

Victims of Decree Laws in Turkey: The Relationship Between Stigma and Suicide

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Received: 03 Mar 2025; **Accepted:** 05 Apr 2025; **Published:** 16 April 2025

Citation: Fatma Zehra Fidan. Victims of Decree Laws in Turkey: The Relationship Between Stigma and Suicides. Addict Res. 2025; 9(1): 1-7.

ABSTRACT

Background: Stigma, a significant factor with devastating effects on mental health, can drive individuals toward suicide. Anything perceived as deviant by society becomes a source of stigma.

Objective: This study examines how stigma, rooted in the unlawful political practices of the Turkish state through Decree Laws (KHK), affects individuals' mental health and contributes to suicidal tendencies.

Method: In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 individuals who planned but did not attempt suicide, as well as with relatives of 18 individuals who died by suicide due to the KHK. The data were thoroughly analyzed using discourse analysis to understand participants' experiences.

Findings: 1. Individuals affected by the KHK experience stigma and exclusion by society. 2. These individuals are labeled as "terrorists" by state institutions, and this stigma is perpetuated in social spaces such as mosques and schools. 3. Highly educated KHK victims face significant difficulties in finding alternative employment after being dismissed from their jobs. 4. Victims with socialist-leftist ideologies receive support from their family and friends instead of being ostracized; this distinction stems from ideological differences. 5. The mental health of individuals stigmatized by the state's policies deteriorated significantly, pushing some toward suicide.

Solutions: The study recommends expediting judicial processes, implementing legal and social rehabilitation programs, developing psychosocial support systems for the mental health treatment of stigmatized individuals, and increasing societal awareness through campaigns to combat stigma and promote sensitivity.

Keywords

Stigma, Social exclusion, Suicide, Political practices, Justice.

Introduction

This study examines the impact of stigmatization experiences on the suicidal tendencies of individuals affected by Turkey's Decree Laws (KHK). Suicide research often centers on stigma as perceived after a suicide attempt or by the bereaved in the aftermath of suicide. However, there is a dialectical relationship between stigma and suicide [1,2]: stigma is both a cause and a consequence of suicide. This study focuses on the process of suicidal ideation and completion among individuals stigmatized due to the state's unlawful political practices under the KHK. I argue that in cases

of KHK-related suicides, state-imposed stigma has a direct effect on suicidal behavior.

According to Goffman [3], stigma can be defined as the process by which individuals perceived as possessing a discredited trait are labeled as abnormal. This negative perception stems from culturally accepted, exclusionary [4] and discrediting stereotypes [5]. The social relationships shaped by such judgments, embedded within the societal habitus [3], subject stigmatized individuals to social exclusion and inhumane treatment, constituting a form of symbolic violence [6]. Stigma, amplified by political practices, permeates all societal categories and contributes to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes [7]. Tyler's argument aligns closely with the

case of Turkey. Similar to the institutionalization of "abnormals" in the Middle Ages [8], the state has created a stigmatized group in contemporary society, rendering them "abnormal" and pushing them to the margins of social life.

Stigma and social exclusion caused by the state's unlawful practices are significant sources of trauma [9,10]. Trauma, in turn, is a major risk factor for suicidal tendencies [5,11]. In suicides resulting from Turkey's Decree Laws (KHK), trauma induced by stigma plays a central role. Considering the societal factors leading individuals to suicide [12], the stigma and social exclusion experienced by KHK victims in Turkey are unprecedented. The perception of stigma and exclusion among KHK victims is not merely shaped by a 'meaningful silence' [13] or the implicit violence of unspoken judgments [14]. In the Turkish context, stigma takes on tangible forms through verbal and behavioral expressions. It is well-documented that social exclusion can push individuals toward suicide [15], whereas social support and integration serve as protective factors against it [16].

This interplay highlights the reciprocal relationship between stigma and suicide: while suicide can be a source of stigma, stigma itself is one of the risk factors that drive individuals toward suicide [1,2]. Stigma, which dates back to the earliest periods of history [3,8], has many causes. These include mental health disorders [17,18], race or disability [19], sexual orientation, diseases like HIV/AIDS [20], being related to individuals accused of extreme activism or terrorism (10 Poli & Arun, 2019), refugee status [21], and suicide itself [5,22-25].

In this study, I argue that the stigma and social exclusion experienced by individuals dismissed from their jobs due to the Decree Laws (KHK) announced in 2016 have a direct impact on suicide. Although the existing literature [1,2] addresses the relationship between stigma and suicide, there is a lack of comprehensive qualitative research on the subject. Research has explored how individuals who attempted suicide [2,25] and the bereaved families of those who died by suicide [26,27] suffer moral harm [28,29], face social isolation [30,31], and endure daily life challenges [32,33]. There are also studies on the mental health effects of stigma resulting from state-led unlawful practices [9,10].

These findings in the literature reinforce the core argument and conclusions of this study. However, there has been no research specifically examining the suicidal tendencies of individuals stigmatized due to the policies implemented in Turkey since 2016. This gap may stem from the reluctance of academics to align themselves with a group that is stigmatized and excluded by the state. As an academic who experienced dismissal under the KHK, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature: it identifies the role of stigma in driving social actors with shared professions and similar forms of stigmatization toward suicide and death by suicide. Demonstrating that state-imposed stigma leads individuals to suicide has the potential to generate significant pressure for adherence to universal legal principles.

State policies causing injustices for citizens are not a novel phenomenon. For example, following the Soviet Union's nuclear attack in 1949, the United States experienced a witch hunt during the anti-communist propaganda campaign of the McCarthy era. Thousands of individuals were blacklisted, unlawfully dismissed, and punished under these policies [34,35]. This era, which ended in 1954 [36], remains one of the most prominent examples of fear politics. However, the events in Turkey surpass even the McCarthy era in their depth and implications [37]. The political climate and policies implemented under the KHK represent one of the most striking examples of modern fear-based governance.

Decree Laws and Oppression in Turkey

The measures implemented under the Decree Laws (KHK) announced after the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, have plunged Turkey into a politically, socially, and economically disruptive transformation process [38,39]. Immediately following the enactment of the Decree Laws, 152,000 people were dismissed from their jobs, with estimates suggesting this number may have reached 300,000. Those affected have faced 153 types of rights violations, collectively described as a form of civil and social death. Actions previously not classified as crimes under Turkish law were criminalized, leading to the imprisonment of tens of thousands. Unlawful and inhumane practices in prisons have resulted in hundreds of deaths. During this period, the combined impact of job losses, social stigmatization, and resulting psychological devastation has severely disrupted families and communities. Thousands of deaths due to stress-related illnesses, a divorce rate thirty times higher than the national average, and approximately 130 suicides have been recorded in the aftermath of the KHK [40].

This study focuses on the suicidal tendencies and completed suicides within this group. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 individuals who contemplated suicide, decided on a method, but ultimately refrained from acting on their decision. Ten of these individuals were dismissed based on alleged links to FETÖ (Fetullah Gülen's organization), while one was dismissed due to alleged affiliation with leftist-socialist groups. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the relatives of 18 individuals who died by suicide after being dismissed based on FETÖ accusations.

The study compares the perceptions of stigma experienced by those who refrained from suicide with the experiences of stigma and exclusion faced by those who died by suicide. The stigmatization and exclusion of those who died, and the impact of these experiences on their mental state, were explored through accounts from their relatives. The intersections of feelings, thoughts, and experiences between individuals who refrained from suicide and those who completed it serve as a basis for analyzing the effect of stigma on suicidal behavior.

Participants

Among the participants who refrained from suicide, three were women and eight were men, aged between 21 and 45. One participant was a high school graduate, another was a university student, and nine were university graduates. Six participants were

married, four were single, and one was divorced. Relatives of those who died by suicide included six men and 12 women. Eight had a university degree, eight had completed secondary education, and two were university students. Of these relatives, 12 were married, three were single, one was divorced, and two were widowed, ranging in age from 19 to 62 years.

Interviews

In preliminary meetings, participants were informed about the study. A semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was prepared by a researcher experienced in the subject matter [41]. Three participants declined face-to-face interviews and provided written responses to the questions. The interviews included three main questions with related follow-ups: 1-How did your family and social circle react to your dismissal from work? 2-How did this make you feel? (For relatives of those who died by suicide, this question was modified to include: "How do you think this made the deceased feel? What did you observe?") 3-What were the reasons that made you (or the deceased) consider suicide? Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was transcribed by the researcher. The responses were grouped into thematic categories and analyzed using discourse analysis.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using in-depth interviews. This method allows participants to express their experiences, emotions, and thoughts in their own terms, enabling the research problem to be understood within its specific context [42]. Exploring the research topic in depth is facilitated by a semi-structured question format [41]. The effectiveness of the interview depends on the interviewer's objective stance [43] and empathetic approach [44]. Such interviews provide researchers access to participants' most intimate details [42,45], while participants gain the opportunity to better interpret their own experiences [44].

Discourse Analysis as a Method

According to Foucault [46], words are imbued with the task and power of "representing thought"; discourse, made up of words, is the foundation of the dominant ideological paradigm. In this context, discourse is not only a way of reflecting or representing external things but also a way of constructing them. The variability of discourse on similar topics is an indicator of the variability and differences within social life [47]. Therefore, understanding discourse means understanding the culture that constructs it [48]. Discourse, which involves taking a position within a body of meaning-laden arguments [49], does not necessarily have to be grammatically correct. Everything, from murmurs and simple curses to short conversations and scribbled notes, provides data on the subject's feelings, thoughts, and actions [50].

Discursive Analysis

Of the twenty-nine participants in the study, twenty-eight reported experiencing stigma and social exclusion due to the Decree Laws (KHK). Stigmatization does not require one to be dismissed from work; being a relative of someone who has been dismissed can also lead to stigma and exclusion.

Erasing the Addressee from Life: Ignoring, Overlooking, Accusing of Terrorism, Degrading, and Threatening

The conceptual framework that emerged from the statements of individuals dismissed by the KHK and their relatives is as follows: Ignoring (My spouse's friends did not call, did not ask, did not answer the phone... none of his colleagues greeted him when they saw him. G-I), overlooking (Some of his police friends, who were very close to him, changed their behavior when they saw him (my father).G-V), pushing and distancing (People who blocked me on the phone, who blocked me on social media... G-II), not engaging (We went to a relative's house. I got out of the car, knocked on the door, but no one opened. Then I got back in the car; my cousin knocked, and they opened the door... G-XIV), accusing of terrorism and creating social pressure (People who thought I should be tortured because they called me 'FETOist' made me live a life of imprisonment in my own home. G-III), marginalizing and degrading (Nobody wants to talk to you; you're like a monster; everyone avoids you. G-VI), threatening (People who said, 'We're thinking about reporting you.'G-II), turning friendships into enmity (People you ate with at the same table and worked with in the same place started distancing themselves from you. G-VI).

The construction of stigma related to suicide in social consciousness and the way it reaches the target is reflected in Feigelman and Feigelman's [14] statement: "What mattered was not what they said, but what they didn't say." However, neither this statement nor the concept of silence [33] fully captures the picture expressed in the quotes. The perception of the individuals who have been subjected to forms of rights violations by the state [40] and targeted for elimination is clear in the habitus of society: Their existence is denied; in other words, they are seen as something that should disappear. This perception and approach sometimes reach the addressees as meaningful silence and sometimes as concrete attacks (e.g., "We're thinking of reporting you, the child of a FETOist!" G-VII, G-VIII). The exclusionary stance of the social environment is not independent of the state's harsh, cruel, and stigmatizing attitude. In the eyes of society, the state's stigmatized group is considered absolute evil, and being close to evil is also considered evil.

Stigmatizing and Excluding Family Members

The family members of individuals affected by the Decree Laws (KHK) have been stigmatized in various aspects of daily life, leading some to contemplate suicide. One of the participants shared the following:

'On October 24, 2016, my dear daughter, who was only 15 years old, took her own life. There were rumors at her school that her father was a FETOist, and she was mocked because of it. During the days leading up to her suicide, we faced significant struggles and depression at home due to the detentions. What happened to my daughter happened to her.' (G-VII)

This testimony highlights how family members of individuals dismissed under the KHK were subjected to intense stigma, with the stress and pressure they faced ultimately contributing to the tragic outcome of the young girl's suicide. The combination

of social exclusion, bullying at school, and the turmoil at home caused by the broader political environment created an unbearable emotional burden.

Stigma Imposed by State Institutions

Following the coup attempt, the mass purges were accompanied by stigmatizing actions from societal institutions, further deepening the emotional toll on affected individuals and their families.

One participant shared the following testimony:

'My son admired his father. He went to the mosque for prayers, and the sermon made him angry. The imam said, 'The FETOists, where is the homeland?' My son replied, 'My father is unjustly imprisoned, and they said the same thing about him.' Over the years, he lost hope, and this turned into anger. He started saying, 'My record is ruined; I can't become a soldier like my father.' (G-VIII).

This statement reflects the emotional devastation brought on by the stigmatization of the family, especially when a place of worship, which should have been a safe haven, became a site of reproach. The young boy, who was only 16 years old at the time, felt the harshness of this accusation, leading him to lose all hope for the future. This sense of hopelessness, as described in Camus's (51 1988) words, 'It's not worth trying anymore,' signals a deep emotional exhaustion. In this case, the effects of the KHK policies are not only limited to the individual targeted but extend to their families, with the state's actions destroying the hope of reintegration into society.

From Citizenship to Terrorism

For individuals affected by the KHK purges, being labeled a terrorist is deeply unacceptable. Their lives, which they dedicated to serving what they viewed as a sacred state, are irreparably shattered by this accusation.

One participant shared:

'Waking up one morning as a terrorist in a country you've served for years was complete destruction. The biggest thought eating away at me was this being criminalized and socially excluded... This was the main factor in my decision to attempt suicide...' (G-X).

For G-X, a law enforcement officer, the fundamental factor that led him to contemplate suicide was being accused of terrorism. The word "destruction" is central to his testimony, reflecting the overwhelming emotional impact of such an accusation. The use of the second-person plural pronoun (you) generalizes this destruction, implying that anyone who suffers the same fate would experience the same devastating loss. The majority of those dismissed under the FETO accusations were individuals who had dedicated their lives to serving the state. The destruction they face stems from the abrupt transition from serving their country to being accused of terrorism. This accusation, with no legal basis, eliminates the distinction between the individual and their actions, reducing the person from a citizen to a terrorist in a single act. This sudden shift in identity pushes them to the brink of suicide.

Honor and Dignity Embodied: The Weapon

For individuals in law enforcement, such as officers and police, the experience of stigma takes on different dimensions. G-XI expresses his suicidal tendencies in the following way:

'At that time, a very close friend of mine had been martyred in Hakkari. I can't say I was in a good psychological state. Then, I got a call from the department saying, 'You've been suspended; you need to hand over your weapon and ID.' In our profession, the hat and ID are important symbols... This hit me really hard. When we were at the academy, they always told us, 'Once you join this profession, it's impossible to be expelled unless you commit a disgraceful crime.' At that moment, I looked at my weapon for the last time because... it was something given with ceremonies. The weapon is an important symbol in this profession. When they say 'TAK,' it's over. It's that simple... I have my weapon; my magazine is full; death is that close to me.' (G-XI).

The weapon, symbolizing honor and dignity, is central to the experience of stigma. Items such as the hat, ID card, and weapon are vital components of an individual's identity in the social realm. Despite G-XI not committing any disgraceful crime under the law, he was treated as if he had, leading to stigmatization. This form of stigma is so traumatic that it can drive an individual to contemplate suicide.

G-XI mentions how the thought of holding the system accountable gave him the strength to abandon his suicidal tendencies. However, there are others who did not find this strength and tragically chose death. One commissioner, a firearms instructor at the police academy, lost his mental health after his weapon was confiscated by the department and later took his own life:

'I can say this with certainty: The day he handed over his weapon was the day he died.' (G-IV) G-IV, describing his spouse's suicide, provides examples of how social exclusion affected him. His KHK-affected commissioner friends ignored him, and ultimately, his weapon was taken away. For him, the weapon embodying honor and dignity was integral to his self-respect. The loss of this symbol signified the erosion of the qualities that sustained his self-worth. This stigma and exclusion, created and validated by the state and society, severely damaged his mental health, ultimately leading him to suicide.

KHK Victims Were Not Hired for Any Jobs

Ninety-nine percent of the KHK-affected individuals are highly educated; yet, after being dismissed from their jobs, they were unable to find work elsewhere.

'I was a person who was highly respected before, but after that, people refused to offer me jobs. Here, horticulture is common, and there are also many lemon and plum farming jobs agricultural labor, in other words. Some people wouldn't even let me go to the field think about that, to the field.' (G-XIV).

Exclusion affects not only the KHK-affected individuals but also their families.

'Since my husband was dismissed, even though they were very

satisfied with my cleaning work, I know people who never hired me again. They used to say, 'There's no job beyond a woman's work; a woman can do in two days what another would do in one, but because of her husband... (We) can't hire her anymore.' (G-I)

This social exclusion severely impacted both the professional and personal lives of KHK-affected individuals and their families, highlighting the deep-rooted stigma they faced in the aftermath of their dismissal.

Receiving Support Instead of Stigma and Exclusion

In the study, it was found that KHK victims with left-wing socialist backgrounds did not experience the same level of stigma and exclusion as others. One participant shared their experience of receiving support:

'I was never excluded by my family or friends. On the contrary, I received constant support from my family, both financially and emotionally. It turns out my father had been secretly sending money to my wife every month for living expenses. He told her, 'Don't tell him; he'll be upset. It'll be too much for him.' (Crying). (G-XII).

G-XII is a teacher who was dismissed due to his leftist-socialist views. The main reason that pushed him to the edge of despair was the denial of his personal qualities:

'I think I am a whole person, but we were thrown away.' (G-XII)

Additionally, he struggled with feelings of inadequacy as a parent: *'My children look at me with eyes full of questions, and I can't do anything.'*

Stigma Damages Mental Health

Research has shown that stigma harms mental health [9,10] and that mental health disorders are a significant risk factor for suicide [11]. This information is supported by original data from the study: *'Don't let anyone come to the house... (they say) They close the curtains and don't open them. 'Why are you doing this?' I ask. 'Our sun has set,' they say, 'don't open, don't let the sun in.' They say, 'Our sun has set.'* (G-IV).

'I think my husband's mental faculties are not right. My strong husband... Excuse me, my mother used to say, 'A woman is her husband's whore.' One evening I did something to him like that. Oh my God, he started crying like a child. 'Okay, okay,' I told him, 'I'm not touching you, I'm not doing anything,' I said, don't be scared. I turned my back, and then I started crying. 'What are we living through like this?' I turned around and cried; I cried...' (G-IV)

'The breaking point was the first time, that shock moment. What will I do? Who will I talk to about this situation? Once I threw myself in front of a truck; it stopped... Then my body didn't die, but my soul did. After that moment (the first one), there were long periods of depression, nightmares in my dreams, and closing myself off. At one point, I developed alopecia. One day I woke up, and my hair was falling out in clumps. A week later, I woke up, and

half of my eyebrow was gone...' (G-X)

Based on the data we obtained, it is possible to say that the state's political practices have a direct impact on the suicidal tendencies of KHK victims.

Findings

The findings obtained from the study are as follows:

- KHK individuals are stigmatized and excluded by society.
- Stigmatization is directed not only at the individuals who have been dismissed but also at their family members.
- KHK individuals have been labeled as terrorists by state institutions, and this stigmatization has continued in social institutions such as mosques and schools.
- Many KHK individuals, particularly those working in professions like the police and as officers, have experienced a loss of honor due to the confiscation of their professional identity symbols, such as their weapons.
- KHK individuals who were dismissed from their jobs have struggled to find new employment and have been prevented from working even in unskilled jobs like agricultural and cleaning work.
- KHK victims with leftist-socialist views have not been excluded by their family and friends; on the contrary, they have received support. This highlights the impact of ideological differences on stigmatization.
- The political practices of the state have severely damaged the mental health of stigmatized individuals, driving some KHK individuals to suicide.

Evaluation

In the dialectical relationship between stigma and suicide, a third link could have been "re-stigmatization." However, individuals and their relatives who were stigmatized due to the KHK (State of Emergency Decree) and driven to suicide were not stigmatized for their suicide, unlike those who take their own lives for other reasons. As seen in this study, the malevolence of state governance has overshadowed the malevolence of suicide. The suicides of KHK individuals or their relatives have been met with more leniency and tolerance in society.

According to the existing literature [1,2], there is a dialectical relationship between stigma and suicide. This information is supported by this research. The existing literature states that stigma arises from socially accepted, alienating [4] and stigmatizing stereotypes [5]. This information is corroborated by the study; KHK individuals have been stigmatized with accusations of treason, which appear as absolute evil in society's habitus. According to the literature [6], individuals who are stigmatized by society are subjected to inhuman treatment and symbolic violence. This information is also supported by the study. The literature [7] asserts that stigma is often politically rooted and strengthens authoritarian forms of government. This information is affirmed by the research. The societal alienation towards KHK individuals should be rooted in the fear of being stigmatized by the state. This situation strengthens the totalitarian structure of the state [37].

The study confirms that stigma damages mental health [9,10], and individuals with deteriorated mental health are more likely to turn to suicide.

Conclusion

This study reveals that individuals and their families have been subjected to intense social stigma and exclusion following the state's decree law (KHK) policies. The terrorist label imposed by the state has caused significant destruction in the social environments of individuals and their families, leading to a loss of reputation and exclusion, which has driven some individuals to suicide. Particularly, the removal of professional symbols, such as badges and weapons, from public servants like police officers and commissioners has led to a loss of honor and dignity, increasing suicidal tendencies. However, individuals with leftist-socialist backgrounds, who were also affected by the KHK, did not perceive stigma and exclusion. This is because, within leftist-socialist circles, the state is not sanctified, and they regard the state as the source of all evil (As a Kurd, we expect nothing good from the state) (G-XII).

Limitations of the Study

The most significant limitation of this study is the researcher's identity as an academic affected by the KHK. While emotional permeability between the researcher and the participants was more easily established, the researcher exerted additional effort and time to maintain objectivity. During this process, professional support for emotional healing was sought.

The inclusion of 29 participants allows for generalizations in qualitative research design. However, studies with a higher number of participants would provide more diversity in the data. The unequal number of suicide victims [11] and bereaved relatives [18] could be seen as a limitation, restricting the diversity of the findings.

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