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‘The Quranic Garden’: Consumption of Fruits, Vegetables, and Whole Grains from an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

The increasing global prevalence of obesity and obesity-related co-morbidities has prompted calls for culturally-congruent dietary patterns and health-promoting strategies and interventions appropriate for specific populations and communities. The Holy Quran is viewed as the primary behavioral and religious guidance for all Muslims around the world. Diets rich in plant-based foods and its protective role in the reduction and prevention of obesity-related diseases have been established. The purpose of this study is to examine passages cited in the Holy Quran with particular reference given to plant foods cited and features of a plant-based diet. A narrative review of the Holy Quran in two formats was conducted to identify plant-based foods. A total of 36 passages were identified in this review with a considerable focus on the consumption of dates, olives, grapes, whole grains, pomegranates, and other plant-based foods. This review supports the Holy Quran as an authoritative culturally-relevant faith-based resource for dietitians, public health educators, and other health professionals operating in Muslim populations and communities around the world to promote dietary patterns rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Keywords: Religion; Health; Nutrition; Cultural competence

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight (Body Mass Index [BMI] between 25–29.9) and of these adults, over 600 million were obese (BMI 30-39.9) in 2014 (World Health Organization, 2016b). As global obesity trends and obesity-related co-morbidities such as type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and some cancers continue to increase unabated (Ng et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2016b), global public policies and awareness campaigns have prompted calls from the WHO for action to reduce obesogenic environments and promote beliefs and attitudes that could support healthy dietary patterns and encourage physical activity (World Health Organization, 2016a). Recent studies have placed an emphasis on the importance of health strategies and interventions that are culturally-relevant and tailored to various respective populations and communities (Bender, Nader, Kennedy, & Gahagan, 2013; Bertran et al., 2015; James, Pobee, Oxidine, Brown, & Joshi, 2012; Kim, Song, Han, Kim, & Kim, 2013). Additionally, theoretical frameworks that incorporate aspects of faith and religion within culturally-tailored interventions have been previously proposed and continue to gain growing recognition for their potential

to influence health beliefs and behaviors (Grundmann, 2014; Lancaster, Carter-Edwards, Grilo, Shen, & Schoenthaler, 2014; Opalinski, Dyess, & Grooper, 2015; Sattin et al., 2016; Yeary et al., 2015). In the predominately-Muslim Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the current prevalence of overweight and obesity ranges from 74-86% and 69-77% in women and men, respectively (World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2016). Given that Muslim communities in MENA and around the world are not immune from the widespread public health problems associated with obesity and poor dietary patterns, some recent studies have begun offering faith-based tailoring applicable to Muslim populations as it relates to healthy dietary patterns and physical activity (Aboul-Enein, 2015, 2016; Ghadimi, Kamrani, Zarghami, & Darzi, 2013; Peyravi & Moezzi, 2013; Tarighat-Esfanjani & Namazi, 2016).

Among the evidence-based healthy diets proposed, diets rich in plant-based foods have been regarded as among the healthiest of diets comparable to the Mediterranean-style diet (MD) (Preedy & Watson, 2015; Tusso, Ismail, Ha, & Bartolotto, 2013). Broadly defined, the general dietary principle behind the plant-based rich diet is to maximize consumption of nutrient-dense plant foods from fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains while reducing the consumption of calorie-dense nutrient-poor foods characterized by refined sugars, saturated fats, and processed foods (Tusso, Stoll, & Li, 2015). Previous studies have shown that a plant-based rich diet can be an effective treatment and prevention of obesity and obesity-related conditions (Campbell II & Colin Campbell, 2013; Macknin et al., 2015; Matada, Philippe, & Koneri, 2013; Newby, 2009; Pistollato & Battino, 2014; Turner-McGrievy & Harris, 2014).

The purpose of this narrative study is to review and reflect public health perspectives of dietary patterns focused on fruits, vegetables, and whole grains with special reference given to passages from the Holy Quran as a cultural-congruent faith-based approach to help address the growing obesity **pandemic** with particular attention given to Muslim populations and communities in MENA and around the world. This review adds value for several reasons. Firstly, there is notable growth in the number of studies (Cong et al., 2014; Kalter-Leibovici et al., 2010; Ludwig, Cox, & Ellahi, 2011) that help elucidate the growing obesity crisis facing Muslim populations and communities around the world. Secondly, given the current obesity crisis facing Muslim populations and communities, this review could lead to a better culturally-relevant understanding of the current and future status of obesity-related strategies and interventions among Muslim populations and communities. Lastly, addressing healthy dietary patterns to prevent and reduce obesity and obesity-related mortality and morbidity is an essential topic on the world health agenda. Therefore, developing foundations for culturally-congruent public health nutrition priorities and interventions relevant to Muslim populations in the MENA region and around the world is warranted.

Methodology

The Holy Quran is regarded as the divinely inspired authoritative word of the Divine. It is divided into 114 Surah (*Chapters*) and 6236 ayah (*passages*). A narrative examination of the Holy Quran was carried out using both electronic and hard copy formats (The Holy Quran, 2016; The Noble Quran, 1993) in order to examine and compare the accuracy and translation of each respective passage. Both formats were narratively reviewed for content that cite plant-based foods. All passages were translated to the English language and tabulated by citation and plant-based food cited in each respective passage (Table 1). The King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran and the King Saud University Electronic Moshaf Project provided English translations for this review. Given the nature of this study, no ethical standards were necessary and, therefore, no ethical review board was required. Additionally, the author wishes to assure Islamic religious authorities that there is no infringement upon theology and no declaration of a dogma pertaining to this review of the Holy Quran.

Results

A total of 36 passages out of 6236 total passages and 21 chapters out of 114 total chapters were identified in this review. The most commonly cited plant-based food was dates [15], followed by grapes [12], olives or olive oil and whole grains [8 each], pomegranates [3], mustard seeds [2], and cucumbers, wheat, garlic, lentils, onions, bananas, corn, herbs, pumpkin, and figs [1 each]. Of the 21 chapters identified in this review, one chapter was titled *The Fig*.

Table 1 Quranic Passage with Corresponding Citation

Plant-based Food Cited ^a	Citation	Passage
Dates; Grapes; Olives (Olive oil)	Surat Al-Mu'minun (<i>The Believers</i>) 23:19–20	“Then We brought forth for you therewith gardens of date palm and grapes, where in as much fruits for you, and where of you eat. “And [We brought forth] an olive tree issuing from Mount Sinai which produces oil and [it is a] relish for those who eat.”
Dates	Surat Maryam (<i>Mary</i>) 19:25–26	“And shake the trunk of date-palm towards you; it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon you. So eat, drink and be content.”
Dates; Grapes	Surat An-Nahl (<i>The Honey Bees</i>) 16:67	“And from the fruits of date palms and grapes you derive intoxication and whole some nourishment. Verily, therein is indeed a sign for people who have wisdom.”
Dates; Grapes; Olives	Surat An-Nahl (<i>The Honey Bees</i>) 16:11	“With it (the rain) He brings up for you the crops, olives, dates, the grapes and every kind of fruit.”
Grapes; Whole grains; Dates	Surat Ar-Ra'd (The Thunder) 13:4	“On the earth are neighboring tracts, and vineyards, and cultivated green fields [Grains], and date palms growing diversely, watered from a single source, yet we make some of them (fruits) exceed (quality of) in food value to eat. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who use their reason.”
Dates; Olives; Pomegranates	Surat Al-An'am (The Livestock) 6:141	“And it is He Who produced gardens, both trellised and untrellised, and date palms, and crops of different shape and taste (their fruits and their seeds) and olives, and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in taste). Eat of the fruits when they ripen.”
Whole grains; Dates; Grapes; Olives; Pomegranates	Surat Al-An'am (The Livestock) 6:99	“It is He who sends down water [rain] from the sky, and with it We bring forth vegetation of all kinds, and out of it We forth green stalks, from which We produce thick clustered grains arranged in layers. And from the date palm and its spathe come forth of its emerging fruit are clusters hanging low and near. And [We produce] gardens of grapes and olives and pomegranates, each similar [in kind] yet different [in variety and taste]. Look at their fruits when they begin to bear, and the ripeness thereof. Indeed! In that are signs for a people who believe.”

Dates; Grapes	Surat Al-Baqara (The Cow) 2:266	“Would any of you wish to have a garden full of date palms and grapes through which rivers flow underneath? He would have all sorts of fruits in it.”
Herbs; cucumbers; Wheat Garlic; Lentils; Onions	Surat Al-Baqara (The Cow) 2:61	“And when you said, O Moses! We cannot endure one kind of food. Therefore, pray to your Lord to produce for us what the earth grows, its herbs, its cucumbers, its wheat or garlic, lentils, and onions.”
Whole grains; Grapes; Olives; Dates	Surat Abasa (He Frowned) 80:27–31	“And caused to grow within it grains; and grapes and nutritious plants; and olives and dates; and gardens dense with many trees; and fruits and herbage.”
Grapes	Surat Al-Naba (The Announcement) 78:32	“Gardens and grapes.”
Bananas	Surat Al-Waqi’ah (The Inevitable Event) 56:29	“And [banana] trees layered [with fruit] piled one above another.”
Dates; Com	Surat Ar-Rahman (The Most Gracious) 55:11–12	“Therein are fruits, dates producing sheathed fruit-stalks; and grain wrapped in Husks [corn] and sweet-scented plants.”
Pumpkin	Surat As-Saffat (Those Ranged in Ranks) 37:146	“And We caused to grow over him a gourd [pumpkin] fruit.”
Whole grains; Dates; Grapes	Surat Ya-Sin (Y.S.) 36:33–34	“And from it (the earth) we produced whole grains, so that they eat thereof. And We placed therein gardens of date palms and grapevines and caused to burst forth there from some springs.”
Figs; Olives	Surat At-Tin (The Fig) 95:1	“By the fig and the olive.”

Olives (Olive oil)	Surat An-Nur (The Light) 24:35	“The Lord is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is like a niche within it a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a brilliant star lit from [the oil of] a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. God guides to His light whom He wills. And God presents examples for the people, and God is Knowing of all things.”
Dates; Grapes	Surat Al-Isra (The Night Journey) 17:91	“Or [until] you have a garden of date palms and grapes, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst abundantly.”
Grapes; Whole grains	Surat Al-Kahf (The Cave) 18:32	“And present to them an example of two men: We granted to one of them two gardens of grapes, and We have surrounded both with date palms and placed between them green crops (cultivated grain fields).”
Whole grains; Dates	Surat Ash-Shu'ara (The Poets) 26:148	“And fields of green crops [grain] and date palms with soft spadix.”
Dates; Pomegranates	Surat Ar-Rahman (The Most Gracious) 55:68	“In both of them are fruits, date palms and pomegranates.”
Mustard seed	Surat Al-Luq'man (Luqman the Wise) 31:16	“O my son! If it be (anything) equal to the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, God will bring it forth. Verily, God is Subtle (in bringing out that grain), Well-Aware (of its place).”
Com	Surat Al-Baqara (The Cow) 2:261	“The likeness of those who spend their wealth in the Way of God, is as the likeness of a grain (of corn); it grows seven ears, and each ear has a hundred grains. God gives manifold increase to whom He pleases.
Mustard seed	Surat Al-Anbiya (The Prophets) 21:47	“And We set a just balance for the Day of Resurrection so that no soul is wronged in aught. Though it be of the weight of a grain of mustard seed, We bring it. And sufficient are we to take account.”
Whole grains; Dates	Surat Qaf (The Letter Q) 50:9-10	“And We have sent down blessed water from the sky and made grow thereby gardens and grain (every kind of harvests) reaped. And lofty date palm trees having fruit arranged in layers.”

Whole grains; Dates	Surat Qaf (The Letter Q) 50:9-10	“And We have sent down blessed water from the sky and made grow thereby gardens and grain (every kind of harvests) reaped. And lofty date palm trees having fruit arranged in layers.”
Whole grains	Surat Al-An’am (The Livestock) 6:95	“And We send down from the sky rain charged with blessing, and We produce therewith gardens and Grain for harvests.”
Olives (Olive oil); Grapes	Surat Yusuf (Joseph) 12:49	“Then will come after that a year in which the people will be given rain and in which they will press [olives and grapes].”

^a As applicable to the respective passage

Discussion

Referred to as the ‘Biblical Seven’ species (Berry, Arnoni, & Aviram, 2011; Preedy & Watson, 2015) and comparable to plant-based foods cited in the Bible (Janick, 2007), plant-based foods identified in the Holy Quran and their nutritional benefits have been elucidated in previous literature (Azarpour, Moraditochae, & Bozorgi, 2014; Salem et al., 2009; Shafaghat, 2010). Phytochemical analysis show these foods to be rich sources of flavonoids (Shafaghat, 2010). Previous studies (Galleano et al., 2012; Hossain et al., 2016; Hurt & Wilson, 2012) continue to support flavonoid-rich foods and their protective mechanisms for preventing and reducing obesity and obesity-related diseases. Evidence regarding the dietary potential found in dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*), grapes (*Vitis vinifera*), olives and olive oil (*Olea europaea*), pomegranates (*Punica granatum*), and whole grains have been well established in the literature (Al-Muammar & Khan, 2012; Cho, Qi, Fahey Jr, & Klurfeld, 2013; Chuang & McIntosh, 2011; Mallhi et al., 2014; Pérez-Martínez, García-Ríos, Delgado-Lista, Pérez-Jiménez, & López-Miranda, 2011). Moreover, the positive and synergistic effects of Mediterranean-style dietary patterns composed of both plant-based dietary fiber and monounsaturated fatty acids, primarily from olive oil, has been suggested in previous evidence (De Barros et al., 2014; Jacobs & Tapsell, 2013; Martínez-González & Gea, 2012). The MD has been previously proposed as an environmentally-friendly diet model defined by its sustainability and biodiversity (Burlingame & Dernini, 2011; Sáez-Almendros, Obrador, Bach-Faig, & Serra-Majem, 2013; Serra-Majem, Bach-Faig, Miranda, & Clapes-Badrinas, 2011). Given that plant-based foods cited in the Holy Quran share common ‘food denominators’ with the MD, it stands to reason that a diet congruent with the Holy Quran would serve as an equally novel culturally-relevant diet model characterized by its biodiversity and sustainability. Interestingly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proposed in establishing a botanical garden in Doha, Qatar, which the primary feature of this project, titled the ‘Quranic Botanic Garden,’ is to promote the cultural heritage and knowledge of Quranic plants for scientific, conservational, and aesthetic purposes (Qatar Foundation, 2016; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009). One of the educational objectives of this project is to highlight the nutritional potential found in Quranic plant foods. Recent literature (Aboul-Enein, 2016; Ghadimi et al., 2013; Hussain, 2013; Owens & Sami, 2015) has proposed the beneficial and health-promoting potential of the Holy Quran as a culturally congruent resource intended for Muslim populations. Therefore, public health nutrition professionals and medical anthropologists could use the food-oriented text and

passages to appropriately inform dietary advice to members of Muslim communities.

Conclusions

Given the global obesity crisis, particularly facing the predominantly-Muslim countries in MENA and other Muslim communities around the world (Aboul-Enein, Bernstein, & Neary, 2017; Cong et al., 2014; Ludwig et al., 2011; World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2016), culturally congruent dietary education strategies and interventions targeting Muslim populations are warranted. A diet that closely aligns with plant-based foods mentioned in the Holy Quran can be regarded as part of a healthy dietary pattern comparable to the MD. The promotion of plant-based foods such as dates, grapes, figs, olives, olive oil, pomegranates, and whole grains cited in the Holy Quran can serve as an influential culturally-relevant environment-friendly diet model. Culturally competent dietitians, anthropologists, nurses, public health educators, clinicians, and other health professions operating in predominately Muslim communities should acquaint themselves with passages from the Holy Quran that cite plant-based foods for the purpose of promoting healthy dietary patterns. Though recent studies (Aboul-Enein, 2015, 2016; Azarpour et al., 2014; Ghadimi et al., 2013; Tarighat-Esfanjani & Namazi, 2016) have begun exploring Islamic ethos and Quranic epistemology as it relates to public health nutrition, its application to practice remains largely unexplored. Consequently, future research directions should focus on incorporating and evaluating the Holy Quran's applicability and efficacy in the form of interventions for behavioral health promotion and public health nutrition education as well as cultural competency training for public health professionals and medical anthropologists. From a theoretical perspective, faith-based health approaches could provide significant insight into the structuring of healthy dietary patterns and the possibilities for individuals to respond to faith-based health-promoting practices. Applications of the Holy Quran's potential in addressing public health nutrition priorities and global health complexities could help broaden our perspectives to new and contemporary ways of thinking.

Limitations

Some limitations should be mentioned with regards to this narrative review. Although the author reviewed two formats of the Holy Quran, some verses may have been missed. Additionally, given that the English language was the language by which the Holy Quran was translated for the purpose of this review, Quranic citations may have been misinterpreted due to semantics, grammar, or syntax in the translation of Quranic chapters and their respective verses. It is important to note that this narrative study did not include the *Sunnah* and *Hadith* (manners, traditions, sayings, and deeds of the Islamic Prophet Muhammed) and was intended mainly to present an interpretational overview of plant foods cited the Holy Quran and its potential implications for human health and nutrition applicable to Muslim populations.

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