

# DIETARY-INDUSTRE

Giving the Muslim world a taste of

An army, it is said, marches on its stomach. And in the wars the United States has waged since September 11, the nation has had to provide not only for its own troops but also for friends and even foes entangled in its operations abroad. Prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, translators in Afghanistan, a quickly ramped-up Iraqi army—the U.S. military feeds them all, and not just any fare: these rations are Islamically sanctioned, halal versions of the military's own go-anywhere, high-calorie Meals Ready to Eat (MREs). Over the past five years, millions of these halal MRE packs have been prepared at home and shipped to the remote fronts in America's global fight. The massive dietary operation, though, has proven almost as difficult to carry out as its military complement. Feeding the Muslim world, it turns out, is not that different from policing it.

Just as with war, you cannot do a halal MRE on the cheap. Every single ingredient of every piece of food in the meals must meet exacting certification standards. Foods flavored with vanilla extract, which includes alcohol, are *haram*, or forbidden, as are most mass-produced bakery goods, which frequently contain a nonessential amino acid derived from human hair. The meats in the halal entrées, such as in this Chicken Mediterranean, must be specially butchered—the slaughter supervised, the animals prayed over, the blood properly drained. The entrées are then assembled in a plant that is triple-cleaned before work begins, to ensure that no non-halal scraps lurk in the machinery. Because the company contracted to make the meals provides the military with kosher MREs as well, it had hoped to save costs by combining its operations. A rabbi, a halal butcher, and the company's lawyer met to figure out whether chickens might be killed in a way that simultaneously satisfied the dietary laws of both faiths. After a long day of trying to slaughter a theoretical bird, all had to admit that it couldn't be done.



A hungry Iraqi soldier, on ripping open one of these MREs, might be inclined to think of the Americans less as liberators than as imperial invaders and occupiers. Everything in the packs is made 100 percent in the USA, and the meals are chock-full of iconic American food brands, such as these Kellogg's Froot Loops. (According to his U.S. guards, Saddam Hussein hated the stuff and often tried to trade them for boxes of Kellogg's Raisin Bran.) Indeed, the halal MRE forces one to partake of a smorgasbord of America itself—candies covered in U.S.-flag wrappers, images of baseball, professional golf, and the heartland. The meals even include these "New York style" bagel chips, their bag emblazoned with a rendering of a Manhattan skyline.

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# TRIAL COMPLEX

ase of America, by Jen Banbury

Once the halal MREs have been bagged and sealed at a plant in Illinois, they take their place among the millions of items that the military sends overseas each month. On their ocean voyage from a distribution center in Pennsylvania to the port of Kuwait, the meals might cruise among Humvees, modular-housing parts, boots, or body bags. To get to depots in Iraq, the MREs then travel in military-escorted convoys along the Main Supply Route Tampa. The convoys, as "soft targets," are regularly ambushed or attacked, and more than seventy contracted drivers have been killed since 2003. Although the military claims that the hijacking of supplies is a minor problem, many of the halal meals have disappeared. Last March, the makers of the halal MREs received an email from a Pakistani shop owner who said the meals had saturated his town's black market. "please care . . . when u send it to pakistan its not going o afghanistan its beeing sale . . . by pakistani's and its haveing too much trouble for our buisnes please do something."

With the American effort to ready an independent Iraqi army falling gravely short, some in the military contend that the halal MREs haven't exactly helped. According to a U.S. lieutenant tasked with this training, Iraqis find the meals inedible and would rather "kick them" than eat them. Iraqi troops at a combat outpost near Ramadi told a reporter there that these "Power" brand sunflower kernels were especially unpalatable. The Marines at the outpost, for their part, were more than happy to take the sunflower kernels and any other rejected halal items off the Iraqis' hands—brand-name goods being preferable alternatives to the generics in the Marines' own MREs. In fact, the halal meals eventually had to be kept under lock and key, to make sure that U.S. troops didn't deprive Iraqis of their rations entirely.

"We have the finest food, the finest equipment, the best spirit," George Patton said of the U.S. military in 1944. "I actually pity those poor sons-of-bitches we're going up against." Today, each time a terror suspect or Iraqi recruit tears into a halal MRE, he is meant to experience this prowess firsthand, in part through such awe-inspiring equipment as this heating pouch, which in seconds warms an MRE entrée to more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit. But unlike WWII, our current wars have done much to call American superiority into question. The Pentagon already is trying to relinquish as many logistical aspects of its disastrous occupation of Iraq as possible, including its control of the National Depot and the five regional supply centers. And soon the Iraqis will likely choose not to buy America's "finest" military meals, as Turkey, France, India, and China all make less expensive versions of the halal MREs. Even as more than 20,000 additional U.S. troops are being sent to Iraq, as part of President Bush's "new strategy," the dietary mission there is steadily being drawn down. ■

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