A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE TO SUICIDE BOMBING[*]

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Özet

Orta Doğu'da İslam ile diğerkâm intihar eylemleri arasındaki ilişkileri anlamaya yönelik olan bu makalede ilk olarak Durkheim'in intihar eylemleri hakkındaki görüşleri ele alınacak. İkinci olarak İslam'ın intihar girişimleri hakkındaki ortodoks yorumları incelenecek. Üçüncü olarak, aynı dinin bazı yerlerde intihar eylemlerini engellerken neden bazı bölgelerde bu eylerimi teşvik ettiğini anlamak için Geertz'in din hakkındaki düşüncelerine bakılacak. Dördüncü olarak, Orta Doğu'nun toplumsal ve siyasi ortamının intihar eylemlerindeki katkısı tartışılacak. Son olarak İslam mı yok Orta Doğunun politik ve içtimai ortamının bu eylemleri teşvik edip etmediği münazarası yapılacak.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İntihar, İslam, Durkheim, Geertz

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Abstract

As we are concerned with prompting an understanding of the relationship between Islam and altruistic suicide in the Middle East, our remarks will fall under five headings. First, there is to be clarified the kinds of altruistic suicide underlying the Durkheim's view to ground the discussion of the relationship between religion and suicide. Secondly, there remains to be examined mainstream interpretation of Islam about suicide. Thirdly, we shall examine Geertz's theory of religion in order to understand why the same religion can provide different symbols for suicide bombing in different countries. Fourthly, there are discussions that arise from our claim that although Islamic ethics plays a discouraging role in committing suicide, the social and political context of Middle East encourages people to commit suicide. Finally, this paper will evaluate whether or not Islam encourages altruistic suicide and the role of social and political context in the Middle East in encouraging people to commit suicide.

Key Words: Suicide, Islam, Middle East, Durkheim, Geertz

Introduction

The wake of a September 2001 terrorist attack on the United states reminds us of the relationship between religious affiliation and suicide, which has been studied by many scholars. Emile Durkheim's work on suicide appears as the most influential work on the contemporary studies on the relationship between religion and suicide. In his study, *Suicide*, Durkheim claimed that social integration or regulation causes people to commit suicide. Furthermore, for him, there is a relationship between religion and suicide; since Catholics is more integrated than Protestants, the rate of suicide in western catholic countries is less than protestant countries in Western Europe. In that study, although he focuses the relationship between religion and egoistic and anomic suicide, he pays little attention to the relationship between altruistic suicide and religion. Indeed, there are hardly any major systematic studies of religion and altruistic suicide. On the one hand, this situation in general, on the other hand specifically the recent terrorist attack makes the examination of the relationship between religion and altruistic suicide in the context of Islam an important research priority.

The present study is offered in the conviction that it is important to explain the relationship between Islam and altruistic suicide. Thus, I am going to focus on the relationship between Islam and altruistic suicide. In this attempt, it is very necessary to address these questions: Although the mainstream interpretation of Islam prohibits any kinds of suicide, why does Islam in the Middle East play an encouraging role in committing altruistic suicide? Although Islam plays a positive role in discouraging any kind of suicide in other Islamic countries, why does it seem to encourage Muslims to commit suicide in the Middle East? In this sense, does Islam or the Middle East's unique social and political settings encourage people to commit altruistic suicide?

As we are concerned with prompting an understanding of the relationship between Islam and altruistic suicide in the Middle East, our remarks will fall under five headings. First, there is to be clarified the kinds of altruistic suicide underlying the Durkheim's view to ground the discussion of the relationship between religion and suicide. Secondly, there remains to be examined mainstream interpretation of Islam about suicide in order to understand whether or not Islamic ethics encourages altruistic suicide. Thirdly, we shall

examine Geertz's theory of religion in order to understand why the same religion can provide different symbols for suicide bombings in different countries. Fourthly, there are discussions that arise from our claim that although Islamic ethics plays a discouraging role in committing suicide, the social and political context of Middle East encourages people to commit suicide.   Finally, this paper will evaluate whether or not Islam encourages altruistic suicide and the role of social and political context in the Middle East in encouraging people to commit suicide.

I

In *Suicide*, Durkheim addresses the issues of social integration and regulation. For him, social regulation and integration play an important role in the suicide rate; although the excessive social regulation may lead fatalistic suicide, the weak social regulation can cause anomic suicide; whereas the strength social integration can be stimulus for altruistic suicide, the weak social integration may be stimulus for egoistic suicide. Thus, Durkheim categorizes the types of suicide into four categories: anomic, egoistic, fatalistic and altruistic suicide. However, the category of altruistic suicide has been much neglected in comparison with the attention bestowed on other categories. For altruistic suicide is the most difficult type in determining whether any death is altruistic suicide or not because people generally do not call this type as suicide. This problem leads us to first define suicide. For Durkheim, "the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows must produce this result."[1] From the perspective of the definition, Durkheim accepts martyrs as a suicide because they also know the result of their actions would be death.

According to Durkheim, altruistic suicide takes place when a person becomes strongly integrated to the social group. Furthermore, altruistic suicide becomes a duty for the person who is strongly integrated to the social group. If the person denies committing suicide, he or she can be punished, ridiculed, or ostracized because the expected behavior for the person is to please the social group not himself or herself.

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[1]   Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 1951, x/ii.

Durkheim suggests three kinds of altruistic suicide: obligatory altruistic suicide, optional altruistic suicide, and acute altruistic suicide. For Durkheim, although the suicide also characteristically performed as a duty is obligatory altruistic one, the suicide not formally required by public opinion, but certainly favored by society is optional altruistic one.[2] In the optional altruistic suicide the individuals kill themselves for the most futile immediate and apparent motives, often involving social prestige.[3] The third kind of altruistic suicide is acute altruistic suicide. Durkheim calls it mystical suicide and for him, "it even happens that the individual kills himself purely for the joy of sacrifice, because even with no particular reason, renunciation in itself is considered praiseworthy."[4] Durkheim describes the psychological dimension of this type of suicide:

> There are no suicides with a more definitely altruistic character. We actually see the individual in all these cases seek to strip himself of his personal being in order to be engulfed in something which he regards as his true essence. The name he gives it is unimportant; he feels that he exist in it and it alone, and strives so violently to blend himself with it in order to have being. He must therefore consider that he has no life of his own. Impersonality is here carried to its highest pitch; altruism is acute.[5]

Durkheim argues that the reasons behind acute altruistic suicide are the excessive social integration rather than psychological reasons. However, he neglects the social context in which suicide takes place. Although he suggests that religion is the most important factor, which provides its members with social integration, he neglects the fact that religion may not play the same role in encouraging people to commit altruistic suicide in the same degree everywhere. Thus, his study of suicide falls short in addressing the disparity between suicides rates among several regions where the same religion dominates.

This is not a new demand. However, perhaps, it gains urgency in this time when the new type of altruistic suicide (suicide bombing) emerges in the Middle East. For this new type of altruistic suicide raises important questions which Durkheim's explanation

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[2]   Durkheim, *Suicide*, 1951, 180-182.
[3]   Joseph A. Blake, *Death by Hand Grenade: Altruistic Suicide in Combat*. 1971, 48.
[4]   Durkheim, *Suicide*, 1951, 181.
[5]   Durkheim, *Suicide*, 1951, 183.

falls short in addressing to: why does Islam in the Middle East play an encouraging role in committing altruistic suicide although the mainstream interpretation of Islam prohibits any kinds of suicide, and why does it seem to encourage Muslims to commit suicide in the Middle East although Islam plays a positive role in discouraging any kind of suicide in other Islamic countries?

Yet once we have given up, or escaped, a universe of traditional explanation of suicide, we must rethink what the relevant issues that emerge on the new type of suicide and its social context. The problem of suicide again calls for reflection.

The call has not gone unheeded. By suggesting a network theory, Bernice A. Pescosolido and Sharon Georgianna assist in the task of addressing the effect of social context in the rate of acute altruistic suicide. They argue "that his (Durkheim) proposition must be tailored to social and historical contexts and that research must specify the underlying social mechanism at work."[6] In contrast to Durkheim, they have suggested that the sheer number of shared beliefs and practices of religious groups has not so much effect in lowering suicide, but more the social support derived from networking with co-religionists.[7] Pescosolido has tried to extend their network theory in his later article. He argues the significance of more locally circumscribed social structures in determining the effect of religious affiliation on suicide; in that sense, he treats more narrowly and precisely recent notions that social, historical and cultural landscapes need be taken into account in applying Durkheim's general propositions to specific times and places.[8] However, this network theory needs to transform itself into multicultural and comparative theory. Here one can argue that in order to understand suicide bombings in the Middle East one must consider it within the context of its unique social, historical, geographic, political setting. It would be much preferable to find a way to provide this multicultural, comparative theory to explain the phenomenon of suicide bombings in the Middle East. Is such a perspective possible?

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[6]   Bernice A Pescosolido, Sharon Georgianna,. *Durkheim, Suicide, and Religion: Toward a Network Theory of Suicide*. 1989:33

[7]   Steven Stack and Ira Wasserman *The Effect of Religion on Suicide Ideology: An Analysis of the Networks Perspective*. 1992:459

[8]   Stack and Ira Wasserman *The Effect of Religion on Suicide Ideology: An Analysis of the Networks Perspective*. 1992:459

I believe it is. In this paper, we will use multicultural and comparative theory. It seems that the Middle East's unique social, historical, geographical and political settings may become a stimulus for suicide bombings. This hypothesis also helps us to address the main question, namely, why suicide bombings have emerged and have been taken place in the Middle East, whereas they do take not place in other Islamic countries. If the stimulus for suicide bombing is the religion of Islam, which is not affected by historical and political context, we have to see the same rate of suicide bombings in other countries. In order to address this hypothesis, first of all, we have to look at the mainstream interpretation of Islam about suicide in general and suicide bombing in specific.

II

Religion of Islam, as contained in the sacred book, the Qur'an, and the *Ahadith* of the Prophet bans any kind of suicide, whether it is altruistic, anomic or egoistic. (Anas (b. Malik) reported Allah's Messenger as saying: None of you should make a request for death because of the trouble in which he is involved, but if there is no other help to it, then say: O Allah, keep me alive as long as there is goodness in life for me and bring death to me when there is goodness in death for me. Hadith - Al-Tirmidhi #1613, Narrated Jabin ibn Abdullah.

The Qur'an reads "...And do not kill yourselves (nor kill one another). Surely, Allah is Most Merciful to you" - An-Nisa 4:29.

"If anyone killed a person, unless it was for murder or spreading mischief on earth, it would be as if he killed all of mankind. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he had saved the lives of all mankind." Qur'an 5:32.

From philosophy of Islam about suicide, Islam, which considers life sacred and a gift from God, bans suicide. According to the Islamic belief, to take one's life at one's discretion is an affront to God who has the real owner of life. It is a revolt against what God has ordained as a test for the moral resilience and determination of human beings.

The quotes reveal the fact that Islam bans any kind of suicide including altruistic suicide. However, although the philosophy of Islam and main sources of Islam ban any kind of suicide, Islam might play an encouraging role in this kind of behavior in the past.

If we assert that the Middle East's context encourages people to commit suicide bombings, we have to make sure that the altruistic suicide is not common in Islamic tradition.

The only example of suicide attacks is the assassins of the order of Hasan al-Sabbah in Islamic tradition. However, the historical details of these movements are usually neglected. They were a political group and targeted certain individuals. In other words, it was a question of political conflict. Furthermore, the assassins never became a tradition in Islam and disappeared after the death of Hasan al-Sabbah. I feel we are reading too much into this example. Thus, Islam also historically discourages any kind of suicide and therefore, altruistic suicide is uncommon in Islamic tradition.

III

In order to address to how the religion of Islam in the Middle East encourages Muslims to commit suicide bombings although the main sources of Islam bans all kinds of suicide and committing suicide attacks are uncommon in the Islamic tradition , we shall look at Geertz's theory of religion. For Geertz, religion is an instance of culture. Like common sense, art, science, and ideology, religion constitutes a cultural system. Cultural systems are not only parts of a particular culture, but also organized parts.[9] Thus, Geertz says that "religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic."[10] Jonathan Liberson makes a useful attempt to explaining Geertz's use of symbols:

> He seems to suggest that such systems of symbols are inherent in cultures and that without them there would be no cultural phenomena to describe, for our language and other symbols do not simply describe the world we live in: they contribute in some fundamental sense to that world being what it is, and may be said in part, to create it.[11]

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[9] Robert A Segal, *Interpreting and Explaining Religion: Geertz and Durkheim* 1988, 31.
[10] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973, 90.
[11] Jonathan Lieberson, *Interpreting the interpreter : Geertz and his field of anthropology* 1984: 385

Wim Hofstee makes a useful attempt to explaining Geertz's view about functions of religion:

> A religion gives the believers a model which enables them to understand the world they are part of and with which they can originate themselves in their natural and social surroundings: a world view. At the same time attitudes and motivations result from this model of reality; in other there arises an ethos which gives direction to their actions. As a model for reality, religion indicates how people have to behave in their natural and social surroundings in order to harmonize them with that world view.[12]

However, this system of symbols are understood and interpreted by believers according to their horizons because understanding as a process is a "fusion of horizons."[13] Social, political and economic context are important factors which determine horizons of believers because these contexts shape and constitute believers' habitus.[14] This point is neglected by Durkheim's theory of suicide, although it is considered by network theory of suicide.

The historical and cultural context of Middle East needs to be reflected in order to address to the question why Middle East's historical and cultural context leads the religion of Islam to be an instrument for suicide bombings. It seems there are two main issues that help us to understand Middle East's context; one of them is a crisis of legitimacy within Islamic world itself and another is the conflict between Israel and Palestinian.

IV

The conflict between Israel and Palestinian leads some Palestinian to use suicide bombings against Israel because they have no sophisticated weapons as Israel has; they sacrifice their life which is their only weapon against Israel. However, suicide bombings are less firmly rooted in religion than politics. It is not so much the principles of Islam as the political circumstances that function as a basis for suicide attacks. This is a common phenomenon to be seen among other secular and religion-based political movements, and we can certainly cite many examples here to illustrate this point.

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[12] Wim Hofstee, *The interpretation of religion : some remarks on the work of Clifford Geertz* 1984: 512
[13] Hans- Goerg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1998.
[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*. 1984.

An example of this point is the suicide bomber who killed Rabin. The killer is not a Muslim but a Jew. Another example is Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a Brooklyn doctor, who entered the Khalil Mosque in 1994 and killed over 34 Muslims during prayer times in Ramadan, the holiest month of the Islamic calendar. Goldstein knew that his was a suicidal mission and that he would eventually be killed. Nevertheless he did it, and what he did was done in the name of Judaism.

In Sri Lanka, the Hindu faith in reincarnation has been used by Tamil Tiger guerrillas to perpetuate the ideology that for every freedom fighter who dies, another is born to take place. According to Sri Lankan researches tracking Tamil militancy, approximately 1500 Tigers have died by using cyanide rather than be captured.[15]

As we see, Durkheim is right in assuming that excessive social integration leads altruistic suicide, although he does not pay attention to the effect of cultural context on the religion and its affect on the altruistic suicide. Offering network theory, Pescosolido has given us some clues in finding the affects of historical and geographical context on religion and the rate of suicide, although he neglects the fact that religion is a system of symbols.

From these perspectives, we can say that: the Middle East's unique social, historical, geographical and political settings become a stimulus for suicide bombings, although suicide bombers assert that they do this in the name of Islam. In that hypothesis, there are three assumptions: (1) Pure Islamic Ethic does not courage any kind of suicide. Thus, Islamic view about suicide bombings are negative and it discourages this kind of behavior, (2) Islam also historically discourages any kind of suicide. Therefore, altruistic suicide is uncommon in Islamic tradition, (3) Since Islam is understood and interpreted by believers according to their horizons (underlying Geertz's theory of religion), it will be affected by regional historical and cultural context.

Conclusion

Our discussion of suicide bombings in the Middle East and Islam has begun with asserting Durkheim's theory of suicide has fallen short in explaining postmodern altruistic suicide, suicide bom-

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15 Nomi, Morris Nomi and Marriam Shahin. *The True Believers,* 1996: 43

bings. We have argued that rather than social regulation provided by religion, as implied by Durkheim's *Suicide,* the context of the Middle East encourages people to commit suicide bombings. One may add in support of Durkehim's theory of failure to explain suicide bombings that if altruistic suicide is caused by excessive social regulation provided by religion, why does not this kind of behavior take place in other Islamic countries? Although Pescosolido's theory of network takes geographical and cultural differences into account in explaining the disparity of suicide rates among countries, he does not pay attention to comparing the phenomenon historically in order to understand the root causes of this phenomenon. Weber's historical multicultural comparative method leads us to study the Middle East's unique historical, geographical, and political settings. However, our first task is to find Islamic view of suicide and suicide bombings.

We have elaborated on Islamic view of suicide in order to understand whether Islam encourages people to commit suicide or not. We have suggested that Islamic view of suicide is negative and discourages people to commit suicide. For Islam plays a discouraging role in other Islamic countries.

In addition, we have tried to examine what causes Islam to play an encouraging role in suicide in the Middle East context. In this point, Geertz's commentary on religions has become crucial.

The results of these findings supported our three assumptions: (1) Pure Islamic Ethic does not courage any kind of suicide. Thus, Islamic view about suicide bombings are negative and it discourages this kind of behavior, (2) Islam also historically discourages any kind of suicide. Therefore, altruistic suicide is uncommon in Islamic tradition, (3) our hypotheses that rather than Islamic principles, the Middle East's unique historical, geographical, and political settings encourage people to commit suicide bombings are proved.

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