

## Less sheep for sharing

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*As the nation celebrates Eid Al-Adha, Injy El-Kashef finds out that the rise in market prices has somewhat dampened the festive holiday spirit*

Eid Al-Adha is once again upon us. The streets are empty, traffic is wonderful, families are gathered around dining tables, children are off from school and some are even lucky enough to be using the week-long holiday to tan on a beach somewhere. But before all the festivities had begun, the number-one priority for many was to purchase their sheep, to be sacrificed after the Eid prayer on the first day of the holiday and distributed to the needy.

However, "this year, people are different", the assistant accountant for Kado Al-Obour for Import, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. The accountant said he was in the best position to judge, as his company had constructed 10 shawader (tents where sheep are sold) across the country, expecting to sell as many sheep as the previous years. "But our sales records this year show a 30 to 40 per cent decrease compared to the last Eid," he said. Following the floatation of the pound and its subsequent decline in value against the dollar, people are wide-eyed with shock as they witness the cost of daily life rising at an alarming speed. The Eid celebrations have not been spared. With prices increasing from last year's LE6.5 per kilo for the lowest quality sheep to LE8.5 this year, no wonder the number of people who can afford the rite of sacrifice has dropped -- especially as the price range per kilo runs as high as LE13.

The cheapest sheep this year are the Marino, or Australian sheep, followed by the Somali. The most expensive remains the local breed, and rightly so as "the baladi are the best... the imported ones are so tasteless," comments Omneya Rifaat, a housewife speaking to the Weekly while she pleaded with the trader to deliver the animal to her home. Other than culinary preferences, another reason many still prefer the local breed, despite its elevated price, is the lingering fear of mad cow disease associated with imported meat, which had made headlines a few years ago.

Hagg Saad, a sheep trader on the Autostrade Road, standing amidst his small herd, said there are many reasons baladi sheep have become more expensive. The first he cites is the need to maintain the differential between the price of the local and the imported sheep that consumers have come to expect. "And since the imported ones are now more expensive because of the price of the dollar, we also had to raise the price of our local sheep," he said. The second, and more reasonable explanation, is the increase in the price of animal feed which, Hagg Saad was sad to admit, is imported.

According to Saad, a kilo of fodder, which used to sell for around 60 piastres, has almost doubled in price. Breeding has become extremely costly as a consequence of the increase in prices. In [Mansoura](#) and Fayoum governorates -- where most of the baladi Eid sheep come from -- the breeding farms are all but empty. "Only last night I went to a farm to obtain 100 sheep for the eve of the Eid; I returned with only 12. There are more traders over at the farms requesting sheep, than there are sheep," Saad said. This phenomenon in itself raises the price of the animals; "it's a question of supply and demand", he added.

The Kado Al-Obour accountant in part disagrees, commenting that the demand itself this year leaves much to be desired. "The eve of the Eid is the time when we don't have enough hands to deal with the huge amount of buyers who wait till the last minute; and look at us today. Hardly any sales at all," he said.

So who is buying the sheep? "The rich," answers Hagg Saad. "They drive in with their big cars, buy several heads and go. They are the same customers every year." Amina Mourad, an employee at a travel agency, finds this reality very sad. "Sacrificing is a sunna [non-obligatory deed following Prophet Mohamed's example] for every Muslim -- not just for the rich," she lamented. Mourad bought a small sheep that her children played with for several days, running to the garage every morning before being picked up by the school

bus and giggling "el-kharouf! el- kharouf!" (the sheep!). Despite the price increase, Mourad prioritised the sacrificial ritual because "it is an occasion that only happens once a year, and I want my children to have their priorities right. This year they won't be getting new clothes, but they will have a taste of what sharing is all about."

A retired army general who preferred anonymity thinks differently of the matter. In his view, since Eid is about charity, and since butchers and sheep traders are "using the economic situation" to price their goods as they please, other forms of charity now seem more pertinent. Following angry discussions about prices, he and his friends decided to make donations to hospitals and orphanages, which, according to him "doubled the price of the sheep. It's not about money. It's about feeling that you are not being ripped off. I gave LE700 yesterday to a cancer hospital, and I feel much happier doing that."

Yasser, a 43-year-old architect, says he bought a sheep this year, but does not even want to think about what will happen next year if prices continue to rise at the same rate. "Because I also have to think about my children's school and the daily food on our table, and if I think about it, I would lose the energy to go on," he said. On the other hand, a drive through the city streets on the first day of Eid showed that most of those who expected a share of animal protein this year were not walking away empty-handed. As Hagg Saad had pointed out, the rich continue to buy despite high prices, sustaining the spirit of charity and sharing that characterises the holiday.

Speaking to *Al-Ahram Weekly*, a salesgirl at a downtown shop urged this reporter to "just look around you. How many people do you see in here? And this is the Eid for god's sake!" She observed that people are merely window shopping; "you get these large groups of young men who come in, try on many different items, bargain over the prices tagged on the clothes, only to leave the items and walk out." During this Eid, the salesgirl added, doing her job conscientiously had proved frustrating, knowing all the while that hardly anyone would actually be buying. "Personally, I would love to get a sheep and share it with my family, but I can barely afford a chicken."

Incidentally, Valentine's Day falls during the same week as Eid Al-Adha this year. And although the current Valentine's displays are more elaborate than ever before -- indicating a more conscious assimilation of the Western tradition -- the holiday's very concept remains irritatingly frivolous to many, especially considering current economic conditions. Abdel-Aal El-Mohandes, 73, thinks "It's senseless, and has no meaning. It's just another way [for some] to make money." And indeed many do. A short stroll down the streets of middle-to-upper-class residential areas like Heliopolis, Maadi, Mohandessin, Zamalek and Nasr City reveals not only an incredible amount of red and pink "cute" merchandise, but also the exorbitant price tags attached to them. On average, candles, mementos with romantic inscriptions, teddy bears and stuffed hearts range from LE50 to LE100, mugs with the words "Happy Valentine's Day" cost between LE25 and LE30, while the wrapping for the present alone runs at no less than LE15.

Financing Valentine's Day celebrations is most often an expensive endeavour -- even for the more privileged. "Any gift that normally costs, say, LE40, actually sells for LE60 or LE65 during Valentine's," says Samia Kamal, a 27-year-old AUC graduate. Hassan Galal, a 42-year-old bank employee, raises another issue: "Honestly, tell me what is more important? That I should buy my wife an item of jewelry on an occasion that is not even traditionally ours, or that I should buy a few extra kilos of meat for the Eid and distribute them among the poor?"

As for the outcomes of the recent increase in prices, some doubt that it will affect the well-to-do because "they already have more than they need to lead a dignified, actually, a luxurious, life," says Rasha Fawzy, mother of three children all expecting new Eid clothes she says she cannot afford. "What will happen," she adds, "is that only the poor will get poorer and the already huge gap between the top and bottom of the socio-economic ladder will become more marked." That is, perhaps, the scariest consequence.