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Bouihrouchane Mbark visits what was once the halal meat section of his Aswak Souss supermarket in Brussels. -
 Copyright : Susannah Ireland

Animal slaughter law brings Muslims, Jews together in Belgium

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BRUSSELS — Workers put the finishing touches on a wall of newly installed shelves at a small grocery store. Three months ago, the same wall was lined with a row of refrigerators filled with halal meat.

But a new law in the Flanders region of Belgium bans the practices required for both halal and kosher meat. That has meant such products have become harder to find and more expensive in recent months.

"I stopped selling meat because I don't want to sell meat that's not halal," said Bouihrouchane Mbark, the owner of the Aswak Souss supermarket in Brussels.

The Jewish and Muslim communities have united in opposition to the ban.

With the help of an American legal fund, a group of Muslim and Jewish organizations have taken legal action and hope to overturn the new law. The Belgian Constitutional Court heard their arguments in January and is expected to rule on the case within weeks.

“*Time and again, the Jewish community is told by senior E.U. officials that there is no Europe without the Jews. These bans undermine those statements and put Jewish life at risk.***”**

The groups say that the new regulation infringes on their civil rights, preventing them from freely practicing their religion.



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"Jews and Muslims are vulnerable minorities in Belgium and this decision stigmatizes these minority groups," said Joos Roets, the lead counsel for the Executive of Muslims in Belgium, and the Belgian Coordination Committee of Islamic Institutions, two organizations involved in the lawsuit.

Belgian law had long required animals to be stunned before slaughter to prevent unnecessary pain. It did, however, grant an exception for ritual slaughter, a practice in Islamic and Jewish religious laws in which the animals are not stunned first. Both halal and kosher slaughter require the use of a very sharp knife to slit the animal's throat in one stroke and sever the major structures and vessels.

The new law in Flanders came into effect in January removing the religious exception. In the Wallonia region, a similar law will come into effect at the end of August.



Halal meat is difficult to find at outlets like Aswak Souss in Brussels since a new law requiring pre-stunning of animals came into effect.Susannah Ireland

Mbark estimates that his supermarket's sales have shrunk between 40 and 45 percent due to the ban.

"There used to be lines at the cashiers, now they are almost empty. People would come for meat and leave with all sorts of other things," he said.

Many Muslims feel the laws are a result of Islamophobia rather than a concern for animal rights. For Jews, they are also an uncomfortable reminder of a darker period in European history. In 1933, one of the first laws the Nazis enacted was a ban on kosher animal slaughter.

Belgium isn't the first European country to prohibit ritual slaughter without stunning. Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Slovenia have banned exceptions for religious killing, while Switzerland and Lichtenstein make an exception only for poultry.



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Belgium is home to larger populations of both Muslims and Jews, who fear that the restrictions on ritual slaughter could spread further throughout Europe. There are around 500,000 Muslims in Belgium and 30,000 Jews.

Antwerp is home to one of the largest Jewish ultra-Orthodox populations in Europe.

The Jewish community has long imported beef and lamb from slaughterhouses in France, Hungary and Poland, but the new law forced the closure of a poultry producer just outside of Antwerp.



Antwerp-based kosher butcher Chaim Goldberg said the wholesale price of chicken has increased around 50 percent. Susannah Ireland

At the small Moszkowitz kosher butcher in Antwerp, the change in legislation has meant an approximate increase of 50 percent in the wholesale cost of chicken. The shop has absorbed the financial hit, preferring to keep prices the same until after the court verdict comes in.

If the community loses the suit, then the shop will likely increase prices by at least 20 percent.

"If it stays this way it will be a big problem, but hopefully it won't take long for the law to be thrown out," butcher Chaim Goldberg, 32, said.

Some Muslim shop and restaurant owners have now also started importing meat from other European countries, though given how recent the law is many are still working to find suppliers.





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The case has attracted attention from Jewish and Muslim communities outside of Belgium, who hope that a victory will stop other European countries from enacting similar laws.

"Time and again, the Jewish community is told by senior E.U. officials that there is no Europe without the Jews. These bans undermine those statements and put Jewish life at risk," Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, said in a statement.

The Jewish community's legal efforts have been assisted and partially funded by the New York City-based Lawfare Project, a legal fund and civil rights organization that works around the world.

"We don't think these types of laws belong in modern society, and a state should not be able to restrict the free religious practice of minority communities," said Brooke Goldstein, the founder and director of the Lawfare Project, whose fund has supported other civil rights cases involving both Jews and Muslims in the United States and Europe.

If the Muslim and Jewish groups lose their lawsuit, they plan to take the case to the European courts.

Despite the strong objections of both minority communities, the politician who introduced the legislation in Flanders insists that religion shouldn't exempt anyone from the country's laws.

"Our convictions concerning animal welfare go above religious insights. Why should [religion] give you more rights?" said Ben Weyts, the Flemish Parliament's animal welfare minister.





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Responding to criticism that the law was politically motivated or anti-Islam, Weyts maintains he was inspired by animal welfare concerns alone.

He would eventually like to see the European Union adopt similar legislation, which is widely supported by animal rights advocates.

Though the law makes ritual observance harder, members of both the Jewish and Muslim communities have no immediate plans to leave Belgium.

"Where's better?" said Benjamin Hoffman, the owner of Hoffs, a kosher deli and restaurant in Antwerp. "This is a great community. Life here is good. If there's an E.U. law against ritual slaughter, then we will have problems."

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