Human Torches: The Genesis of Self-Immolation in the Sociopolitical Context

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HUMAN TORCHES: THE GENESIS OF SELF-IMMOLATION IN THE
SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

by

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B.A. May, 2012, Old Dominion University

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ABSTRACT

HUMAN TORCHES: THE GENESIS OF SELF-IMMOLATION IN THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Ryan Michael Nixon
Old Dominion University, 2012
Director: Dr. Regina Karp

In 2012 there was a record number of self-immolations globally. This phenomenon has been associated with the civil unrest and the collapse of regimes. Most recently, self-immolations in Tunisia sparked a revolution that led to the collapse of the Tunisian government. In the study of politics, self-immolations frequently appear merely as footnotes in the discussion of other phenomena. Where research has been previously conducted, focus has rested mainly on how it initially became a tool of contention and how it spreads. This paper seeks to understand the conditions that lead individuals to choose this method of protest. To do so, this project examines clusters of self-immolations in the Arab World during the Arab Spring, Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation of 1969, and the United States during the Vietnam War. Specifically, public statements, news articles, and suicide letters are examined. This project finds that self-immolation is likely to occur when three criteria are met: 1) there is a self-destructive individual, 2) this person is strictly and deeply attached to their society, and 3) the individual experiences intolerable conditions, or hopelessness. The implications of the genesis are important because of its potential consequences to societies and governments.
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This thesis is dedicated to Frank A. Walls, Jr.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There were at least one hundred five known political self-immolations in 2012. The year prior to that saw at least twenty-three self-immolations. This two-year period shows a remarkable departure from the first decade of the third millennium, which saw as few as one self-immolation per year. In fact, 2011 and 2012 make up one fifth of all known self-immolations according to the data collected for this project. This is an alarming trend with global implications. Self-immolation has historically been associated with political unrest. For example, a Buddhist monk self-immolated in South Vietnam in 1963, leading to the collapse of the South Vietnamese government and the president's assassination.

Previous research into political self-immolation has been conducted mainly within the medical and psychological communities. For example, medical journals have looked into self-immolation as a tool to address oppression against women in Afghanistan.\(^1\) Politically, research into self-immolation as a form of protest has addressed how self-immolation transformed from a Buddhist religious tradition into a form of protest,\(^2\) the lineage of self-immolation that leads back to this

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transformation, and how it is perpetuated through the growth of media. Usually, self-immolation is a footnote in research projects that examine a subsequent act following a self-immolation. For example, research into the Tunisian Revolution of 2010 to 2011 often mentions Mohamed Bouazizi, the man who self-immolated just prior to the outbreak of the unrest. This leaves many questions unanswered, some of which will be raised throughout the body of this paper.

Biggs suggests that self-immolation had a starting point. That is, it took an initial act of self-immolation to which every subsequent act of self-immolation can be traced. Here, Biggs only explains how self-immolation initially entered the social conscience as an acceptable method of protest. It took the act of one man on his own accord, who was familiar with self-immolation as a religious practice, to commit the act in a public setting, which was then adopted by a wider audience. Why this audience adopted self-immolation, however, is not addressed by Biggs or within the sociopolitical literature. The literature within the medical and psychological communities offers some insight; however, it is only applied to normal suicides—that is, suicides occurring outside of the scope of this project, which looks at suicide as a form of protest. This paper considers whether the medical community can work in concert with sociopolitical research to determine how and when people choose to

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6 Biggs, 1.
commit self-immolation. That is, this paper asks the question under what conditions does self-immolation occur?

This project seeks to answer that question by incorporating the findings by Raj [et al], which suggests that women in Afghanistan self-immolate after suffering "intolerable conditions," or hopelessness, with Émile Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide, which explains why people kill themselves for their society. In other words people who commit suicide because the conditions within a community compel the actor to commit suicide for the community. Closing this gap might offer valuable insight into the consequences of self-immolation, which will be addressed in the Analysis chapter.

This paper states the following hypothesis: Self-immolation occurs when a person is sufficiently self-destructive, feels a deep connection to their society, and perceives their situation as hopeless. This paper then tests this hypothesis against three case studies. First, it examines a cluster of self-immolations that occurred in the Arab World in 2010 through 2011. When Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in December 2010, a subsequent cluster of suicides occurred in support of the Arab Spring. This project uncovers six cases of self-immolation in the Arab World; however, that number could be much higher. It next tests the hypothesis against a cluster of self-immolations occurring in Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring in 1969. Five self-immolations are observed in support of the Czechoslovak resistance to the Soviet occupation, including three in Czechoslovakia and four

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7 Raj (et al), 2203.
outside the country, two of which were identified by country of origin only, with no other data. Finally, the hypothesis is tested against self-immolations occurring in the United States in 1965 to 1970 in protest of the War in Vietnam. The dataset includes five cases of self-immolation during this time, as well as three others with insufficient data. Again, the actual number of self-immolations occurring in the US during the Vietnam War could be much greater. Each case study is broken down into two waves of self-immolation: the primary wave and the secondary wave. The hypothesis is tested against both waves to account for various other variables that might lead to self-immolation instead.

This paper finds that the hypothesis, as applied to the Arab Spring case study, is insufficient to explain the primary wave of self-immolation. The primary wave consists solely of Mohamed Bouazizi. The data itself might be to blame for the weak correlation between the hypothesis and reality. That is, Bouazizi acted immediately following a grievance. He left behind no suicide note, thus preventing adequate understanding. It might be assumed that his suicide was merely a desperate act of impulse.

The hypothesis, on the other hand, explains the secondary wave quite well. Self-immolation in the Arab World was unheard of before Bouazizi acted. His act created a martyr for the Tunisian people, communicating the message that self-immolation might indeed be a useful tool in dealing with the level of hopelessness that existed in Tunisia and the rest of the Arab World. Examining public statements and suicide notes, this paper finds that the hypothesis works. That is, the secondary wave of self-immolations in the Arab World consisted of self-destructive individuals
who were strictly bonded to their country or the Arab World at large, and who were living in a hopeless situation.

When applied to the cluster of self-immolations in Czechoslovakia and in support of the Prague Spring, the hypothesis finds similar results, but in reverse order. That is, when Jan Palach self-immolated in Prague in 1969, he explicitly called for the action of his fellow countrymen and women and explicitly stated his hopelessness. Those who followed Palach's example also expressed similar sentiments. This paper finds that the hypothesis is sufficient to explain the primary wave of self-immolations in Czechoslovakia.

The secondary wave of self-immolations, however, occurred outside of Czechoslovakia and contained at least one individual who was not seeking change. How committed these individuals were to the Czechoslovak society is unknown. Where the hypothesis is weak in this case, alternate explanations might be used. For example, this paper seeks to explain the hypothesis' inability to explain self-immolations outside of Czechoslovakia with the Werther Syndrome, or the copycat effect. That is, the use of media built Palach up as a martyr and distributed the news of his martyrdom to a global audience, causing some others in Europe to seek a similar level of respect.

The US case study shows a moderate ability for the hypothesis to explain the phenomenon of self-immolation during the Vietnam War. The first case of self-immolation—that of Alice Herz in 1965—very strongly supports the hypothesis. The second case in the primary wave—that of Norman Morrison—moderately supports the hypothesis. The final case in the primary wave has insufficient data to
support the hypothesis. Therefore, the hypothesis has moderate strength. A recurring theme in the primary wave appears to be religious conviction. Each of the three protestors during the primary wave were explicit in their religious reasons for committing self-immolation. The moderate weakness might be explained by religious conviction instead.

The secondary wave in the US during the Vietnam War consists of cases with insufficient data. Indeed, these protestors' actions have been all-but-erased from history. Therefore, the hypothesis cannot be applied to the secondary wave without uncovering new evidence.

What can be inferred by the case studies, however, is that in most circumstances where the data is sufficient, there appears to be a link between self-destructive people, love for their societies, and hopelessness with self-immolation. This correlation by itself is meaningless; therefore, this paper applies lessons learned to additional questions in the analysis section, the first of which simply tests the overall strength of the hypothesis.

The second question looks at the relationship between clusters of self-immolation and subsequent events. For example, why did the self-immolations in Tunisia spark the Arab Spring, which led to the eventual collapse of the Tunisian regime, but self-immolations in the US had no impact on ending the US involvement in Vietnam? This paper adopts Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) to explain that self-immolation is essentially ineffective in countries with governments that enjoy strong and complex domestic institutions. That is,
order is correlated with the level of government, rather than regime type. Therefore, only weak states need to worry about the effects of political self-immolation.

Third, this paper examines the relationship between self-immolation and suicide terrorism, finding that there is a worthwhile link to study between them. They are tools for the same thing: Change. On the other hand, social perceptions of these two methods of protest are very different. Self-immolation, designed to kill only the protestor, enjoys a moderate amount of social acceptance. Suicide terrorism, designed to maximize civilian casualties, is met more with social scorn. Cultural differences might explain why protestors will choose one over the other.

Fourth, this paper looks at the relationship between self-immolation and other forms of self-destructive behavior. While the link between self-immolation and seppuku is relatively small, the link between self-immolation and hunger strikes is worthwhile to examine. Both create a martyr, one dead and the other living. Self-immolation, on the other hand, is designed to facilitate an instant death, while hunger strikes are designed to facilitate the threat of death at a later point if change is not affected.

In other words, there are some links between self-immolation and various other self-destructive forms of protest; however, self-immolation is profoundly different from these forms in the methods and manners incorporated within it. That is, self-immolation is a form of protest that forces the observer to examine it fully in order to attempt to understand why a person would commit such an irrational act.

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Due to suicide terrorism's civilian kill count, the observer is less likely to show sympathy towards the actor. In regards to the hunger striker, the observer has time before the actor dies. Furthermore, hunger strikes are generally not done in public and never contain an important spectacular element that is enjoyed by the self-immolator: Fire.

Finally, this paper poses the question: Are self-immolations expected to grow in numbers? As noted in the opening paragraph, 2012 saw more self-immolations than any other year prior. In fact, one fifth of all known self-immolations occurred in 2012. This represents a troubling trend. This paper suggests, however, that self-immolations will be fewer in the future, given a long enough timeline. This paper adopts Ronald Inglehart's Modernization and Postmodernization (1997) to complement Huntington's model of order. That is, states will become less secure and more prone to social pressures as existential security rises. As it rises focus will fall less on existential security and more on social issues, such as economic equality and personal expression. The weakening of the state, coupled with more focus on social issues, will provide new hope for those who were previously hopeless. Therefore, as already stated, self-immolation will eventually fall out of practice. How long that will take is another question that cannot be answered by this paper.

Ultimately, it is argued that three conditions explain how and when political self-immolations occur. First, there must be a self-destructive person. It is not believed that non-self-destructive persons are likely to commit suicide. Second, the

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10 Ronald Inglehart, Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Table 1.1: 43.
person enjoys a strict bond with the society in which they are acting. Self-immolations without a level of altruism fall merely into the regular suicide category. Finally, it is not believed that the person will choose to commit suicide if other methods of redress are available to them. That is, the person must be hopeless. It should be expected that self-immolation will continue to be a tool to voice contention in the future; however, states are unlikely to be compelled to act following clusters of self-immolations. Furthermore, self-immolation is expected to be utilized less frequently as existential security rises.
CHAPTER 2
METHODS

The argument made is that political self-immolation occurs when a self-destructive individual becomes strictly connected to the society in which they act and have experienced a loss of hope regarding their social or political situation. The following methods are used to explore and test the hypothesis: First, self-immolation is defined. Second, using the definitions, data is collected from various newspaper articles and scholarly research dating from 1963 to 2012. Third, this project examines the geographical and chronological variations to determine clusters of self-immolations. Finally, this project identifies and tests the hypothesis against three clusters of self-immolation: The Arab World during the Arab Spring, Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring, and the US during the Vietnam War. Each case study also examines the weakness of the hypothesis and presents alternative explanations.

Definitions

In order to conceptualize political self-immolation, or suicide protest, as it will be used interchangeably throughout this writing, it must first be defined. Defining suicide protest is, however, difficult and sometimes problematic. For the purpose of this writing, political self-immolation will be defined in historic terms (self-destruction); as Michael Biggs suggests, the act of self-immolation occurs when
a person intentionally commits suicide or acts in a way sufficient to cause death.\textsuperscript{1} Fiery protests are definitely included, as are self-poisoning and self-defenestration. These non-fiery methods are few and will be identified. Here, threats of suicide are omitted. Hunger strikes too, while bearing many similarities with self-immolation and certainly sometimes causing death, as will be addressed later, fail to meet these criteria because death is not the ultimate goal. The goal of hunger strikes is to affect change prior to death, thus giving the actor the possibility of enjoying the effects of their actions.

Self-immolation is a communicative act performed in front of a public audience to make a political statement.\textsuperscript{2} In many instances the act is choreographed to maximize the witnesses, creating a public spectacle. For example, the first political self-immolation in the modern era is that of the South Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc in 1963. Quang Duc and his conspirators not only staged the fiery protest in the center of a busy Saigon intersection, they also tipped off the press that there would be a major event. Quang Duc, before a crowd of hundreds, sat in the lotus position and, after his fellow monks poured flammable liquid on him, burned himself alive to the horror of the audience. His act was very public, and Malcolm Browne’s photograph of the “Burning Monk” was quickly disseminated to a global audience. In addition to burning himself in public, Quang Duc also left behind a suicide letter explaining the point behind his suicide. In the decades that followed,

\textsuperscript{1} Biggs, 2.
\textsuperscript{2} Biggs in Gambetta argues that there are two ways in which political self-immolation is carried out: “in a public place in view of other people, or accompanied by a written letter addressed to political figures or to the general public”: 173.
some suicide protestors committed suicide in private, leaving only a letter of explanation without the public spectacle.

Self-immolation is also a form of activism. That is, it communicates a message and attempts to push for the perception of positive social, political, or religious reform. Here, self-immolation is further distinguished from regular suicides, murders, Sati (the social practice of widows who throw themselves onto their husbands' funeral pyres in India), religious sacrifice, and martyrdom without suicide. These other actions lack altruism.

While self-immolation is undoubtedly a very painful way to end, or at least attempt to end, one's life, it is not absent as a tool for suicide for personal reasons. Here, however, the definitions become a little complicated. In December 2010, for example, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, was harassed by a female Tunisian police officer for not having the proper license to sell produce on public streets. After his attempts for redress were ignored by the local magistrate's office, he proceeded to self-immolate in front of many passersby. While his suicide was in public and was political in nature, it is not known if he had planned to make a statement. Because he left behind no suicide letter, one can only speculate if he was trying to push for change or if he was merely frustrated about his personal economic condition. For the purpose of this research, however, Bouazizi's self-

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immolation must be included because it is believed that his act served as the catalyst for the Arab Spring. While Bouazizi's suicide can be included, the unknown Israeli man who stabbed his wife to death before attempting to burn himself cannot.

Murders must also be excluded from this data. Michael Biggs addresses this issue. In his research he explicitly excludes self-immolations occurring in prisons because corrupt prison guards may stage a murder to resemble a protest against the prison.

Martyrdom is another issue for which must be controlled. Although martyrdom is one element that can be used to explain suicide protest (i.e. political self-immolation and martyrdom are certainly linked), martyrdom without suicide is not an act of protest, even if the victim is aware of his or her pending death and does nothing to prevent it.

Finally, self-immolation fits in Émile Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide. That is, the suicide protest is carried out to better humanity and is carried out in a way sufficient to harm only the person committing the act. This immediately means that suicide bombers can be stricken from this study because their acts not only harm themselves, but they also are explicitly designed to harm innocent civilians.

Here, defining self-immolation becomes tricky. When Quang Duc immolated himself,


5 Biggs in Gambetta, 176.

6 Ibid, 174.


several monks circled him to 1) ensure that the police and rescue services could not extinguish the flames and 2) to prevent innocent bystanders from getting hurt.

Quang Duc's suicide obviously meets the criterion of altruism, but, as will be addressed later, this is not always the case.

Data

The data in this study was compiled using several sources. Because political suicide protest is a topic that has not been heavily studied, this data primarily came from English language news articles. In some cases the sources are scholarly, such as the research by Michael Biggs and other sociologists, in addition to studies carried out by medical doctors and psychologists. This project first draws on the data collected from scholarly research. Much of Biggs' data was adopted to cover the lengthy research that he has already carried out, which covers a forty-year period from 1963 to 2002. This project covers an additional ten-year period, from 2003 to 2012. To uncover political self-immolations during this ten-year period, the aforementioned newspaper articles were scoured to find a minimum of three identifiers: Name, location, and date. These identifiers are important because they help prevent duplicate entries in the database. While it is certainly helpful to know the reasons behind the self-immolations, that is not always possible. For example, in 2001 a group of Chinese citizens self-immolated, or attempted to, in Tiananmen Square. The reason for this collective self-immolation is disputed between the members of the banned Falun Gong group and the Chinese government.

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9 Biggs in Gambetta used these same criteria, 176.
In total the dataset includes 488 acts of self-immolation occurring between 1963 and 2012. This number is smaller than Biggs' sample of 533, however, because Biggs did not specifically reveal all of the data. This project relied on his visual representations, which did not represent his total of 533. This project’s research, on the other hand, uncovered some instances of self-immolation that were missed by Biggs. For example, Biggs' visual representation of suicide protest overlooked the self-immolation of Per-Axel Arosenius in Sweden in 1981.

The data also includes suicide notes that explain the reasons for the suicide, if available. In some cases no suicide note was available, but eyewitnesses were able to give some insight into the victims' purposes. In many cases the victims made signs or chanted slogans to get their messages across. If these are available, they are studied and included with the data. If they are not available, their absence is also noted to expose the limits of the strengths of this research. This is especially apparent in the Arab Spring case study. Over one hundred victims are believed to exist in the Arab World during the Arab Spring; however, only a small handful of victims include the requisite data for understanding the purposes of their actions.

Geographical Variations

These 488 self-immolations represent forty-three states and every inhabited continent. More than one fifth of the cases of self-immolation occurred in China between 2011 and 2012 (all of which, except one, are linked to the Tibetan struggle for autonomy), which skews the Y-axis as shown in Figure 1. Large clusters also

\[10\] Biggs in Gambetta, 175.
occurred in India, which possibly has the highest number of self-immolations globally,\textsuperscript{11} Vietnam, Korea, and the United States, which saw most self-immolations occurring during the US involvement in Vietnam. After the Vietnam War there were only four self-immolations in the US, the most recent happening in 2011.

Regionally, political self-immolation is a phenomenon on every continent and widespread regionally; however, the vast majority of suicide protests occur on the Asian continent. Most of these occur in China and India. Asia represents sixty-nine percent of self-immolations from the sampled period, as represented in Figure 2. Europe has the second largest occurrence of self-immolation, with eighteen percent. The Middle East, while part of the Asian continent, is grouped with the Arab World, which represents the Middle East and Northern Africa. This region represents six percent of the sample. North America, too, represents six percent, and the remaining one percent can be found in South America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania.

\textsuperscript{11} Biggs in Gambetta, Table 5.1, shows India with 255 self-immolations from 1963 to 2002, or 47.8 percent of his total, 185.
Figure 1: Political Self-Immolations 1963-2012

![Political Self-Immolations 1963-2012](chart.png)

Total: 488

Figure 2: Self-Immolations by Region

![Self-Immolations by Region](chart.png)

- Middle East/ North Africa: 6%
- North America: 6%
- South America: >1%
- Oceania: >1%
- Europe: 18%
- Sub-Saharan Africa: >1%

Legend: Number of Immolations
Chronology

Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation in 1963 is the first known occurrence of political suicide protest. Immediately following his self-immolation to protest the Catholic regime’s treatment of the Buddhists, several South Vietnamese religious figures followed Quang Duc’s example. By the end of the year, twelve Buddhists had committed suicide in protest. This includes ten fiery deaths, one suicide by cyanide, and one nun who jumped from a building. These two non-fiery deaths represent the only examples of non-fiery self-immolation in this study. They are included because they were in direct response to Quang Duc’s suicide. It should be noted that there are probably more examples of non-fiery suicide protest; however, by the mid-1960s there is no mention of them in media reports.

Self-immolation as a means of protest quickly spread to North America (predominantly the United States) and other states in Asia (including Korea and India). By 1966 the phenomenon reached Europe, where, in 1969 it became a social movement when Jan Palach self-immolated to protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. Several suicides followed Palach’s in Czechoslovakia, but the phenomenon also spread to Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Greece, and Spain.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s self-immolation was a constant but rare occurrence in social and political protest. In 1990 the phenomenon hit an all time high with a wave occurring in India when the government introduced reservations for the lower classes. This project can only identify less than twenty-five of them by name. High numbers of self-immolations continued throughout the next two
decades, until they appeared to fall to record low numbers annually for the first
decade of the third millennium.

When Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in December 2010, he sparked a
series of self-immolations throughout the Arab World. At the same time in China, an
evermore wave of self-immolations began to occur, beginning when Tapey set fire
to himself in early 2009 to bring attention to the Tibetan struggle for autonomy.
Following his suicide, a record number of self-immolations occurred (refer back to
Figure 1). As mentioned previously, this was not the first time that self-immolation
occurred in China.

Weakness of Data

The dispute between the Fulan Gong and the Chinese government regarding
the reasons behind the 2001 mass self-immolation in Tiananmen Square uncovers
problems with the data: state-controlled and reluctant media. It cannot be assumed
that the list of political self-immolations compiled for this research is representative
of the entire history of political self-immolation. This obstacle is twofold. First,
totalitarian regimes are unlikely to allow information about the political protest to
be disseminated. This might explain the finding of zero self-immolations occurring
in North Korea and the very limited number occurring in the Soviet Union during
the Cold War. Second, self-censorship is a barrier due to the imitable aspect of self-
immolations.12 The “copycat effect” is examined in the case studies. If the state

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12 Biggs in Gambetta, see barriers, 176-177. Also see Benjamin Greenberg and Rael
D. Strous, “Werther’s Syndrome: Copycat Self-Immolation in Israel with a Call for
Responsible Media Response” The Israel Medical Association Journal 14, no. 8 (July
suppresses the release of information, or if the media is unwilling or uninterested in reporting about it, then there could potentially be several, if not hundreds or thousands, of unknown political self-immolations.\(^\text{13}\)

The uncertainty regarding the completeness of this data means that there is certainly a chance that it will be impossible to gage the overall effectiveness of the central argument of this research until such a time—if ever—that the missing data is uncovered. That being stated, however, this research is not contingent on quantitative data. Because self-immolation is very shocking and irrational, narrative-based research methods must be adopted. For example, as mentioned above, Mohamed Bouazizi possibly lacks one important element: activism. Even without this component, his self-immolation is important considering its immediate aftermath. The immediate aftermath can only be explained by addressing the social narrative of Tunisia’s downtrodden.

Another problem with the data is the reporting methods. The dataset includes 102 victims of self-immolation for a free Tibet. Because of the state-run media in China, eyewitnesses sending information to the media in other countries must carry out reporting of self-immolation. In order to report a self-immolation, an eyewitness calls the International Campaign for Tibet\(^\text{14}\) and provides information

\(^{13}\) Biggs in Gambetta believes that the number from 1963 to 2002 could be as low as 800 or as high as 3,000,\(^\text{177}\).

\(^{14}\) The International Campaign for Tibet’s factsheet on Self-Immolation by Tibetans is the first source that was used to find the names of the protestors. After that their names were checked with major news sources, accessed January 5, 2013, http://savetibet.org/resource-center/maps-data-fact-sheets/self-immolation-factsheet.
about the victim. This can be problematic if the information is falsely reported and copied by various news sources. Indeed, the International Campaign for Tibet's website lacks complete data in several areas, specifically whether or not the victim died.

A final problem with the data refers back to the definitions, specifically regarding altruism. While the vast majority of suicide protests are done in such a manner that the only intended victim is the protestor, there is at least one known case where safety measures were not put in place. Furthermore the suicide might have turned into attempted murder. In June 1978 a Crimean Tatar named Musa Mamut was frustrated about the Soviet occupation and set fire to himself when a policeman came to his home to compel his appearance before the local prosecutor. After setting his body on fire, Mamut charged toward the officer but collapsed before he could harm the officer.\(^\text{15}\) If Mamut's intention was to commit suicide in such a manner as to cause the death of a police officer, Mamut's suicide might be closer to that of a suicide bomber. If this is the case, then Mamut's actions are problematic to the central claims of this study.

\(^{15}\) Çarikov Ridvan in Reşat Cemilev Musa Mamut-Human Torch: Collection of Documents (New York: Crimea Foundation New York 1986): 94. Ridvan writes, "He let us approach him up to approximately 2-3 meters, then suddenly he jumped aside and ran further into the yard. There he burst into a bright blaze. Enveloped in flames, he turned back and ran to the policeman ... The policeman Sopykin left his motorcycle and ran away from the scene." While this is not definitive proof of Mamut's intentions, it seems telling: The policeman ran when he felt threatened. Furthermore, Biggs in Gambetta writes that Mamut's father said that Mamut had intentionally tried to kill the policeman, 320 in Biggs' footnotes.
Conditions

While self-immolation is under-studied in the sociopolitical context, the medical community has done much research. In “Self-Immolations: Cause and Culture,” medical doctors Sharon Romm, Heidi Combs, and Matthew B. Klein (2008) study the history of self-immolation, dating back at least as far as 3,000 BCE. They discover several themes that lead to self-immolation, including, among others, cultural phenomena, oppression against women, and political protest. In regards to the latter, they agree that political self-immolation fits with Émile Durkheim’s theory of altruistic suicide. They write, “In altruistic suicide the individual is strictly bonded to society and is self-destructive in social context.” In other words, the individual is compelled towards self-destruction and acts in accordance with the needs of the society. According to Durkheim, “when a person [commits altruistic suicide], it is not because he assumes the right to do so but, on the contrary, because it is his duty.” In other words, in contrast to regular suicides, the person committing altruistic suicide does not commit suicide for selfish reasons; rather they do so because they are part of a bonded society.

In “Driven to a Fiery Death—The Tragedy of Self-Immolation in Afghanistan” (2008), researchers Anita Raj, Charlemange Gomez, and Jay G. Silverman explore the phenomenon of women in Afghanistan who self-immolate. Their findings suggest “Women and girls appear to see this horrifying act as a means of both escaping from intolerable conditions and speaking out against abuse, since their actual voices do

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16 Romm, Combs, and Klein, 991.
17 Durkheim, 219.
not bring about changes that would allow them to lead safe and secure lives.” In other words, these women were in hopeless situations where their pleas for change were ignored.

Tomas Kavaliauskas, in *Transformations in Central Europe between 1989 and 2012: Geopolitical, Cultural, and Socioeconomic Shifts* (2012), also considers the correlation between hopelessness and self-immolation. He argues that the level of hope present in the society can explain the disparity between the social effects of six Central European self-immolations between 1968 and 1989. For example, when Jan Palach, Jan Zajic, and Evžen Plocek self-immolated in 1969, the message was clear because there was a sense of hopelessness during the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. These are revered figures in Prague history. On the other hand, when Vytautas Vičiulis self-immolated in 1989 against the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, his message was not clear because there was a sense of hope for Lithuanian freedom. Although a plaque has been placed in Vičiulis’ honor, he is not as celebrated as those who self-immolated during the Prague Spring.

**Core Argument**

These writings together uncover the three necessary conditions that lead to suicide protest—protesting while acting in a manner sufficient to cause death in accordance with the needs of society. The first condition is self-destructive behavior. Self-destructive behavior is defined as the actions that are sufficient to cause death.

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18 Raj, Gomez, and Silverman, 2203.
Suicide cannot occur without being self-destructive. The second condition is a deep attachment to the society in which one is acting. Love for one's social group and feeling like the needs of social group are more important than the individual are necessary elements in altruistic suicides. Self-immolation without altruism is merely suicide. Finally, the third condition is a sense of hopelessness. Generally, protestors will not self-immolate if there are alternative or unexplored measures. Unexplored measures might be peaceful or violent protests, ranging from letter writing to acts of terrorism. The condition of hopelessness is not undermined by the suicide of Viciulis because hopelessness is subjective; while the society in which he was acting experienced a sense of hope, Viciulis is interpreted as having lost hope.  

The data and hypothesis are applied to three case studies. First, the self-immolations occurring in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring and the Soviet occupation is explored. The data reveals that seven individuals self-immolated to protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. This includes three Czechoslovak nationals and four individuals from other countries. Second, this project tests the hypothesis against the wave of self-immolations that happened in the United States during the Vietnam War. The data shows five individuals self-immolated in the United States during its involvement in the Vietnam War. Biggs identifies twelve. The New York Times identifies fifteen. Third, the wave of self-immolations in Tunisia and the Arab World occurring between 2010 and 2012 are tested. The data collected here shows six instances of self-immolation in the Arab

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20 Kavaliauskas, 103.
21 Biggs, Figure 1: Suicide Protest, 1919-1970, 41.
World; however, “numerous” instances of suicide protest were recorded, including a dozen immediately following Mohamed Bouazizi’s act. These three case studies are interesting in that they all have fundamentally different outcomes. For example, Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation sparked the Arab Spring and led to the collapse of states in the Arab World. The US society and its policymakers largely ignored the suicide protests in the US. Finally, the Soviet occupying forces were able to repel the violence sparked by Jan Palach and his cohorts. These disparate outcomes have no discernible impact on the argument of this paper but do raise interesting questions, which will be addressed later.

23 Saidani, p. 45.
CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDY # 1: THE ARAB SPRING

Introduction

One year after Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in Tunisia, sparking the Arab Spring, the BBC reported that in Tunisia alone at least 107 people committed or attempted to commit suicide via self-immolation during the previous twelve month period.¹ There is no consensus about the total number of victims of self-immolation during the Arab Spring in Tunisia; however, it is believed that “numerous” victims exist.² The phenomenon was not limited to Tunisia and spread throughout the Middle East and the Arab World.

The reasons for the Arab Spring are numerous. Corruption is a recurring theme in the Arab World. That is, in contrast to the West, the Middle East and Northern Africa have higher levels of corruption. Transparency International scores the Arab World states between 40-49 and 0-9 on the Corruption Perceptions Index 2012, with zero being the highest level of corruption and one hundred being the lowest level. The West, on the other hand, generally scores as high as 90-100 and as

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² Mounir, 45.
low as 40-49.\textsuperscript{3} The perception of corruption leads to discontent towards the state, if not hopelessness.

Weak economies, perhaps caused by corruption, have resulted in a small middle class and a large lower class. In 2004 the CIA, in terms of Gross Domestic Product per capita, ranks Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, at number 120 out of 229.\textsuperscript{4} Tunisia scored higher than most other Arab World states. Poverty throughout Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and other Arab World states probably play a role in the general sense of hopelessness. On the other hand, personal financial problems might belittle the instances of self-immolation as an altruistic phenomenon.

Finally, rising food prices played a role in several instances of self-immolation. These acts of suicide protest against the cost of food are shown to be instances of accusation against the state. It must also be noted that the rising of food prices is merely a variable that led to a general sense of hopelessness. All three phenomena—corruption perceptions, weak economies, and rising food prices—show an environment ripe for the outbreak of contention, as was the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

The data uncovers six instances of self-immolation in the Arab World from December 2010 to January 2012. This number is grossly underestimated. During the Arab Spring, self-immolation became so widespread that news agencies stopped reporting names and dates. Instead they opted to report articles that noted, for

example, "This week twelve protestors self-immolated in Algeria." Therefore, the
data is largely incomplete. This project must rely on the few instances where a self-
immolation was notable enough to justify the inclusion of the victims' names and
the date of their suicide or attempted suicide.

This case study finds that five of the six identified cases of self-immolation in
the Arab World support the hypothesis. That is, most of the observable cases of self-
immolation reveal self-destructive individuals who were deeply tied to their
communities in the social context and who had experienced hopelessness. The
initial self-immolation, on the other hand—that of Mohamed Bouazizi—only weakly
supports the hypothesis. His action might instead be a case of ordinary suicide for
selfish or impulsive reasons. This case study also shows, generally speaking, that
those cases identified and even those that are not identified by name show deep
social connections to their communities and to the Arab World at large. This stands
in contrast to the cases of self-immolation occurring outside of the Soviet sphere of
influence after the Prague Spring, such as that occurring in Scotland.

Mohamed Bouazizi: The Catalyst of Revolution

On December 17, 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouazid,
Tunisia, was harassed by the police, who confiscated his license to sell produce.
Bouazizi approached the municipal building and attempted to procure a new
vendor's license. The agent he approached was female and slapped him across the
face because he could not afford to pay the bribe necessary to get the license.\(^5\) His frustration and humiliation caused Bouazizi to publicly set fire to himself. Although, as discussed in the Methods chapter, it is unknown if his suicide specifically meets the necessary conditions to be defined as a political self-immolation, it in turn led to the Arab Spring. Michael Biggs, quoted by Deutsche Welle, suggests that Bouazizi might have implied a political message.\(^6\) His act symbolized the growing frustrations in the Arab World. Laryssa Chomiak writes:

Mohamed Bouazizi committed a painfully theatrical act that ultimately led to his death. His plight, many argue, represented the frustration of thousands of Tunisians, the educated but jobless young population as well as the millions of Tunisians impacted by rapidly rising food prices.\(^7\)

Because of the impact on the people of Tunisia and the rest of the Arab World, discussion about self-immolation and the Arab Spring must begin with discussion on Mohamed Bouazizi.

While Bouazizi allegedly left behind no suicide note and appears to have been acting on impulse, he is quoted as threatening to self-immolate. Josheph Pugliese quotes from the book *Self-Immolations* (Memphis: Books LLC, 2011) that

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\(^5\) Laryssa Chomiak, “Confronting Authoritarianism: Order, Dissent, and Everyday Politics in Modern Tunisia,” dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park (2011), 133. See also Joseph Pugliese, “Permanent Revolution: Mohamed Bouazizi’s Incendiary Ethics of Revolt,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (published online) 12 June 2012, 2. Pugliese writes that Bouazizi was required to pay a fine, not a bribe.


\(^7\) Chomiak, 133.
Bouazizi allegedly stated to the municipal servant, "If you don’t see me, I’ll burn myself" and "How do you expect me to make a living?" before setting himself on fire. Here, Bouazizi expresses two behavioral traits: impulsivity and selfishness. He was acting on impulse by self-immolating immediately following a threat that was not heeded by the municipal worker. He was acting selfishly by committing suicide to escape his own personal economic problems.

As noted in the Methods chapter, Bouazizi is an outlying case of political self-immolation. While his actions do not fit Durkheim’s model of altruistic suicide—that is, he was self-destructive by nature but not necessarily strictly bonded to the Tunisian society—his suicide is important to include in this study. That is, Mohamed Bouazizi’s suicide meets two of the criteria; he was self-destructive and hopeless about his personal situation. Under other circumstances it would not be included in this study, but Bouazizi’s act was the catalyst of the Tunisian revolution of 2010-2011. Therefore, unlike Jan Palach (Czechoslovakia) and Alice Herz (the United States), the hypothesis of this paper does not explain Bouazizi’s act—the initial act of self-immolation—but it does explain subsequent acts of self-immolation during the Arab Spring and, specifically, the Tunisian revolution.

In the months following Bouazizi’s self-immolation, the BBC reports that 107 people copied his act. In the article, a man named Hosni is interviewed about his attempted self-immolation, which left him permanently disfigured and physically impaired. Hosni says that he attempted to commit suicide for two reasons: first, out of economic desperation, and second, because of the Tunisian revolution. He says,

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8 Pugliese, 3.
"The whole country seemed to be on fire, so I set myself alight too, but it hasn’t made things any better." While his statement suggests that the Werther Syndrome, or the copycat effect, might have played a role in his actions, it also suggests an act of profession towards the Tunisian people. He implies that things could have become better based on his action. Therefore, it is argued that, while Bouazizi’s action is not explained by the hypothesis, Hosni’s action is. That is, Hosni was a self-destructive individual who felt that change needed to be made in Tunisia and that ultimately he had lost all hope.

A New York Times blog by J. David Goodman collated four cases of self-immolation in Tunisia during the week prior to the article. He suggests that the suicide protestors in Tunisia act in “a way to achieve justice and recapture some measure of dignity.” These include the fatal self-immolation of Ammar Gharsallah, who killed himself in front of the Governate Headquarters in Gafsa on January 5, 2012. He was protesting the government along with many other jobless Tunisians. His death led to a violent demonstration against police officers. Gharsallah fits the conditions of the hypothesis due to his involvement with the social movement against the state. The other cases of self-immolation, as identified by Goodman, offer no useable information. It can be reasonably assumed, however, that other cases of

Self-immolation in Tunisia during the revolution were to reinforce a social movement and not necessarily linked only to the Werther Syndrome.

Self-immolations in Tunisia were widespread. The phenomenon began with Mohamed Bouazizi and quickly developed across the country. Bouazizi's self-immolation does not appear to fit the hypothesis. He was self-destructive and hopeless, but his act does not necessarily fit Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide; rather, it appears to be an impulsive and selfish act. Other acts of self-immolation in Tunisia do, however, appear to fit the model. Bouazizi's suicide sparked a revolution in Tunisia, and numerous protestors copied his self-immolation—not necessarily for glory, as expected with the Werther Syndrome—but to stand in solidarity with a social movement that was accusing the state of being oppressive. In other words, those who committed suicide after Bouazizi did so because it was the proper thing to do. Self-immolations were not contained to Tunisia, however, and the phenomenon was quickly spread to many countries in the Arab World.

Self-Immolations Across the Arab World

Following the unrest in Tunisia, revolutions spread through the Arab World. The factors for these movements have been argued to be “deteriorating economies, the uneven distribution of economic resources, the spread of poverty and unemployment, the repressive violent nature of the Arab regimes and corruption...”12 A Stratfor Analysis of the opposition in Algeria shows that high unemployment, especially among the young; a lack of an effective subsidy program

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to address high oil tax revenue; high taxes and duties; and expensive housing also played roles in creating a hopeless situation.\textsuperscript{13} These factors underline a communal sense of hopelessness throughout the Middle East and North Africa. That is, one condition for suicide protest was systemic throughout much of the Arab World. The catalyst for the revolutions, as noted above, was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi; however, Tunisia did not hold a monopoly on the political “self-application of lethal force.”\textsuperscript{14}

Within a month following Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia at least four protestors committed suicide by fire in Egypt. At least a dozen killed themselves in Algeria. Within a year, news sources cite self-immolations as having spread to Morocco, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Syria, Mauritania, and Bahrain.\textsuperscript{15} Professor Nabil Dajani of the American University of Beirut, as quoted by the New York Times, summed up the hopelessness of their situations. “The governments are indifferent [to the self-immolations]. And they still talk about democracy when there is a hierarchy of needs that should be addressed first.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, despite self-immolations occurring at a high rate, the governments of the Arab World ignored the needs of the people, pushing their hopelessness to new heights.

\textsuperscript{14} Jason Manning, “Suicide as Social Control,” \textit{Sociological Forum} 27, no. 1, (March 2012): 208. Manning writes that this is the “ideal type” of suicide, as opposed to threats, failed attempts, or coerced suicide.
\textsuperscript{15} Most of these self-immolations are absent from the data collected for this project because names and dates were often not provided.
Mohsen Bouterfif's hopeless situation pushed him to commit self-immolation on January 13, 2011. He set fire to himself in front of the town hall of Boukhadra, Algeria. Bouterfif died four days later. According to al Jazeera he was protesting high unemployment and the lack of housing in his town. Here, publicly setting himself on fire while making a statement against the state occupies the other two conditions as identified in the hypothesis. Bouterfif was a self-destructive person who was connected to the society in which he was acting, and he was hopeless. Therefore, he both accused the state while professing towards the people of Boukhadra, as well as the downtrodden of Algeria as a whole.

In mid-January 2011, Yacoub Dahoud set fire to himself in Mauritania. It is unknown if he survived his burns. Prior to his self-immolation, he started a Facebook page called "Stop the corruption and tyranny in Mauritania." On the page he praised Mohamed Bouazizi, vowing that the people of Mauritania will never forget him. He further wrote that "Isn't it the time for the Mauritanian people to choose their freedom?" At first glance Dahoud's suicide or attempted suicide looks like merely a copycat suicide. He was aware of Bouazizi's self-immolation a month earlier and perhaps sought the same level of prestige that Bouazizi had found in death. His additional statements on Facebook, however, reveal a man who was acting for the people of Mauritania. Therefore, Dahoud's action, whether suicide or attempted suicide, meets the conditions of the hypothesis. Dahoud was a self-

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destructive individual who was deeply connected to the Mauritanian society and sensed hopelessness.

On January 18, 2011 Mohammed Farouq Hassan set himself on fire in front of the prime minister's office in Egypt. He survived the suicide attempt. Prior to setting himself on fire, Hassan shouted anti-government slogans, specifically condemning rising prices. Here, like the above victims of self-immolation, Hassan was acting in concert with the widespread protests occurring throughout the Arab World. This, coupled with the fact that Hassan was shouting anti-government slogans and chants about rising prices, means that he was acting according to the interests of the Egyptian people as well as against the state. Therefore, Hassan meets the conditions of the hypothesis. He was a self-destructive person acting for his country, and he had lost hope.

In January 2012 a group of five men publicly self-immolated in Rabat, Morocco. At least one of the protestors died. Mahmoud, twenty-six, survived and was able to offer some insight into their decision. First, according to the BBC, he did it as a warning to the government of Morocco. Second, as a law graduate and member of the Unemployed Movement, Mahmoud feels like the government should give employment opportunities to the educated Moroccans. Here, Mahmoud and his conspirators fit the model. They are self-destructive individuals who, although fighting for a smaller society (the educated Moroccans), are bonded to their society.

Finally, they have lost hope because the government has not helped them find employment.

Analysis

TABLE 1: Self-Immolations during the Arab Spring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Strict Bond?</th>
<th>Hopeless?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 17, 2010</td>
<td>Mohamed Bouazizi</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 13, 2011</td>
<td>Mohsen Bouterfif</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 17, 2011</td>
<td>Yacoub Dahoud</td>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 18, 2011</td>
<td>Mohammed Farouq Hassan</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2012</td>
<td>Mahmoud</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 5, 2012</td>
<td>Ammar Gharsallah</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 above shows all six identifiable cases of self-immolation occurring in the Arab World during the Arab Spring. It shows that five of the six cases of self-
immolation across the Arab World fit the model as developed by this paper. The only case that does not necessarily fit the model is the initial case of self-immolation. Mohamed Bouazizi might have acted selfishly or impulsively in choosing to set his body on fire. The five other identifiable cases of self-immolation, although stemming from Bouazizi's action as explained by the Werther Syndrome, show a phenomenon of self-immolation developing into a social movement or a means to a collective end.

The Werther Syndrome plays a role in encouraging the protestors to commit suicide protest. This should not discount the hypothesis, however; the actors in the Arab World are indeed deeply and strictly bonded to their countries and the Arab World as a whole. It might be argued here that the acts of self-immolation in the Arab World serves as a reminder that pan-Arabism is not dead; it has merely been subjugated to the level of the individuals rather than the state.

While it is suggested that the hypothesis strongly fits the Arab World case study, it must be mentioned that the data collected for this project uncovered zero cases of self-immolation in the Arab World prior to Mohamed Bouazizi. There are three known cases in Israel, but Jewish protestors preformed all of these self-immolations. It might be suggested that religion in the Arab World has a negative correlation with self-immolation. That is, Islam might play a role in dissuading the hopeless from committing suicide. On the other hand, suicide terrorist attacks are not absent from the repertoire of political protest in the Arab World. In other words, it is unknown why self-immolation was nonexistent in the Arab World prior to the Arab Spring. Furthermore, it is unknown why self-immolation became so widespread after the development of the Arab Spring. This is an understudied area
in the phenomenon of self-immolation. Future research might help to better understand why suicide bombings are much more the norm in the Arab World than self-immolation.

Conclusion

Prior to December 2010, high levels of corruption perceptions, weak economies, and rising food prices were a part of the standard operating procedure in the Arab World. These realities constituted a general level of frustration among the lower classes, and in many cases these manifested themselves in feelings of relative hopelessness. In December of that year, contention came to a breaking point when Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in public after being harassed by police. What next transpired were the outbreak of the Arab Spring and widespread cases of self-immolation throughout the Arab World.

This case study identifies six individual cases of self-immolation during the Arab Spring. In addition to these six, it is believed that at least one hundred protestors set fire to themselves in Tunisia in solidarity with the movement and to accuse the state. It is possible that several hundred committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide in similar fashions throughout the Arab World in the following years.

This case study finds that Bouazizi's self-immolation only weakly supports the hypothesis. That is, he was a self-destructive individual who had experienced hopelessness. It is not known if he was committing suicide for altruistic reasons. Instead, it is likely that he committed suicide for impulsive, personal, and selfish
reasons. While Bouazizi's self-immolation does not necessarily fit the model developed by this paper, the five other identifiable cases of self-immolation in the Arab World do.

From January 2011 to January 2012, five suicide protestors are identified by name, date, and location. These five actors are also linked with clear suicide notes, messages, or eyewitness testimony. They show not only hopeless and self-destructive individuals who were strictly bonded to their respective communities, they also show a connection with the Arab World at large. Furthermore, media reports indicate several actors working in concert with some of the suicide protestors. That is, self-immolation developed into a social movement in the Arab World. The victims represented a newfound hope for freedom from corruption, poverty, and economic inequality.

The Werther Syndrome certainly played a role in the spread of self-immolation in the Arab World, but this paper is unable to explain how self-immolation suddenly emerged with such frequency in an area where it had been completely absent prior to December 2010. This case study, therefore, can make no predictions or alternate explanations for self-immolation in the Arab World. This does not mean that this paper's hypothesis is the default explanation; it merely means that future research is necessary to explain what this paper cannot explain. Namely, why is suicide terrorism much more common than self-immolation? This also does not explain the differences between those committing suicide in the West in solidarity with the Czechoslovakian protestors and those in the Arab World who were supporting the revolutionary Arab struggle.
CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY #2: CZECHOSLOVAK SELF-IMMOLATION, 1969

Introduction

On August 20, 1968 forces, troops, and tanks from the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union rolled into Czechoslovakia in reaction to the liberalization through which the Czechoslovak government was going. The citizens, after receiving their first taste of intellectual freedom, subsequently appeared complacent about the Soviet attempts at normalization. Later that month the people categorically renounced a violent resistance against the Soviet occupiers. A small group of dissidents, however, were frustrated that the Czechoslovak people would accept, not only normalization, but also Soviet occupation. The ensuing self-immolations led to a period of great instability and crisis in Czechoslovakia.

The Czechoslovakian case of self-immolation occurred during the Soviet occupation. Three Czechoslovak protestors set fire to themselves to demonstrate against the occupation and the common complacency of the Czechoslovak people. In addition, four others from various European countries copied this act in solidarity with the Czechoslovak “torches.” This section highlights these seven cases and attempts to test the hypothesis. That is, self-immolation occurs when three conditions are met: 1) the individual is self-destructive, 2) the individual feels a strict bond with their society, and 3) the individual feels a sense of hopelessness. This chapter finds that the primary wave of self-immolations—that is, those occurring in Czechoslovakia during the first four months of 1969—meet the criteria
of the hypothesis. All were self-destructive, strictly bonded to their society, and felt hopelessness. The other four acts of self-immolation do not necessarily meet these conditions due to geographic variations and incomplete data regarding their suicides. The Werther Syndrome—the spread of suicide due to its glamorization through media reports—might better explain these four suicides.

Self-Immolations in Czechoslovakia

Following the Soviet normalization of Czechoslovakia’s Prague Spring of 1968, at least three persons self-immolated to protest the Soviet occupation. Loren Coleman and Michael Biggs believe in their respective studies that at least seven people sympathetically self-immolated globally in the ensuing four months.¹ The first occurred on January 16, 1969. Jan Palach publicly set fire to himself in Wenceslas Square, dying days later and leaving behind a suicide note promising more self-immolations if his demands were not met. Indeed, by April 1969 Jan Zajíc and Evžen Plocek, both Czechoslovak nationals, committed suicide protest, in addition to Sándor Bauer from Hungary and Eljahu Rips, a Latvian who attempted to self-immolate in solidarity with the Palach.

Palach’s self-immolation served two purposes. First, it was meant as an accusation against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. Second, Palach, by killing himself, was “professing” towards a complacent society that had accepted the Soviet occupation.² Palach believed that his country should dissent instead of consent. According to the Guardian, “In the note he carried, Palach wrote that he

¹ Coleman, 54. Biggs in Gambetta agrees, 182.
² Kavaliauskas, 107.
wanted 'to wake the people of our country up’ to the conditions of the occupation.³ Here, Palach was not merely acting against the Soviets; he was acting for the people.

In 2003 Jaroslava Moserova, former Czech senator and the medical doctor who cared for Jan Palach after his self-immolation, spoke about her conversations with Palach. She remembered his action as being not in direct response to the Soviet occupation; rather, he was acting to inspire the complacent Czechoslovak people. She says, “It was not so much in opposition to the Soviet occupation, but the demoralization which was setting in, that people were not only giving up, but giving in. And he wanted to stop that demoralization.”⁴ Moserova speaks not only about Palach’s message; she also speaks about Palach’s bond with the Czechoslovak society.

Palach’s actions support Émile Durkheim’s model of altruistic suicide—the first and second points of the hypothesis (a self-destructive person who is bonded to their society). That is, because the Czechoslovak people accepted the conditions under which they were living—conditions that contradicted Palach’s beliefs—he felt that it was his duty to act in such an irrational manner. Acting in any other manner would be a disservice to the people for which Palach wielded his dissent.

His actions also support the third point of the hypothesis: there is a sense of hopelessness. As Palach watched his country give up the resistance to the Soviet

occupation, he felt that there was nothing he could rationally do to get the people's attention.

The second suicide protest happened on February 25, 1969 when Jan Zajíc entered a government building on Wenceslas Square in Prague. He self-immolated, dying immediately. Tomas Kavaliauskas suggests that the timing of Zajíc's suicide might have been to communicate the message that self-immolation is designed. The second suicide protest happened on February 25, 1969 when Jan Zajíc entered a government building on Wenceslas Square in Prague. He self-immolated, dying immediately. Tomas Kavaliauskas suggests that the timing of Zajíc's suicide might have been to communicate the message that self-immolation is designed.5

Charles University, where Palach studied, runs a website titled “Jan Palach: Charles University Multimedia Project.” The project claims that Zajíc publicly made his intentions known, and that no one tried to stop him.6 Calling himself “torch number 2,” Zajíc left behind a suicide note that recalled what Palach had done a month earlier. He also adds, “I am not doing it to be mourned, to become famous or because I am crazy. I decided to immolate myself so that you will really pull yourselves together and will not let yourselves be oppressed by several dictators!”7 In other words, Zajíc was not merely committing suicide. He was trying to convey a message—that the occupation should be resisted—to the people of Czechoslovakia.

Zajíc committed suicide protest for the same reasons that Palach self-immolated. Here, Zajíc fits the criteria of the hypothesis: a self-destructive individual who expresses love for the society in which he lives and feels hopeless about the society's situation. His suicide uncovers, however, an interesting question, as raised by Kavaliauskas's argument: is self-immolation systemic if these conditions are met?

5 Kavaliauskas, 104. He writes that Zajíc chose the time to self-immolate “as if to demonstrate that selfimmolation (sic) is not a coincidence.”
7 Charles University, “Jan Zajíc.”
This project does not intend to answer this question, but it will be addressed in the analysis section.

The third Czechoslovak national to self-immolate is Evžen Plocek. Plocek publicly set fire to himself in Jihlava on the main square on April 4, 1969. He died five days later. Before he committed suicide, he left behind two letters. One reads, "To tell the truth is revolutionary." The other reads, "I am for the human face, I hate heartlessness – Evžen." Although Plocek is celebrated and remembered in Prague, he is not granted the same status as Palach and Zajíc. While this might be the case, his suicide, like Palach’s and Zajíc’s, appears to fit the three criteria of the hypothesis.

A fourth self-immolation occurred in Czechoslovakia; however, a lack of information makes this a questionable case. On January 20, recently divorced Josef Hlavatý self-immolated near the Czechoslovak state bank. While some evidence suggests that he was involved with politics, it is also believed that Hlavatý was deeply depressed about his personal situation. Therefore, he is not used in this study. While the three other Czechoslovak victims of self-immolation support the argument of this paper, the self-immolations of non-Czechoslovak people might undermine the hypothesis.

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9 Kavaliauskas, 105, Table 6.1.
11 On the other hand, Coleman mentions Hlavatý without differentiating him from a suicide protestor. He does not appear to include him in the data, 54.
Self-Immolations Elsewhere

On April 13, 1969 mathematics student Elijahu Rips attempted to self-immolate in Riga, Latvia. According to his suicide note, he acted in solidarity with the Czechoslovak resistance to the Soviet occupation. After the failed suicide attempt, Rips said that his purpose was different from Palach's. He was not trying to rouse action in Czechoslovakia. According to Rips, "No, it was my personal protest and I did not want to provoke anything. My act originates in pure bitterness. I stopped to believe that Communism can collapse, even though it finally did." In other words, he was accusing the Soviet Union and Communism without—contrary to Palach—"professing" towards the Czechoslovak people.

While Rips ultimate goal was different from Palach's, at least two of the three conditions are met. First, Rips acted in a self-destructive way. Second, by stating that he was bitter and that he did not believe that Communism would fall, he was expressing his hopelessness about the situation in Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, there is only a weak bond to the society. Rips was born in Latvia and was acting in Latvia.

At the time of Rips' attempted self-immolation, Latvia was a republic of the Soviet Union. It might be argued here that Rips felt a connection to the people of Czechoslovakia who were facing Soviet occupation. Another argument might be that Rips was expressing a belief against Communism, a belief socially shared with those in the resistance. A third argument might be that he viewed himself as part of the human race first and a Latvian second. Despite any perceived connection to Palach,

the fact was that he was not an actual member of the Czechoslovak people under Soviet occupation. This fact undermines the condition of being “strictly bonded to society.” The case can be made that there was some connection, but it was not strict.

The same can be said for the three other non-Czechoslovak people whom Coleman and Biggs identified as showing sympathy by self-immolating, including Hungarian Sándor Bauer, the only other person identified in the data collected for this project. Bauer is said to have self-immolated in support of “a Czech brother who did the same”; however, he carried with him two Hungarian flags. This casts doubt over the strength of his bond with Czechoslovakia.

Biggs identifies protestors in Hungary, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. Coleman is more precise regarding Great Britain, identifying Scotland. These three protestors meet at least one of the criteria: they were self-destructive. Bauer stated in his suicide letter his solidarity with the Czechoslovak resistance. Therefore, like Rips, he might meet all three. However, without suicide letters from the others, it is not known to what extent the protestors sensed hopelessness or what their bond to the society was.

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13 Romm, Combs, and Klein, 991.
15 Biggs in Gambetta, 182.
16 Coleman, 54.
17 Charles University, “Sándor Bauer.”
<table>
<thead>
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<td>Soviet Union</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 above combines the data collected for this project and the data collected by Coleman and Biggs. The column for self-destructive behavior is omitted because it is generally assumed that people who commit or attempt to commit suicide are self-destructive. The table identifies all known information based on the data collected. It reveals that three people meet the three conditions. Jan Palach, Jan Zajíc, and Evžen Plocek were all self-destructive, strictly bonded to the Czechoslovak society, and sensed hopelessness about the Soviet occupation and the people's attitude towards the occupation. It also reveals that the four other victims of self-immolation do not necessarily meet all three of these conditions. It is unknown to what extent Sándor Bauer or Elijahua Rips were strictly bonded with the Czechoslovak cause. Furthermore, the two other victims are nameless, and nothing is known about their actions. Therefore, it is argued that the primary Czechoslovak
wave of self-immolations supports the hypothesis. The other four might better fall under the Werther Syndrome.

The Werther Syndrome: An Alternate Explanation

The Werther Syndrome refers to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1774 writing, The Sorrows of Young Werther (German: Die Leiden des jungen Werthers). In Goethe’s novella Werther commits suicide once he realizes that the object of his affection will not leave her fiancé to be with him. The book was highly influential. While it inspired men to copy Werther’s fashions, it also “led to several hundred copycat suicides among young men.”18 The Werther Syndrome might also be called copycat suicide or suicide contagion. That is, the mass communication and publication of suicide through media might inspire individuals to commit suicide.19 Biggs writes that “an individual is more likely to choose this sacrifice when someone else has done so; self-immolation is subject to positive feedback.”20 The media is responsible for this “positive feedback” because the drama associated with self-immolations is particularly newsworthy.21 Without media reports, information about Palach’s self-immolation might not have traveled to Hungary, Latvia, Scotland, and the Soviet Union.

The Werther Syndrome might also be called the Yukiko Effect. In 1986 eighteen-year-old Japanese singer and actress, Yukiko Okada, committed suicide by 

18 Greenberg and Strous, 467.
20 Biggs in Gambetta, 188.
21 Coleman, 48.
jumping from the seventh story of a building. The media reported her suicide due to her celebrity status. Within two weeks twenty-eight teenagers copied her suicide.\textsuperscript{22} Regardless of what name is used for the effect, this case illustrates another example of how the media helps to glamorize suicide and spread suicide as a social phenomenon.

It cannot be argued that the media did not play a role in communicating Palach's suicide to Zajíc and Plocek. The copycat effect surely played some role in their decisions to end their lives. Indeed, Biggs would argue that Palach was also at least somewhat inspired by the South Vietnamese monk, Thich Quang Duc, who self-immolated six years earlier;\textsuperscript{23} however, as was addressed above, Zajíc and Plocek still meet the conditions of the hypothesis. The copycat effect here is used mainly to explain the limits of this research as applied to the four other individuals who committed suicide in response to Palach. It might be argued that the Werther Syndrome is a necessary condition when at least one of the hypothesis' conditions are not met and self-immolation still occurs.

Conclusion

At least seven individuals set fire to themselves to protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia during the first four months of 1969. Among these were three Czechoslovak nationals and four non-Czechoslovakians. These self-immolations served two purposes. First, they were meant to accuse the Soviets—\textsuperscript{22} Wire Reports, "TEEN-AGE DEATH WAVE JOLTS JAPAN 28 SUICIDES FOLLOW YOUNG SINGER'S DEATH," The Orlando Sentinel, April 23, 1986, A1.  
\textsuperscript{23} Biggs, 4. He writes, "Almost all instances of suicide protest after 1963 constitute a single lineage [back to Thich Quang Duc]."
that the occupation would not be tolerated. Second, at least three were meant to
profess towards the Czechoslovak people that consent was not an option. The
second purpose supports Émile Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide. That is, it
shows a deep attachment to the society by the actors that prompted them to commit suicide.

The central hypothesis is that in order for self-immolation to occur, there
needs to be a self-destructive individual who is strictly bonded to their society.
While this is necessary to commit altruistic suicide, it is not sufficient. The third
factor is that the individual senses hopelessness. In this case study, this hypothesis
is tested against the seven individuals who self-immolated during the Soviet
occupation of Czechoslovakia.

The hypothesis explains the primary wave of self-immolations. The primary
wave consists of those three who set fire to themselves in Czechoslovakia: Jan
Palach, Jan Zajíc, and Evžen Plocek. In all three cases of self-immolation in
Czechoslovakia, this paper argues that the individuals were self-destructive, deeply
bonded to their society, and felt that the conditions under which they were living
were hopeless. In the case of Jan Palach, he explicitly tried to force the hand of the
people who had given in to the Soviet occupation.

The non-Czechoslovak victims of self-immolation meet at least two of the
three conditions in the hypothesis; they were self-destructive and felt hopeless. On
the other hand, it cannot be assumed that they were strictly bonded to the
Czechoslovak society. These self-immolations occurred in Hungary, Latvia, Scotland,
and the Soviet Union. In some of the cases there is little or nothing known about the
individuals. Until such a time that this data is revealed, the hypothesis cannot explain these actions. Therefore, the hypothesis only explains the primary wave of self-immolations in Czechoslovakia.

Émile Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide might not be the only factor explaining why people choose to set themselves on fire to make political statements. The weakness of the hypothesis—that is, its inability to adequately explain the four non-Czechoslovak victims—might be explained with the Werther Syndrome, or the copycat effect. As the stories about Jan Palach were published in newspaper articles and communicated to mass audiences worldwide, the glamorization of self-sacrifice was also spread to the same audience. Even individuals who are not necessarily bonded to the Czechoslovak society might see Palach's actions and desire to emulate them. The actors in Hungary, Latvia, Scotland, and the Soviet Union might have never heard about Palach if not for the invention of mass communication that reaches a wide audience.
CHAPTER 5


Introduction

Beginning during the 1960s, the United States was involved in a military conflict in Indochina. In the West the conflict was referred to as the Vietnam War, a war the United States supported to prevent the spread of Communism during the Cold War. The American support for the war was divided, with a large segment publicly opposing it. Opposition to the war was magnified by such events as the draft; alleged military abuses, such as the My Lai Massacre in which upwards of 400 South Vietnamese civilians were killed by US troops; and a student-led movement that reinforced itself through its own culture (the hippie movement). For others, the war was a painful reminder of the Second World War just two decades earlier, particularly the use of atomic bombs in Japan.¹

The opposition to the Vietnam War was mainly a non-violent movement. Baby Boomers burned their draft cards; staged public demonstrations accusing the American leaders, calling for an end to the war; and some declared themselves to be conscientious objectors, or those who officially oppose war for religious or ethical reasons. Other protestors resorted to violent means of opposition to the war, such

¹ Alice Herz, (edited by Shingo Shibata), *Phoenix: Letters and Documents of Alice Herz: The Thought and Practice of a Modern-day Martyr (Philosophical Currents)* (B.R. Gruner Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1976), 137. Herz, a Jewish survivor of Nazi Germany, believed that the “brink of war” would escalate to the use of nuclear weapons.
as the destruction of Reserve Officer’s Training Corps buildings. Acts of violence by protestors were relatively rare, appearing on only ten percent of college campuses. A very small minority of the protestors staged public spectacles where they set themselves on fire to protest the war. These self-immolations, while shocking, did not seem to garner the same kind of attention that Buddhist monks who did the same were getting in South Vietnam. To be sure, the self-immolations in South Vietnam led to a radical regime change, while those in the United States were relatively ignored.

Cases of self-immolation entered the public discussion in the early 1960s, when it developed as a social phenomenon in South Vietnam and spread to Korea and other East Asian states. Following the United States’ incursion into North Vietnam, Operation Rolling Thunder, in 1965 the phenomenon was discovered in the US. The data for this project identifies five persons who self-immolated in the US from 1965 to 1970. Michael Biggs was able to identify twelve. The New York Times identifies fifteen. Sallie B. King only identifies eight; however, the data collected by this project is merged with her data to make its argument because she provides names of the victims. The victims ranged in age from twenty-two to eighty-two and

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4 Biggs, 41, Figure 1: Suicide Protest, 1919-1970.
were both male and female. Most were Caucasian and one was of Asian descent. Each case of suicide protest was revealed to be explicitly in protest against the United States' involvement with the Vietnam War.

The hypothesis tested here is that the conditions under which self-immolations occur is a combination of Émile Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide and a sense of hopelessness. That is, self-immolations occur when a self-destructive individual is deeply bonded to his or her society and experiences a sense of hopelessness regarding the society's given circumstances.

This case study reveals that the data only weakly supports the hypothesis. Problems with the data include missing or contradictory information. In five of the eight identified cases, no suicide note or newspaper article was recovered. In the cases of two of the victims, their actions resemble impulsivity more than they do hopeless acts. Only one case fits the model developed by this project. The weakness of the data to support the hypothesis might be explained by other phenomena, such as the Werther Syndrome (or copycat suicide) or religious or other cultural or social phenomena. While there are problems correlating the hypothesis with the examples of self-immolation in the United States during the Vietnam War, the model is still a useful tool.

Alice Herz: “the illuminating death of a Buddhist”

On March 16, 1965 an eighty-two-year-old woman set herself ablaze on a Detroit street, marking the first-known instance of self-immolation being used as a form of protest in the West. Alice Herz, a widow and pacifist, initially survived the
self-immolation. On her way to the hospital, she was able to provide some insight into her actions. Speaking to the first responders, she said, “I did it to protest the arms race all over the world. I wanted to burn myself like the monks in Vietnam did.” Her suicide note stated that she wanted to protest, “the use of his office by our President, L.B.J., in trying to wipe out small nations.” She went on to write that, “I wanted to call attention to this problem by choosing the illuminating death of a Buddhist.”

Herz’s suicide letter was widely disseminated; however, attaining a copy in the 1960s would prove problematic for one reporter due to bureaucratic processes. The letter, which was highly critical of and addressed to the Johnson Administration, alludes to the buildup of American soldiers in Vietnam and the previous month’s incursion into North Vietnam, Operation Rolling Thunder. Her suicide note, thus, makes three points: First, she is against nuclear proliferation. Second, she accuses the Johnson Administration of attempting to wage an unjust war in its battle against Communism. Third, she explicitly compares her suicide to that of Thich Quang Duc and the other Buddhist monks who self-immolated two years earlier.

Herz’s suicide, however, paled into comparison to that of Thich Quang Duc. His suicide received international attention and directly led to the coup against

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8 Hayes B. Jacobs, “The Martyrdom of Alice Herz,” in Herz. Jacobs writes that political and bureaucratic obstacles prevented him from attaining a copy until Alice’s daughter provided him one, 154.
9 Herz, 160-161.
South Vietnamese President Diem, which ended in the president's assassination.\textsuperscript{10} Alice Herz, on the other hand, was highly dismissed. Some went so far as to call her crazy.\textsuperscript{11} Herz's accusations largely fell on deaf ears, especially within the Johnson Administration. Biggs argues that this might be due to the fact that Herz killed herself "on a Detroit street corner, far from any place of national significance."\textsuperscript{12}

This paper argues that Alice Herz's suicide can be explained by the hypothesis: self-immolation occurs when a self-destructive individual who is deeply bonded to their society interprets a situation as hopeless. To meet the first point, Herz, by committing suicide, expresses her self-destructive personality. Herz's suicide also mimics that of Jan Palach's, who would self-immolate four years after Herz. She was not merely accusing the government; she was professing towards the American people. She writes:

\textbf{TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE:} With the help of THE COLOSSAL LIE your President Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, J. F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, have deceived and misguided you. Through hatred and fear, deliberately whipped up during the last twenty years, you have allowed your lawmakers in Congress to appropriate endless billions of dollars for an Arsenal of Destruction – unlimited. AWAKE AND TAKE ACTION! BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. Yours is the responsibility to decide if 56his world [sic] shall be a good place to live for all human beings, in dignity and peace, or if it should blow itself up to oblivion.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Jacobs in Herz, 152.
\textsuperscript{12} Biggs in Gambetta, 322 (footnote 18).
\textsuperscript{13} Herz (Quoted by Jacobs), 160-161.
Like Jan Palach, Herz expresses her connection to the American people by calling them to action. This call to action in turn reveals that Herz was *strictly* bonded to the United States community.

Japanese professor Shingo Shibata is the editor of a collection of correspondence Herz shared with him, in addition to other writings about Herz, *Phoenix: Letters and Documents of Alice Herz* (1976). Shibata and Herz shared many letters over a period of several years. The book specifically covers 1952 to 1964. Her letters to the professor are revealing about her growing frustrations about the course that the United States' government had taken. For example, on May 2, 1958 Herz writes to Shibata:

> I find no words to express my abhorrence and despair of the rulers who are without responsibility and human feeling and deaf to the outcry of humanity. The citizens of this country (I am none) are aroused and more active than ever—but powerless. This so-called democracy is a sham ... The lack of power of the people of this country is due to their complacency with which a great number allowed themselves to be propagandized and invited to senseless and unmotivated fear and hatred. They did not nip the evil *in the bud*. That is their guilt. 14

This is one of many letters she wrote to Shibata to express her frustration with the US government and the growing complacency of the American people. It is argued here that these letters to Dr. Shibata reveal the slow loss of hope over the course of a decade. On the other hand, on December 28, 1964, less than three months before her death, Herz writes in her final letter revealed by Shibata: “But yet, I don’t lose

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14 Herz (quoted by Shibata), 113.
hope that man's common sense and humanitarianism will overcome some day this depravation."\textsuperscript{15} This quote does not diminish the argument that Herz was hopeless; rather, it merely suggests that by December 1964, Herz did not yet feel that she had exhausted all other options.

Therefore, it is argued here that Alice Herz's action fits Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide and ultimately the hypothesis of this paper: Herz was a self-destructive person who felt strong ties to her society, and that she ultimately gave up hope, finding self-immolation as the only rational choice she could make. Finally, although, as noted above, Herz's self-immolation was largely discounted and—perhaps—mocked by the American people and its government, another self-immolation of a young Quaker later that year might be regarded as marginally more effective.

\textbf{Norman Morrison: a bizarre event at the Pentagon}

On November 2, 1965, thirty-one-year-old Norman Morrison and his infant daughter traveled from his home in Baltimore to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Passing his daughter off to a stranger, Morrison positioned himself outside of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's office and set his body on fire. He died the same day. Morrison's death was widely reported at the time, particularly because he killed himself at the Pentagon.

\textsuperscript{15} Herz (quoted by Shibata), 138.
Norman Morrison was a married Quaker and peace activist, who, like Alice Herz, committed suicide to protest against the Vietnam War. According to Morrison's wife:

Norman Morrison has given his life today to express his concern over the great loss of life and human suffering caused by the war in Vietnam. He was protesting our Government's deep military involvement in this war. He felt that all citizens must speak their true convictions about our country's actions.¹⁶

Robert McNamara was already struggling with the moral implications of the war in Vietnam when Morrison committed suicide outside his office. When the self-immolation occurred, McNamara further struggled to support the war, writing years later, "It was an outcry against the killing that was destroying the lives of so many Vietnamese and American youth ... I believed I understood and shared some of [Morrison's] thoughts."¹⁷ McNamara's quote reveals something telling: Morrison's act, contrary to that of Alice Herz, managed to affect those in the upper echelons of the state, even if it was essentially useless.

McNamara's quote and the quote taken from Morrison's wife show a narrative that mirrors Herz's narrative: He was specifically accusing the US government for its involvement in Vietnam, and he was professing to the American

people to show their discontent with the war. Here, Morrison’s act can be explained with the hypothesis: He was a self-destructive person who loved his society and felt hopeless about the situation with Vietnam.

Morrison meets the first condition by committing suicide. The second criterion, that he be strictly bonded to his society, is met by analyzing the quotes by McNamara and Morrison’s wife above. His wife’s quote reveals that Morrison was attempting to rile up the American people. McNamara’s quote shows that Morrison felt deeply about both the Vietnamese and American victims of the war. Both of these revelations support the condition of being strictly bonded with his society.

The condition of hopelessness is a little tricky. Sallie B. King quotes Morrison’s suicide letter in her article, “They Who Burned Themselves for Peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators during the Vietnam War.” Morrison writes, “For weeks even months I have been praying only that I be shown what I must do. This morning with no warning I was shown.... Know that I love thee but must act....”18 Morrison’s quote here is interesting. While it might convey a sense of hopelessness about the US involvement in Vietnam, it also shows an impulsive act. He chose to commit suicide on the same day that the idea occurred to him. In other words, Morrison might not have been as hopeless as Alice Herz or Jan Palach.

Thus, it is argued that Norman Morrison’s suicide fits the first two conditions of the hypothesis: he was a self-destructive individual who was deeply connected to the American people. The third condition—that he feels hopelessness—is weakly supported. It cannot definitely be argued that he was strictly hopeless about the

situation; rather it might instead be argued that he was merely impulsive and gave into his self-destructive personality without adequately exploring other options, such as violent or non-violent forms of protest.

Roger Allen LaPorte: a protest against "war, all war"

Days after Morrison self-immolated outside the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., Roger Allen LaPorte, a twenty-two-year-old Catholic Worker and student of divinity, burned his draft card to protest against the war in Vietnam. A few days after that, on November 9, 1965, LaPorte traveled to the United Nations building and set himself on fire in front of it. He did not die immediately, allowing him to profess two things: First, LaPorte self-immolated to protest against "war, all war," and second, he wanted to live. LaPorte died the next day from burns to ninety-five percent of his body.

According to The New York Times article about LaPorte, published on November 11, 1965, he had been involved with the Catholic Workers Movement for two years. The movement is described as host to people of various backgrounds who share a similar religious identity. It was only in the last month of his life, however, that he "seem[ed] to make a commitment to the movement." Indeed, a non-member friend argues that LaPorte was only religious; he was not, until recently, radical in his religious beliefs or activism. Very little is known about LaPorte outside of the information provided above.

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19 Corry, 4.
20 Corry, 4.
His suicide is differentiated from Herz's and Morrison's because he left behind no suicide note. Instead it is only known that he self-immolated to protest against “war, all war.” This means that using the hypothesis to explain his actions is tricky. While he unquestionably fits the first condition—he was self-destructive—he did not profess for the action of the American people. He merely accused the United States government. Furthermore, like Morrison, LaPorte experienced a rapid radicalization and might have been acting impulsively. His statement that he wanted to survive further supports this possible impulsivity.

Therefore, this paper argues that the hypothesis is not adequate to explain Roger Allen LaPorte's self-immolation. Although LaPorte was self-destructive, without more information it is not possible to argue that he was strictly bonded to his society or that he felt hopeless about the American involvement in the Vietnam War. Despite the fact that little is known about LaPorte, he still appears to be one of the most celebrated American victims of self-immolation, quite possibly due to his choice to commit suicide in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

Five more cases and analysis

The three cases of self-immolation in the US during the Vietnam War are not the only three cases identified for this paper. The table below highlights an additional five cases. It must also be again stated that these eight are not representative of all cases of self-immolation in the US from 1965 to 1970.
TABLE 3: US Self-Immolations during the Vietnam War

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<td>Erik Thoen</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to Herz, Morrison, and LaPorte, the above table reveals five additional self-immolations: Florence Beaumont, George Winne, Jr., Hiroko Hayasak, Ronald Braze, and Erik Thoen. There exists very little information on these last five victims. All that is known is that all five self-immolated to protest against the war in Vietnam. Without access to suicide notes or newspaper articles about their deaths, the hypothesis cannot be tested against them.

Because this project lacks the requisite information for most of the protestors, and because the hypothesis appears to only weakly explain the primary three protestors, the Werther Syndrome is again explored. Essentially, the Werther Syndrome is an effect of copycat suicides caused by the mass dissemination of

\[21\] King, 128.
information about sensational suicides. In this case, the suicides of Alice Herz, Norman Morrison and Roger LaPorte serve as a primary wave of suicide protest. The subsequent five self-immolations serve as the secondary wave.

The Werther Syndrome might explain the attempted suicide of Celene Jankowski, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Indiana who attempted to self-immolate on the same day as LaPorte. While she expressed some sorrow over the reports of death coming out of Vietnam, she was also mourning the death of her three-year-old child the month prior. It is believed that the primary cause of her attempted suicide was the death of her child. Therefore, Jankowski's attempted suicide is not part of this project's data, but it is useful to help understand how reports of self-immolation in the United States and South Vietnam during the 1960s might have inspired her to such an act.

The secondary wave of self-immolations in the United States from 1967 to 1970 at this time can only be attributed to the Werther Syndrome. That is, the greatly visible self-immolations of Thich Quang Duc in South Vietnam, Norman Morrison, and Roger LaPorte were sensational enough to warrant high levels of media attention. This media attention, thus, "presented potential suicide victims with a collective method and model for behavior." Indeed, as noted by Biggs, even Alice Herz's self-immolation was inspired by Thich Quang Duc's suicide. That is, the fiery image of the burning monk that was communicated across the globe served to make self-immolation a socially acceptable form of protest. Alice Herz explicitly

22 Coleman, 52.
23 Coleman, 53.
24 Biggs, 4.
recalled the monks of Vietnam in her decision to end her life. Those who followed Herz in the United States must have known about Quang Duc. Some must have known about Herz, Morrison, or LaPorte. It is unlikely that self-immolation was simultaneously and independently invented.

While the hypothesis might not be adequate to explain the self-immolation phenomenon in the US during the Vietnam War, and while the Werther Syndrome might only explain why self-immolation was chosen, a closer look at the primary wave of self-immolations reveals an interesting recurring theme. That is, Alice Herz, Norman Morrison, and Roger LaPorte were all deeply religious. While this project does not intend to correlate religiosity with suicide protest, it is an interesting question that is explored to offer some insight into the weakness of the hypothesis.

Alice Herz, for example, in her correspondence with Professor Shingo Shibata, referred to her experiences as a Jew escaping Nazi Germany. In subsequent writings, she equated the peace movement with the Biblical story of David and Goliath:

The peace workers of the whole world are in a very similar position. Before them stands with all his might and destructive power the Brute of War, the God Mars and threatens to crush them. We have to be as fearless as little David was in sight of the Giant Goliath who thundered his menaces against him.25

Norman Morrison, too, was religious. A devout Quaker, he specifically referred to prayer in helping him reach the decision to self-immolate. Finally, LaPorte, a

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Catholic, referred to his religion in his decision: he reportedly said, “I did this as a religious action” in the ambulance. In other words, there is a religious theme in some self-immolations in the United States, if not a religious correlation. This theme is in contrast to the Czechoslovakian case, which had little evidence of religious motivations.

This religious theme was also picked up in self-immolations after the Vietnam War. On November 3, 2006 Malachi Ritscher, a musician and anti-war activist, self-immolated in Chicago to protest against the US war in Iraq. On his personal website, Savage Sound, Ritscher writes his suicide note. In it he writes, “I too love God and Country,” “Who would Jesus bomb?” and “Without fear I go now to God – your future is what you will choose today.” His suicide note explicitly mentions his belief in the Christian god several times.

This religious theme uncovers interesting questions. First, is belief in god correlated with the decision to self-immolate? Michael Biggs notes that the vast majority of self-immolations from 1963 to 2002 were “most frequent in countries with Buddhist or Hindu religious traditions...” Additionally, he points to belief in a supernatural being as a motivational factor in the decision to self-immolate. He writes, “Self immolation is an exchange: in return for the sacrifice, a supernatural agency will intervene on behalf of the cause.” While this might indeed be a motivation for believers in the Eastern gods, it cannot definitively be stated that it

26 Coleman, 52.
28 Biggs in Gambetta, 175.
29 Biggs in Gambetta, 197.
serves as a motivation for believers in the god of Abraham; the Abrahamic god promises no eternal reward for suicide, but rather eternal suffering. The question, however, is important. Unfortunately, it can never be answered because most who choose this kind of protest are not alive to provide answers.

Second, religion is a cultural phenomenon. Therefore, are there other cultural and identity-based themes in the United States that can account for self-immolation without explicit altruism? For example, Malachi Ritscher played bass guitar in a punk band. Could there be a correlation between radical forms of activism and the punk rock subculture? This project does not intend to answer this question either.

Conclusion

Political self-immolations in the United States were few during the Vietnam War years, but they were not absent from the environment of contention. This project identifies five cases of suicide protest in the US from 1965 to 1970, in addition to three others as identified by King. The hypothesis—that self-immolation fits Émile Durkheim’s model of altruistic suicide and occurs when the individual experiences a hopeless situation—can only explain the first instance of suicide protest in the US. Alice Herz’s 1965 self-immolation is the only case that strongly fits this model. Norman Morrison’s self-immolation the same year weakly fits the model. The other six self-immolations protesting the Vietnam War might fit the model, but there is insufficient evidence to test the strength of the correlation. In the cases of Morrison and LaPorte, their decisions to commit suicide appear more like impulsive acts than acts out of hopelessness.
The weakness of the hypothesis as applied to the United States during the Vietnam War might be—as it is in the Czechoslovakia case—explained by the Werther Syndrome, or copycat suicide. Altruistic suicide committed as a public spectacle creates sensational news stories that are, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, disseminated globally. In the case of Thich Quang Duc in Vietnam, his suicide captured headlines accompanied by a powerful photograph of the burning monk. These images forced people to live vicariously through them and, according to Biggs, inspired every subsequent case of self-immolation through the present. Quang Duc’s public self-immolation more than likely inspired Alice Herz and the other Americans who followed suit. Here, the Werther Syndrome might fill in the gaps exposed during this project.

The case of self-immolation in the US is interesting because, unlike those that occurred in Czechoslovakia in 1969, there appears to be a repeating religious theme. That is, the primary wave of suicide protests shows strong evidence of deep religious conviction. It is difficult, however, to explain because, unlike the Buddhist monks who worshipped benign Eastern gods, Herz, Morrison, and LaPorte worshipped the god of Abraham, who punishes people who commit suicide with eternal suffering. Therefore, although there appears to be a recurring religious theme in the United States, the theme appears to contradict the teachings of those religions. Therefore, if religion does play a role in people’s decisions to commit suicide protest in the US, further research is needed to explain why the protestors violate the teachings of their religion. This insight might further help fill in the gaps exposed by this project.
Therefore, this project argues that even though the hypothesis is weak as applied to this case, it is still a useful tool to explain the conditions under which self-immolation might occur. Although there are possibly other variables that explain suicide protest in the United States, such as the Werther Effect and religious or cultural phenomena, the model developed in this paper explains some of the cases of self-immolation.
CHAPTER 6
ANALYSIS

Introduction

These three case studies are interesting, yet meaningless without understanding what they mean in the overall sociopolitical context. The fact that people burn themselves to death to affect change is a given. The fact that it happens in clusters is also something that is not argued against. Why people do it is an interesting point, but only if one can make generalizations.

This chapter is divided into five sections that examine other questions identified in this paper. First, does the hypothesis adequately explain what is observed? That is, do the criteria identified explain when one should expect to see self-immolation occur? Second, if the evidence supports the hypothesis, can one use the hypothesis to explain subsequent acts? In other words, is there a correlation between self-immolation and political instability and change? Third, what is the relationship between self-immolation and suicide terrorism? Both acts seek the same thing, but are they really two tools in the same toolbox? Fourth, what is the relationship between self-immolation and other forms of self-destructive forms of protest? One should not assume that self-destructive individuals must choose between self-immolation and suicide terrorism in order to convey their messages. Fifth, because self-immolations occur in clusters, and because 2012 represents the deadliest year on record for suicide protest, is it believed that self-immolation will continue to rise as a tool to voice contention?
This chapter finds that the hypothesis is relatively successful at explaining the conditions under which self-immolation occurs. That is, where the data is sufficient, one observes self-destructive individuals who are deeply bonded to their societies and who experience hopelessness. Second, the correlation between self-immolation and successful change is weak. One should not expect to see radical revolutions or even reform following a cluster of suicide protests. This might be due to effective institutions within governments. Third, self-immolations and suicide terrorism occur for the same reasons. How and why protestors choose one over the other is currently not explainable. Geographic variations accounting for cultural differences might explain why self-immolation is relatively widespread in Eastern Asia while suicide terrorism occurs more frequently in the Middle East. Fourth, there are many similarities between self-immolation and other forms of suicide protest, particularly the hunger strike; however, the goals of both differ greatly. The goal of the self-immolator is to die and offer this death as a tool to spark change. The goal of the hunger striker is to survive and affect change. Finally, this chapter finds that while self-immolations are occurring at higher rates than in previous years, one should not expect to see self-immolation continue at these rates. Diminishing gains and increased existential security is expected to offer less incentive to commit suicide protest and offer the actor different outlets to voice their contention and affect change.
Overall Effectiveness of the Hypothesis

This project examines the conditions under which suicide protest, or self-immolation, occurs. It tests the hypothesis that self-immolation occurs when three conditions are met. First, there must be a self-destructive individual. Second, this individual must be deeply bonded to their society. Third, the individual must have experienced hopelessness regarding a situation that affects the society. The project tests this hypothesis against three case studies: 1) the Arab Spring in Tunisia and the Arab World, 2) the events following the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, and 3) the anti-war movement in the United States during the Vietnam War.

In all three cases this project finds that the hypothesis works, if only in a weak capacity. Each case study found two waves of self-immolations: the primary wave and the secondary wave. In the case of the Arab Spring, the primary wave, consisting merely of one protestors, weakly supports the hypothesis. The reason for this is a lack of information. Because Mohamed Bouazizi died following his act and without explicitly stating his purpose, it cannot be known whether he was acting in concert with the needs of the Tunisian people or if he was acting according to his own needs. Despite this, on the other hand, the secondary wave of self-immolations, consisting of five identified protestors and perhaps several hundred unidentified protestors, appears to strongly fit the hypothesis. In this case the Werther Effect worked to complement the argument. That is, after Bouazizi's self-immolation the idea of burning oneself to death to further a cause entered the social narrative in the Arab World, where it had never before resided. Subsequently, a small group of people across the Arab World who were deeply bonded to their society found a way...
to express their hopelessness in a manner that might provide hope to those for which they were acting. It can positively be stated that self-immolation in the Arab World occurred after meeting the three conditions suggested by the hypothesis.

Next this project tests the self-immolations that occurred in Czechoslovakia in 1969 following the Prague Spring. Again two waves of self-immolations were noted. The primary wave consisted of three protestors in Czechoslovakia, sparked by Jan Palach. This paper finds that the primary wave supports the hypothesis. That is, the Czechoslovak actors went beyond protesting; they called for action by the Czechoslovak people living under Soviet occupation. Therefore, they were explicitly acting for the needs of the people. The secondary wave of self-immolations, on the other hand, occurred outside of Czechoslovakia. Because they had little to no bond with the Czechoslovak society, it cannot be argued that their actions fit the model proposed by this paper. Here, the Werther Effect might explain why self-immolations occurred outside of Czechoslovakia.

Finally, this project tests the hypothesis against the self-immolations occurring in the United States during the Vietnam War. The primary wave consists of three protestors during 1965. This paper finds that two of the victims were strictly bonded to their society; however, one of the victims might have acted on impulse rather than out of hopelessness. The third victim during the primary wave does not necessarily fit the model. The evidence suggests that he was newly indoctrinated into the anti-war protest movement and hoped to survive his self-immolation. Because he wanted to survive, he might have been acting on impulse instead of hopelessness. The secondary wave of self-immolations contains two
protestors identified by date of action and three more protestors with uncertain motives. The secondary wave reveals a major obstacle to this kind of research; because they are deceased their suicides cannot be applied to the model developed by this paper. There also appears to be a religious aspect to self-immolation in the United States that might explain things that the hypothesis cannot explain. For example, the primary wave of self-immolations occurred explicitly in concert with religious beliefs.

Regardless of the weaknesses of the data in the case studies, it can be positively argued that self-immolation occurs when self-destructive people are deeply bonded to their society and experience hopelessness. Although there are other variables that may correlate with suicide protest, such as religious beliefs and the Werther Effect, the hypothesis presents variables that are observed in all instances of self-immolation that has sufficient data, such as suicide letters. This might be weak, such as in the case of Norman Morrison in the United States. Until further data can be collected it should be assumed that self-immolation occurs when these three conditions are met.

**Self-Immolations and Subsequent Events**

This thesis is primarily concerned with the causality of self-immolation as a form of protest. There would be no concern about self-immolation if it had no impact; therefore, this project should also discuss the trends that have been observed and look for patterns, generalizations, and expectations.
First, the Werther Effect can be explored again. Over the last fifty years there are few isolated examples of self-immolation. One example is when Malachi Ritscher self-immolated in the United States in 2006 to protest against the war in Iraq. His suicide is one of the few identified in the data that was not followed by subsequent acts of self-immolation. The data collected observed at least sixteen clusters of self-immolation. That is, at least sixteen instances of suicide protest were followed by subsequent acts of self-immolation in solidarity with a single cause. As Michael Biggs suggests, every self-immolation in some way is a copycat of Thích Quang Duc in 1963 due to his ability to shake the world through suicide and achieve his stated goals. Because of his effectiveness, and because there was a public audience that observed his success, self-immolation was permanently etched into the book of tools of protest.\(^1\) The model presented by Biggs on the macro level can now be applied to the micro level.

Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia in late 2010 constitutes a new lineage stemmed from Quang Duc’s paternity. When Bouazizi committed suicide, he sparked a radical revolution in Tunisia, leading first to the copycat actions of possibly scores of protestors and ultimately to the collapse of the Tunisian government. The success of this revolution caused several other actors in various states in the Arab World to copy Bouazizi’s act in hopes of achieving the same level of success.

In other words, although Bouazizi was not explicitly acting according to the needs of the Tunisian people, his act was successful at communicating the message

\(^1\) Biggs, 27. He writes, “The potential modularity of suicide protest had been realized, which was crucial to ensure its persistence in the long run.”
to the Tunisian audience that self-immolation is a legitimate method to voice contention. Therefore, it can positively be argued that self-immolation is successful in the sense that it conveys an idea, even if the idea is constructed after the self-immolation. This constructed idea is then re-communicated through the successive acts of suicide protest that generally follow an initial act of self-immolation.

While self-immolation is successful at communicating a message—even a constructed message—its overall effectiveness at achieving its explicit goal is essentially nil. That is, it is a weak method for subsequent desired outcomes. This can be illustrated by observing the effects of the case studies presented in the project. First, Bouazizi caused the Arab Spring and the collapse of Tunisia's government and other revolutions in the Arab World, which is one of the only successful cases of self-immolation in history. Second, the self-immolations in Czechoslovakia that were explicitly designed to compel the Czechoslovak people to resist the Soviet occupation ultimately failed, and the Soviet Union strengthened its grip around Czechoslovakia. Third, the United States was relatively immune from the effects of the self-immolators protesting the Vietnam War. Despite the sympathy that Robert McNamara had towards the victims of suicide protest, it ultimately had no effect on US foreign policy.

Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) might explain the disparity between the outcomes of these cases. Huntington dismisses the idea that regime type leads to stability. For example, one should not consider whether or not a democracy is better suited to resist pressure from its constituents than a communist state. Rather, he believes that order—even in the face of reform
or even revolution—is achieved by states that enjoy a high level of government. He writes that this high level of government is:

- effective bureaucracies,
- well-organized political parties,
- a high degree of popular participation in public affairs,
- working systems of civilian control over the military,
- extensive activity by the government in the economy,
- and reasonably effective procedures for regulating succession and controlling political conflict.  

In the case of Tunisia, a rapid mobilization of new political entities and social change occurred in a system with relatively weak domestic institutions. If Bouazizi acted in a state with a strong government, such as China or the United Kingdom, Huntington’s theory would suggest that any subsequent push for reform or revolution would fail. This might explain why the anti-war movement in the United States and the resistance against the Soviet occupation in Czechoslovakia failed to materialize any discernable victory.

Therefore, this paper argues that there is no detectable correlation between self-immolation and successful revolutions. Instances of self-immolation are merely the catalysts for revolutionary forces that were bound to develop anyway given a long enough timeline. In other words, if one imagines a hopeless sociopolitical condition as being a pile of kindling, self-immolation is merely one of many tools that could set the whole thing ablaze and lead to revolutionary action. The success of that action is the product of a state with a weak government.

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2 Huntington, p. 1.
Relationship between Self-Immolation and Suicide Terrorism

There are other tools that could be used to set the kindling ablaze. One of these is suicide terrorism, which was hinted at in the Czechoslovakia case study when this paper put forth the question: is self-immolation systemic if the conditions suggested by the hypothesis are met? The three criteria that lead to self-immolations sometime lead to suicide terrorism. That is, suicide bombers are also likely to be self-destructive, bonded to their society, and hopeless. This is not necessarily true all of the time; other factors certainly play a role, but if one observes certain individual cases of suicide terrorism, one can see similar themes.

For example, in 1985 Lebanon was in the midst of a bloody civil war in addition to a war with Israel. On April 9 Syrian Social Nationalist Party member Sana'a Mehaidli blew herself up in the south of Lebanon, killing two Israeli soldiers in a convoy. By doing so she became the first known female suicide bomber. Like many suicide bombers and like many victims of self-immolation, she left behind a suicide note explaining her actions and asking for her family to understand why she took her own life. In a video recording of her will, she states, “I am very comfortable with carrying out this operation. I choose to do this because I am fulfilling my duty towards my land and my people” before following that up with “Mother, you taught me to love, to sacrifice and to show respect. Now I am loving my country, sacrificing my life and respecting the people of the south.”

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4 Bilal Khrais, “Lebanon’s women warriors,” Al Jazeera English, April 24, 2010, accessed December 6, 2013,
Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide. She was a self-destructive person who was acting in accordance of the needs of the people in Lebanon living under Israeli occupation. Her suicide letter does not address the level of hope she had; however, it cannot be assumed that people will make irrational decisions, such as committing suicide, if there is hope remaining.

This is not to say that self-destructive people who are deeply bonded to their society and experience hopelessness have a choice between self-immolating and committing suicide terrorism. Although the conditions leading to self-immolation are often present in suicide terrorism, there are other social and cultural factors that lead to these different actions. For example, prior to Bouazizi's self-immolation, there were no recorded instances of sociopolitical self-immolation in the Arab World. The only self-immolations that occurred in the Middle East prior to 2010 were in Israel in response to the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, suicide terrorism is generally perceived to be a product of the Arab World. The opposite can be said about Tibetan monks in China. Tibetan monks make up almost one fifth of observed cases of self-immolation between 1963 and 2012 (most of which occurred in 2012, but, as mentioned in the Methods chapter, they are difficult to study because the reporting methods are questionable). Tibetan monks are not known to commit suicide terrorism.

One could also look at the effects of self-immolation and suicide terrorism. In self-immolation the purpose is to push the hand of the people by accusing the state. They seek to achieve this goal without the use of violence against innocent civilians.

This allows the observer the ability to live vicariously through the images or newspaper articles describing the event. This, in other words, is the constructed hero. The observer asks why? They seek to answer that question by examining the social and political conditions that caused such an irrational act.

On the other hand, suicide terrorists attempt to push the hand of the state by accusing the state in a manner that maximizes civilian casualties. Because innocent civilians are often injured or killed, neither the observer nor the state is likely to live vicariously through the images of mass carnage or news articles describing the event in a manner sufficient to offer sympathy to the attacker. The suicide bomber might be a martyr for their cause alone, but the outside audience is less likely to be swayed than they would be by acts of self-immolation. Furthermore, suicide terrorism is often followed up with retribution or criminal investigations, actions usually not present in the aftermath of self-immolations.

Examining the weapon of choice might also sway public perceptions that contrast the two forms of suicide protest. Self-immolation, because it is altruistic and non-violent, utilizes ideology as a weapon. Ideology is not tangible, but it can play a role in the construction of the hero. Self-immolation, acting as a vehicle for vicarious living, does not cloud ideology with a kill count. Suicide terrorism, on the other hand, utilizes real, tangible weapons that are responsible for mass carnage. The weapon of choice in suicide terrorism clouds any ideology that the actor is attempting to communicate.

Finally, it can be argued that self-immolation and suicide terrorism are two strategies for the same thing: change. But, as addressed above, one is done strictly
out of love for society, and the other is done—perhaps out of love for society—but also out of anger towards the state. Therefore, while change might be the ultimate goal, suicide bombers are less capable in affecting that change.

Relationship with other Self-Destructive Acts

The desire to affect change through self-destructive acts is not solely the domain of self-immolators and suicide terrorists. As addressed in the Methods chapter, sometimes the conditions that lead to burning oneself to death might also lead to self-poisoning or self-defenestration. These self-destructive acts might be rare because they are not spectacular enough to sway public opinion or affect change. An observer of self-defenestration in the United States, for example, might merely assume that the victim was crazy, even if they were explicit in their purpose. Self-immolation is such a spectacle that it shocks the observer and forces them to consider the meaning behind the act.

Another form of self-destructive behavior that might be relatively effective is the hunger strike. Hunger strikes create a living martyr with which the public can sympathize. The ultimate goal of the hunger striker is to exploit that living martyrdom in a way sufficient to survive. That is, the goal is to beat the clock and survive while affecting change, thereby creating hope in a hopeless situation. This change is thought to be the product of resolve, which the enemy fears. If the victim dies, the living martyrdom is passed on to actual martyrdom, essentially expressing

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the same thing that the self-immolator expresses—that he or she is *willing* to die for a cause, even if death is not desired.

The goal of the self-immolator, however, is to ultimately die to affect change. They desire to transcend their own demise into an idea that is utilized by the society. In contrast to the hunger striker, the self-immolator does not have time to race against a clock. Death, for them, negates the clock and pushes for immediate change.

On the other hand, on October 2 or 3, 1978, Lynette Phillips self-immolated in Geneva because she thought that the United Nations was a corrupt organization. This occurred after she was arrested in the United Kingdom for threatening to self-immolate for the same reason. This is the only known case in this dataset that shows an individual who threatened to self-immolate and followed through. This exposes that the threat of self-immolation could be used to set a clock, attempting to force the state to react, very much like the hunger strike. On the other hand, one cannot control when death occurs through a hunger strike, while the self-immolator is in almost complete control over the time of their death.

Here, there is a worthwhile link to study between self-immolation and hunger strikes. Although the goals are fundamentally different (one is to survive, while the other is to die), both do so without violence and through actual or potential sacrifice. Furthermore, the threats of self-immolation are very similar to the threat of a hunger strike. However, because self-immolation is considered an irrational act that is almost certain to cause the death of the actor, this does not

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6 Biggs in Gambetta, 182.
mean that the threats of self-immolation should be taken as seriously as the hunger strike. Furthermore, self-immolations are so rare, relatively speaking, that it should not be assumed that anyone who threatens self-immolation would actually go through with it, even if that person were hopeless. To assume that they would follow through with self-immolation would set the precedent that threats are sufficient.

A final form of social and political self-destructive behavior is seppuku. Seppuku is an ancient Japanese method of suicide wherein the victim disembowels him or herself and is meant to preserve the honor of a person who has dishonored him or herself or committed a serious crime. The link between seppuku and self-immolation is very weak. Without social or political pressure, the victim would not necessarily be self-destructive. It could, however, be altruistic. The honor that is meant to be restored through the act of seppuku is not the domain of the victim because the victim is not around to enjoy it; rather, it is for those who knew or knew of the victim. There might also be some connection to hopelessness. The victim might commit seppuku because of imminent military conquest. Here the victim is preemptively preserving their honor prior to losing it, but this is not due to perceived injustices at the hands of the enemy. Therefore, the link between self-immolation and seppuku is negligible and should not necessarily be studied.

Should One Expect More?

Self-immolations almost always occur in clusters. Most clusters have been small, ranging between two victims and a dozen. But as noted earlier in this chapter,
monks in Tibet self-immolated at an alarming rate between 2011 and 2012. In fact, these victims represent about one fifth of all known self-immolations since 1963. It could also be that in 1990 hundreds or thousands of people self-immolated in India to protest against the reservations for lower castes implemented by the Indian government. The data is insufficient to support this claim, but if this is true then 1990 and 2012 represent major spikes of self-immolation that might cause some concern. Do these spikes suggest that self-immolation will continue to increase as a tool of protest? What we can say is that self-immolation has entered the social consciousness. Because it is unlikely that it will be forgotten, we can assume that it will remain a legitimate form of protest. It cannot be assumed, on the other hand, that this phenomenon would continue to grow more frequent. In fact, it should steadily decline, despite what the data from 2012 suggests.

For example, as noted in the case study on the United States, there were several instances of self-immolation in the US during the Vietnam War. Indeed, Michael Biggs ranked the US as the fourth highest country in regards to the number of self-immolations between 1963 and 2002 with a total of twenty-nine.\(^7\) Almost all of these occurred during the Vietnam War. For the data collected for this project, only five occurred after the Vietnam War. In other words, the US has seen more self-immolations than most other countries, but the phenomenon has essentially fallen out of practice.

While self-immolation has hit an all-time high in the Tibetan region in China, it should be expected that its occurrence will drop. The reason for this is

\(^7\) Biggs in Gambetta, Table 5.1, 185.
diminishing gains. Well over one hundred people have committed suicide protest in Tibet. Each suicide socially and statistically means less than the one before it. Because there has been no positive response noticed from the Chinese government, there should come a time when diminishing gains turns into a loss as the Chinese people and, indeed, the international community become more and more jaded by the news stories of self-immolation.

This might explain why self-immolations have become rare in the United States. As each self-immolation receives less and less media coverage and positive reinforcement, the perceived gains from committing suicide protest become fewer and fewer. While the gains diminish, it cannot be argued that is the main reason why self-immolation as a global phenomenon is expected to decline.

To make this argument—that self-immolation is expected to decline—this paper will adopt a post-materialistic approach as utilized by Ronald Inglehart in Modernization and Postmodernization (1997). That is, the modernized state is not the end of modernization. When the state modernizes, existential security, or the ability to survive, rises and is no longer considered the main goal of a society. As standards of living increase globally, one should expect a change in value systems. These changes in value systems include four main points: First, politics will de-emphasize the importance of political authority. This complements Huntington’s hypothesis that strong political authority correlates with order and resistance to reform. When the political authority declines, one should see the success of non-violent revolutions and social reform. It should also signal that hope is possible,

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8Inglehart, Table 1.1, 43.
negating the need for self-immolation. Second, quality of life will trump economic
gains, diminishing the state and private ownership. As noted by the self-immolators
in the Arab World, political corruption and economic inequality were the reasons
for the Arab Spring. Mohamed Bouazizi and other self-immolators in the Arab World
might not have committed suicide if their quality of life was higher and the state was
weaker, allowing for change without revolutionary acts. Third, individual self-
expression will come to the forefront. In this sense, individuals will have less need to
protest—and, indeed, self-immolate—if they are able to express themselves and
seek personal gratification by other methods. Finally, rules will become flexible, and
ethics will become situational, which will diminish the church's ability to influence
society. This means that individuals will be more likely to seek meaning and
purpose of life rather than to seek the predictability that religion offers. If there is a
correlation between religious belief and self-immolation, then, as Inglehart predicts
in this final point, religious beliefs will decline, offering less incentive to commit
suicide protest in the name of religion.

This paper argues that Inglehart's hypothesis—that as societies experience
an increase in existential security, the authority is weakened and social issues
become more important—can explain why self-immolation is relatively rare in the
developed world (particularly present-day Western Europe). If his hypothesis is to
be believed, then it should also be believed that as the individual has more
autonomy and as the state is weakened due to an increase in existential security,
fewer individuals will experience hopelessness, and thus self-immolation will fall
out of practice.
Inglehart's hypothesis fills the gaps left behind by Samuel P. Huntington's hypothesis. That is, although the state's ability to preserve order in the face of social change is due to the state's level of government, or the strength of its domestic institutions, when society's existential security reaches an optimal level, the state will no longer be able to resist sociopolitical change. This inability to resist change reintroduces hope into the sociopolitical condition because it brings the individual back in to the equation. Because hopelessness is believed to be a necessary condition that leads to self-immolation, it is believed that self-immolation will not occur at significantly higher rates in the future. How far away that future is, however, is another issue entirely.

Conclusion

Self-immolation occurs when three conditions are met. There must be a self-destructive person. He or she must be strictly bonded to the community in which they are acting. Finally, he or she must be hopeless. Self-immolation can occur spontaneously, which appears to be the case of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia; however, where the data is sufficient, these three conditions appear to successfully explain why self-immolation is observed. This alone, however, is relatively meaningless. In order make as much sense out of self-immolation as one can, the hypothesis must be applied to other questions. This chapter tackles some of those questions.

First, the case studies are observed to seek generalizations. The data is largely missing, due to factors out of the control of the observer. Where the data
exists, however, there appears to be a strong correlation between self-destructive personalities, social bonds, and hopelessness with self-immolation. In most observable cases of suicide protest, the actors exhibit all three conditions as expressed through suicide letters or public statements.

Second, as observed following Bouazizi's self-immolation and, indeed, the most famous self-immolation of them all, Thich Quang Duc of South Vietnam, self-immolation can sometimes set in motion a chain of events that culminates with the radical overthrow of a regime. This raises the question: what is the correlation between self-immolation and subsequent events? Unfortunately for those who give up their lives in such a painful way, the positive effects of self-immolation are rarely noticed. Only a small handful of acts of suicide protest have led to reform. Even fewer have led to successful revolutions. This chapter thus adopts Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* to help explain why states are relatively immune from the effects of self-immolation. That is, when states build complex domestic institutions, the effectively put into place systemic order. One should not expect to see the radical overthrow of the US government following a cluster of American self-immolations.

Third, self-immolation and suicide terrorism are certainly similar. Both use suicide as a tool to deliver a message to a public audience. Suicide terrorism, however, capitalizes on civilian casualties, seeking to maximize the death toll. Self-immolation, on the other hand, is relatively peaceful; the death toll is designed to include only the primary actor. This disparity might explain the differences in social importance. That is, suicide terrorism begets public scorn and anger. Self-
immolation begets vicarious living and social inquisitiveness. Therefore, suicide terrorism is generally unacceptable, while self-immolation is generally acceptable.

Fourth, self-immolation can also be linked to other forms of suicide protest. For example, there are many links between self-immolation and the hunger strike. These similarities, however, are often obscured by their differences. Self-immolation seeks the immediate death of the actor to create an actual martyr for a cause. The hunger strike seeks to create a living martyr who will survive while enjoying the change they seek. This difference might fade if protestors begin to threaten to self-immolate, essentially putting a time limit on affected change. This time limit is also enjoyed by the hunger striker; however, the self-immolator can extend the clock as long as necessary, whereas the hunger striker is restricted by the limits of the human body. The link between self-immolation and other forms of self-destructive behavior, such as seppuku, is limited and weak.

Finally, despite a seemingly growing trend in self-immolation in China, one should not expect self-immolation to rise globally. Barring a cataclysmic event that threatens existential security, it is argued that as the standards of living continue to increase around the world, governments will weaken, allowing citizens to seek redress for their grievances in less self-destructive manners. This might take time to materialize in the developing world, but one can already observe self-immolation on the decline in other parts of the globe, such as Western Europe. The problem with self-immolation in China, even without a rise in existential security, might also work itself out by offering protestors diminishing gains as they observe China's ability to withstand social pressures. That is, if China failed to offer autonomy to the Tibetan
region after one hundred self-immolations, it is unlikely to offer autonomy after one hundred twenty self-immolations. The global audience, too, does not care as much about the one hundredth self-immolation as it cared about the first.
Self-immolation is a global phenomenon, being practiced on every inhabited continent for a wide array of reasons. It was been utilized by Buddhist monks in Vietnam to protest oppressive regimes, Indians to protest against creating reservations for lower castes, and by people in the Czech Republic to protest against general evil in the world. Prior research into this topic has primarily been conducted by the medical and psychological communities and appears merely as footnotes in the study of sociology and politics. Where it has been studied in the sociopolitical context, it has mainly focused on how self-immolation transformed from a Buddhist religious practice and its eventual spread throughout culture as a meme-like phenomenon. Its communicative abilities have sealed self-immolations fate as a socially acceptable, yet irrational tool for voicing disdain and rallying support behind a collective cause. Very little, if any, research has been conducted, however, into explaining how and when self-immolation is likely to occur. This is an important question to ask because, as has been noted in the body of this text, self-immolation can sometimes have serious consequences. These consequences could affect a government, such as the collapse of a regime, or they could affect civilians, such as a government crackdown on dissidence. Understanding the origins of clusters of self-immolation, therefore, is beneficial to the security and order of both the state and its civilian population.
Therefore, this paper asks the following research question: Under what conditions do self-immolations occur? It argues that self-immolation occurs when three criteria are met. First, there is a self-destructive individual. Suicidal behavior does not occur without first being self-destructive. Second, this self-destructive person seeks to act in accordance to the needs of his or her community. That is, their bond to their society is strong enough that they are compelled to kill themselves because it is their duty. This is similar to a US Marine sacrificing his life to save the lives of his fellow US Marines during combat. Third, there must exist a social or political situation that is perceived as hopeless, or in other words, intolerable. The third point is especially important to consider for two reasons. The first reason is that it should not be argued that hopeful people are likely to commit suicide. Indeed, self-immolation is relatively rare in countries that are more adaptable to the needs of its civilians. The second reason is because hopelessness adds to Émile Durkheim’s model of altruistic suicide. Altruistic suicide is adopted here to represent the first two criteria (self-destructive person, bonded to society). When hopelessness is added to the equation, the stage is set on which self-immolations are more likely to occur.

This paper tests this hypothesis against three case studies, or geographic clusters of self-immolations wherein a single message is trying to be communicated. These case studies include the Arab World during the Arab Spring, Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring, and the United States during the Vietnam War. Within each case study clusters are divided into two waves. The primary wave consists the initial people who committed suicide and brought self-immolation into the
repertoire of tools to voice contention. The secondary wave consists of individuals who commit suicide by self-immolation for similar purposes, but the purposes might differ slightly from the primary wave, or there may be geographical differences that make their actions not necessarily fit with the actions of those in the primary wave. Both waves are examined by looking at suicide letters, public statements, and newspaper articles about the victims.

The first case study tests the hypothesis against the emergence of self-immolation in the Arab World that prompted the Arab Spring. Prior to December 2010 self-immolation was absent as a tool of contention in the Arab World. That changed when Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself in Tunisia. Following his suicide, scores, or perhaps hundreds, of people in the Arab World self-immolated. This led to great unrest in various Arab countries as people took to the streets to protest against corruption and economic inequality and led to the collapse of a few governments, including Tunisia.

Due to insufficient data regarding Bouazizi (the primary wave of self-immolation in the Arab World), it cannot be argued that the hypothesis explains his action. It is possible that Bouazizi acted on impulse, rather than in accordance to the needs of the Tunisian people. On the other hand, the hypothesis strongly explains the actions of subsequent acts of self-immolation in the Arab World (the secondary wave). That is, self-destructive people in the Arab World experienced hopeless situations and set fire to themselves for the explicit purpose of compelling their countrymen and women to shake off intolerable regimes. Their messages were publicly communicated not merely by the act of suicide, but also through chants,
slogans, and suicide letters. In some cases their messages were also communicated through Facebook posts. It is these statements that allow the hypothesis to fit the secondary wave nicely.

The second case study examined self-immolations in Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring, during the period of Soviet occupation. The primary wave consisted of Czechoslovak nationals who set themselves on fire within the confines of Czechoslovakia to express their displeasure with both the Soviet occupation and the general sense of nonchalance expressed by the Czechoslovak people. These are primarily students who, although deceased, today enjoy a venerable status in Prague. Following these suicides several others set fire to themselves in other countries to express their solidarity with the Czechoslovak resistance. These non-Czechoslovak self-immolations make up the secondary wave.

The hypothesis nicely fits the Czechoslovakia case study. The suicide letters that were examined, supplied by Charles University in Prague, reveal that the three Czechoslovak protestors were explicit in their purpose; they sought to mobilize a complacent society in order to regain the rights that they believed the Soviet Union was taking from them. Their suicide letters fit perfectly into Durkheim’s model of altruistic suicide. Furthermore, it is argued that they were hopeless because they lost certain rights for which the public was unwilling to fight at that time.

The secondary wave, on the other hand, is more malleable to other explanations. These individuals were not Czechoslovak nationals; therefore, it cannot be argued that they were bonded to the Czechoslovak society. This weakness might be explained in two different ways. First, there is insufficient evidence, such
as suicide notes, to explain their actions. Second, the Werther Syndrome, or copycat suicide, might better explain their actions. That is, because the primary wave of self-immolations was broadcasted to a global audience, and because those in Czechoslovakia were highly celebrated, others might have been influenced to do the same in hopes of receiving the same level of fame.

Finally, this paper tests the hypothesis against individuals who self-immolated in the United States to protest against the Vietnam War. The primary wave consists three individuals who committed suicide in 1965. All three were religious (a Jewish woman, a Catholic man, and a Mormon man). The observations moderately support the hypothesis. The hypothesis strongly explains the initial act of self-immolation; however, it moderately explains the second and might be a case of impulse, and insufficient data prevents it from explaining the third case. An alternate explanation might refer back to the fact that all three were religious. It could be that they felt that they were acting in accordance with the demands of their faith, rather than the demands of society.

The secondary wave of self-immolations in the United States during the Vietnam War, too, is problematic to the hypothesis. That is, the messages of those actors are unknowable at this time. Insufficient data prevents the application of the hypothesis on the secondary wave. The Werther Effect might be a useful tool for explaining the secondary wave.

These case studies point out the main findings of this paper. Where the data is sufficient, the hypothesis does well to explain the genesis of self-immolation in the sociopolitical context. That is, when one can adequately observe what is happening,
one finds self-destructive people who are deeply attached to their societies. They commit suicide by self-immolation when the conditions become intolerable or hopeless. It is unlikely that they would commit suicide—even if they are previously self-destructive—in accordance with the needs of society if they did not feel a strict and deep bond with the society. It is additionally unlikely that they would commit suicide if there were other avenues to find redress through state apparatuses. That is, hope would prevent the occurrence of self-immolation.

This is not to say that the hypothesis can perfectly explain what is happening. Due to insufficient data it is possible that there are variables that are unknown at this time. While this project only identified 488 cases of self-immolation from 1963 to 2012, it is very possible that this number could really be much, much higher, possibly as high as several thousand. Problems with data collection, as identified in the Methods chapter, mean that there are probably more unobserved cases of self-immolation than there are cases of observed self-immolation. What can be argued, however, is that the hypothesis is a useful tool for explaining what can be observed.

Self-immolation is a spectacular act that seemingly correlates with massive unrest. The Arab Spring is a prime example of how self-immolation can potentially lead to the collapse of regimes. Indeed, this consequence has also been observed in South Vietnam in the 1960s. On the other hand, if one examines the frequency of self-immolations and compares that with the frequency of regime collapse, one would see that self-immolation rarely leads to change. Domestic institutional models likely explain this. The higher the level of government over every day societal issues, the less likely it is that cases of self-immolation will turn into
problems with which the government cannot deal. It is argued that stronger
governments will not be affected by the actions of suicidal protestors. Indeed, it can
be argued that the Nazi Germany regime would not have cared if the resistance
began burning themselves to death in protest. This is probably also true for other
cases of suicidal protest.

The hypothesis is not necessarily solely the domain of self-immolation, and it
can be applied to other forms of self-destructive behavior, such as suicide terrorism
and hunger strikes. The hypothesis is, on the other hand, useless to explain why an
actor chooses one over the other. Future research might provide more useful tools
to explain why a person chooses to commit suicide terrorism instead of going on a
hunger strike or committing self-immolation. This future research might also help
prevent suicide terrorism. That is not to say that one should encourage other forms
of self-destructive behavior, but it might give one a better understanding of what
goes through the minds of self-destructive people and how to address those issues.

Finally, despite a seemingly growing number of self-immolations worldwide,
the hypothesis of this paper uncovers an important variable that is expected to
resolve itself and lead to a decline in self-immolations. Hopelessness, or intolerable
conditions, is a necessary condition that leads to self-immolation. This paper adopts
a post-materialistic model to explain this prediction. Post-materialistic theory
predicts that as states modernize, societies will gain higher levels of existential
security and, ultimately, state apparatuses will become more malleable to social
pressures. If the state becomes weakened and the individual has increased
autonomy over social issues, then hope will be reintroduced to the equation, leading
to a decline of self-immolations. This might be observed in Western Europe, where very few cases of self-immolation have occurred since the end of the Cold War. This might also be observed in the United States, where historically the number of self-immolations is very high, but has been extremely rare following the end of the Vietnam War. It is argued that post-materialism will contribute to self-immolation falling out of practice as societies continue to modernize and as levels of existential security continue to rise because hope is, as far as can be observed, essential to the prevention of political self-immolation.
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