candies. The labels on these pre-made, frozen meals claimed that they were handmade or natural. However, fast-food items such as hamburgers were also on display, making visible the increasing inundation of more foreign-like, packaged foods in Iranian households. Yet although the audience of the food show was highly receptive to these products, the not so subtle invocation of grandmothers and homemade cuisine, as well as categories of Iranian and traditional fare, revealed the general public’s concerns about the innate quality difference between processed foods and homemade foods. Indeed, although the companies were selling processed foods through the idioms of home and mother, and although the best processed foods mimetically reproduced foods that were traditional, Iranian, or “hand” made, these food never quite compared to the real thing.

In part, this was because my hosts in both Tehran and Fars Province linked the making of good homemade food with the making of a pure and virtuous family. Nushin, for instance, always cleaned the rice for the lunch meal on a long plastic tray, pouring the grains handful by handful. She sifted each grain from one end of the tray to the other. This process was almost meditative. Sitting on her bright red Persian carpet, Nushin’s voice would tell me stories of the family of the Prophet. She also took care to coordinate her rice-cleaning ritual with her own ablutions and daily prayer (Wellman 2017). When I asked her about this practice, Nushin said that this kind of everyday religious coordination of meals was important for both the physical and spiritual nourishment of her children. Making good food for her family, she said, involved synchronizing cooking with daily prayers, avoiding gossip while cooking, and cooking with continual mindfulness of God and the family of the Prophet.

In addition, Nushin’s everyday work in the kitchen sometimes required explicitly stirring prayers into food or water to create “blessed food” (tabarrok) for family members and neighbors, a process that transforms food from mere physical nutrition to sacred nourishment. In Iran, an entire category of religious prayer called “vow making” (nazar kordan) centers on the creation and distribution of votive food to create blessing and fulfill personal vows to God or the Shi’i imams. Such vow making through prayer and cooking and feeding is a central path for forging the right kind of blessed and pure kin relations and thus of protecting kin. Even more, the labor of cooking votive food is itself a kind of labor through which one can accrue “religious merit/reward” (savaab), helping to ensure God’s favor in this life and the next. Thus while the halalness of food was not a central concern because of people’s conviction that Iran was already a halal country, cooking good, nourishing, and/or blessed food was necessary for the bodily and spiritual health of children.

These pious food practices also appeared on a national scale. State-sponsored martyrs’ foundations cooked and distributed blessed food in locations such as martyrs’ graveyards, the kitchens of imams, or public squares (Wellman 2017). On the birthday of Ayatollah Khomeini in 2010, for instance, a parastatal martyrs’ foundation distributed a votive meal of kebab and cut fruit to crowds of thousands of “brothers and sisters of Islam” in the parking lot outside the Imam Khomeini Mausoleum outside of Tehran. This food, taken from Iran’s “national menu,” was offered in conjunction with prayers that imbued it with blessing. On another occasion in Fars-Abad, a martyrs foundation distributed fresh lentils, rice, yogurt, and drinks to hundreds of ritual participants who were commemorating the reburial of two unknown martyrs who had been unearthed from the Iran-Iraq War battlefield to be reburied in town. Participants were asked to think of the unknown martyrs as their own kin (Wellman 2015). They were told that those who eat this food should consider themselves fortunate.

For my hosts, the food-sharing part of these state-funded rituals is important. More than a reason for attendance, they echoed the presiding local imams and state elites who also said that the food helped imbue them with blessing and connected the participants to each other as kin, or what I term “kindred citizens.” For my hosts, it did so, in part, by resembling food sharing at home. Indeed, as with the family and household, state-sponsored food sharing at such events was a means of imbuing participants with blessing and linking them to each other and to the state, vis-à-vis the actual substances and tropes of kinship and of religion. By eating state-sponsored blessed food, participants simultaneously embodied a sense of familial piety, connection to God, and Iranian-ness.

Generational and Regional Differences

It is important to note that there were key generational and regional differences in these food choices and food aesthetics. The state-supporting parents I interviewed, who were born before the 1979 revolution, saw fresh halal, homemade, trusted, and pure foods—made of rice, meat, fruits, nuts, yogurt, fresh bread, and herbs and cooked by a pure intentioned wife/mother—as best for the bodies and souls of their children and family members. They endeavored to orchestrate beautiful, pure dining spreads that would spread blessing and shape their families. Young adults born after the
revolution, however, or what many in Iran term the “third generation,” had a different view of these industrially produced, processed goods, very often welcoming these products if they were halal. Some of these young people, however, preferred Iranian products. In Tehran, Haleh, Parvin’s daughter, for instance, saw foods made in Iran as a sign of positive Iranian technological advancement and independence from foreign powers and said that they were safe, delicious, and halal. She was not as concerned as her mother about the ill effects of factory-made products and ingredients. At the same time, however, she very strongly believed in the efficacy of blessed food and votive meals. Moreover, she regularly cooked homemade fare from fresh ingredients for her own family.

In Far-Abad, Haleh’s cousin, Maryam, Nushin’s daughter, was a little more cautious. She occasionally ate processed and packaged ice cream and potato chips, but did not often eat other processed foods, blaming those substances for causing skin blemishes or what she saw as the sinful fighting of her brothers. Notably, I did not once eat jello with my hosts while living in the generally more conservative and more rural town of Far-Abad. Apart from products that came from the local canning and pickling plant, Nushin and Ahmad seemed suspicious of any processed food stuffs. They argued that the more traditional foods they prepared at home from fresh, natural ingredients were healthier, more trustworthy, and better for the family.

Food as a Biomoral, Physio-sacred Substance

According to anthropologist David Sutton (2001: 152), “Food does not simply symbolize social bonds and divisions; it participates in their creation and re-creation.” Similarly, anthropologist Judith Farquhar (2002) illustrates how food can mediate and shape citizenship. She argues that “appetites” for food and sex in post-socialist China embodied the shift from Maoist ideology—visible in what was then an emphasis on food simplicity, comradeship, and austerity—to 1990s post-socialist consumerism—evidenced by pleasure/banquet eating.

What can we make of Iranian state supporters’ somewhat ambivalent “appetites” for jello? Has there been a post-revolutionary shift from the Western-inspired foods that were popular before the revolution in the 1970s to foods that are marked as “traditional” parts of an Islamic and/or Iranian national cuisine? Has there been yet another, more recent, backlash against these changes in the 2000s, wherein even the most ardent state supporters prize Western, processed, and packaged food items as a sign of foreign savvy? For my Basiji hosts, the answers to these questions are complicated and vary according to age, class, and urban or rural residence, among other factors. But for all, eating the “right” (halal) foods was connected to acting in the right way as kin.

Eating the “right” food was also connected to politics and citizenship. By participating in state rituals that featured the sharing of blessed foods, in particular, my Basiji hosts, their extended relations, and friends were expressing their piety and political commitment to the Islamic Republic. They said that acts of sharing blessed food brought them closer to God, to each other, and to the aspirations of the Supreme Leader.

The case of Iran compels us to think about the politics of large-scale food rituals, whether these are aligned with the state or a sign of protest, and the ways in which these rituals can be a means of expressing, contesting, and shaping political standpoints. Beyond these grand rituals of state power, the Iranian case also compels us to think of everyday food practices as a kind of “daily revolutionary practice” (Sutton et al. 2013) in which people’s food choices reflect and articulate their (shifting) values and aspirations for their kin and fellow citizens. And finally, it requires us to think about citizenship differently. Not solely as a set of rights, but as an ethical and relational project that can be the object of renewal and transformation. In Iran, this process is embodied. Food is a “biomoral” and “physio-sacred” substance such that the moral and the biological and the sacred and the physical are inextricably tied (Wellman 2017; Appadurai 1981). Some of these biomoral properties of food are being recognized by the post-revolutionary state. In a limited way, they appear in the increasing standardization and certification of halal food. But they are being mobilized dramatically in the state-sponsored commemorative events that spread blessing between and among citizens and God. Here, food is a means of creating relationships and boundaries through transaction, whether between kin, citizens, or citizens and the state.

Jello is thus more revealing than it may first appear. Although it may seem to be a simple gelatinous dessert, jello is actually the subject of much controversy and debate. These debates make visible a complex milieu of sparring Western, cosmopolitan, national, and religious food practices in contemporary Iran that shift according to political affiliations, class, and urban and rural communities. They reveal that food practices are connected to the work of forging the right kind of family members and citizens. Indeed, arguments surrounding jello reveal the scope and form of a special attention to moral and religious foodways in the Islamic Republic as a strategy of nation-making. The ideas and embodied practices of Iranian citizenship are constantly being forged and contested through food choices and religious ethics. And jello
is a technology of citizenship, a "physio-sacred" or "biomoral" substance that can enter the bodies of citizens and mark the often contested political/spiritual orientations of self, family, and state.

NOTES
1. The word “jello” (also called jelly) refers to a gelatin dessert. “Jell-O” is a trademarked brand of American gelatin, but has since become a generic term, like kleenex or xerox.
2. I use a modified form of the Persian transliteration system of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. Consonants are consistent with this system, but with the exception of the aleph, diacritics are not used to distinguish letters that have the same pronunciation in Persian. Short vowels are transliterated with the closest English equivalent: this means that I use e and o, rather than i and u. Long ye is rendered as i, and ay is written as a. Final heh is written as eh. Finally, the ayin is indicated by an opening single quotation mark (‘), and the hamza is indicated by a closing single quotation mark (’). (Olzewski 2015, xvi).
3. Most Iranians are Muslim and most belong to the Shi’i branch of Islam. Shi’as claim that the son-in-law of the Prophet, ‘Ali, is the divinely appointed successor to Muhammad, and he is known as the First Imam. They extend this “Imami” doctrine to Muhammad’s family, “the people of the house” (ahl al-bayt), and the Twelve Imams who possess special religious and political authority.
4. Members of the Basij are often described as the “original revolutionaries” who defended Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). They were often the first to go to the front and be martyred (Varzí 2006).
5. This includes the miles governing animal slaughter, hygiene, food safety, and food labeling and packaging.
6. I here view citizenship not only as a set of legal rights, but as an assemblage of aspirational and developable qualities that can be accrued and embodied through practices such as consuming and sharing the “right” foods, among other things.
7. According to scholar of Islamic legal theory Schacht (1966), there are two categories that divide human acts and transactions. The first is a set of declaratory rules that refers to the validity or nullity of an act of transaction. The second represents five categories through which human acts are evaluated with reference to their spiritual effects (e.g., reward or punishment). In Arabic, these include (1) “obligatory acts which in their omission incur a divine punishment” (wajib); (2) “recommended acts which earn reward” (mandub); (3) “neutral acts with neither sanction nor reward” (mubah); (4) “disapproved acts that earn divine reward when omitted but are not punished; and (5) “forbidden acts which incur punishment” (mahzur).
8. This term was first coined by Ahmad Fardid, a professor of the University of Tehran.
9. For more on the sandreviche-kilbās, including a recipe, see www.claudecooks.com/recipes/sandreviche-kilbas-iran-mottadeh-sandwich-bysoungchah-chehabi/.
11. www.farsnews.com/news/19960110000036/1
12. Ibid.
16. The classification of fish without scales as impermissible stems from early Imami doctrine: the Imam ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, visits a fish market and tells those present not to eat fish without scales. The same view is taken by the Fifth Shi’i Imam, Muhammad Al-Basir (677–733 CE), and by the sixth Shi’i Imam, Jaffar al-Sadiq (700 or 702–765 CE), who defends a particular fish because traces of scales are present (Cook 1986: 237). Note that most Sunni legal scholars do not make this distinction and do not limit fish in this manner.
17. Iran has one of the most web-savvy populations in the world, and websites such as hadana.ir are frequently used by religious scholars and laymen alike. However, in rural settings such as Farsabah, where internet access is often still dial up, people rely more on their Islamic schooling and their local religious leaders who are aware of the key rulings on issues such as gelatin.
19. This means that the animal has to be alive and healthy, a Muslim has to perform the slaughter in the appropriate ritual manner, and the animal’s throat must be cut by a sharp knife severing the carotid artery and windpipe in a single swipe. Blood must be drained out of the carcass.
20. Interestingly, (Conservative) Jewish rabbis debating jello have made similar arguments. For instance, in an official statement, a teshuva, endorsed by the 1969 Rabbinical Assembly titled “Is Gelatin Kosher?” Rabbi Isaac Klein writes that “in the manufacture of gelatin the materials used go through chemical changes which make the end product paniym Chadashot, something entirely new.” He concludes: “Gelatin that is made from bone or from hides is kosher” (Horowitz 2016: 71).
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. For instance, people often remarked that local butter is better than Kareh Jameh (a brand of factory-processed butter available in stores across Iran). They talk of making butter as children, its taste and its soothing quality.
25. The Foundation for the Preservation of Heritage and the Distribution of Sacred Defense is a parastatal organization that participates in the memorialization of unknown martyrs, the creation of martyr memorials and collective shrines, and programming of all aspects of battlefield pilgrimages. Like the more widely known Martyrs’ Foundation, it is parastatal because it is neither wholly of the state nor wholly distinct from it (Maloney 2000).

REFERENCES


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