



VEGANISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Zaid Tabaza

Middle Eastern food is often perceived as heavily dependent on meat and dairy, with lamb, chicken, and yogurt featured in many of the cuisine's most popular dishes. Growing up in Amman, Jordan, I felt a deep connection to the dishes I regularly shared with my family and friends, which I came to understand as a defining element of my cultural identity. Despite not being particularly fond of meat, I enjoyed eating most dishes, almost feeling an obligation to cherish every facet of Levantine cuisine. Turning down offers of a meal never felt like an option, especially in a culture where sharing food is considered a token of hospitality. Thus, when I decided to become vegan, I struggled to redefine my relationship with my food and its role in shaping my cultural identity.

The story behind my decision to go vegan started two years ago when my family adopted a kitten. Previously, I feared most animals and saw them as distant creatures who only happened to inhabit the same planet as us. Living with a kitten quickly transformed my fear into affection and dismantled the barriers between me and non-human animals. Simultaneously, and perhaps coincidentally, one of my class assignments during my freshman year in college involved not eating any foods that contained animal products for a week. Completing the assignment challenged my views on food and eating, which led me to consider veganism as a lifestyle.

As I gradually became vegan, I faced a mixed reception, starting from close friends and family all the way to distant strangers, and ranging from curiosity and confusion to overt disapproval. Although I defended my choices, in many cases, these reactions led to thought-provoking discussions that exposed me to a diversity of valuable perspectives. All the while, however, I was still mourning the loss of many of the foods I grew up eating and subconsciously feared that I had rejected a significant component of my identity. My vulnerability was particularly amplified by the fallacious assertions that veganism is an imported Western ideology

that is irreconcilable with Middle Eastern cuisine and identity. As annoyed as I felt by these claims, I am grateful to have heard them, as they led me on a journey of ambitious research to understand how my Middle Eastern heritage intersects with my newfound vegan identity.

The idea that veganism is somehow incongruous with Middle Eastern culture can be easily refuted by examining the region's rich history of plant-based diets. Not only does Middle Eastern cuisine boast a variety of foods seen as essential to the modern vegan diet, but the region of Southwest Asia is also considered by many scholars to be the birthplace of agriculture.¹ Furthermore, some of the earliest manifestations of veganism as a philosophy in the region can be traced to the words of the 10th century poet Al-Ma'arri from Al-Ma'arra, a city in today's northwestern Syria. Al-Ma'arri was a vegan who argued against human exploitation of non-human animals. In a poem entitled "I no longer Steal from Nature," Al-Ma'arri advocates for some of the core values behind the philosophy of veganism, writing "do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals. Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young."² Al-Ma'arri's poetry thus stands as proof that veganism has existed within Arab societies for millennia, refuting the misconception of its novelty.

As I continued my quest to discover the history of plant-based diets in the Middle East, I took comfort in learning about the role of veganism in the region across different periods of time. Still, I remained in search of one essential piece: a guide to reinventing the Levantine dishes from my childhood as vegan. To my surprise, I found a guide within a cookbook in the Food and Lifestyle section of a bookstore in Nuremberg, Germany, where I was doing an internship last summer. The cookbook, which offers a vegan reinterpretation of Syrian cuisine, is written in German and entitled *Syrisch in Vegan*. As I rifled through the book's pages, I realized it was much more than a mere guide to plant-

based alternatives for many of my cravings.

The cookbook was authored by the Doudieh family who moved to Nuremberg from Damascus in 2002. In 2018, they decided to go vegan, and in the process, they conceived of a way to veganize traditional Syrian recipes, which they share in their cookbook. Following the success of their first book, the family wrote a second volume, in which they covered 45 additional recipes. Beyond documenting recipes, the second volume serves as a culinary and cultural journey through Damascus, incorporating paintings of different sites within the city and weaving recipes with the family's memories of their life in Damascus. As such, the authors share several personal anecdotes, including the story behind what led them to adopt a vegan lifestyle and their recent experiences volunteering at a *Lebenshof*, a home for rescued animals.³ Finding and exploring these cookbooks felt like an affirmation of my vegan lifestyle, allowing me to enjoy all the aspects of my native cuisine. It also led me to another realization that further challenges the idea of Middle Eastern cuisine as being meat-dependent: although meat and dairy are found in many dishes, they are non-essential—the dishes often taste the same when these ingredients are omitted.

The *Syrisch in Vegan* cookbooks are one initiative among many that are currently being led by Middle Eastern communities—both within the region and abroad—with the goal of rediscovering and advancing Middle Eastern, plant-based food culture. For example, within Amman alone, multiple vegan restaurants have opened in recent years. Additionally, Hayek Hospital, located in Beirut, Lebanon, is the first hospital in the world to serve exclusively vegan food to its patients—a decision that stems from a belief in the curative potential of plant-based foods.⁴ These vegan institutions and initiatives, when considered alongside the region's history of veganism, attest to the deep-rooted and dynamically evolving significance of plant-based diets in the Middle East.