

# ISLAM AND DISASTER: A REFINED CONCEPT THROUGH COMMUNITY'S DISASTER PERCEPTION OF POST THE 2004 INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study is to present the Islamic conception on the disasters that accepted by the community from a case of Aceh of post the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

**Methodology:** The data was collected from several interviews with the key persons in tsunami-affected areas. The interviewed key persons were *Tengkus* or *Ulamas* who have a role in constructing the community disaster perception, community members and related stakeholders. The interview results were identified and coded based on the similarity and related to the study purpose.

**Main Findings:** The interpretation of disaster based on the religious context of post the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami has been trended negatively to construct the community's disaster perception. The perceptions are most driven by the key person in society such as *Tengkus* or *Ulamas* but it seems to be far from disaster risk reduction goals. The disaster risk reduction efforts should pay on this matter in order to make community more resilient to face future disasters.

**Applications of this study:** This study can be useful as the important noted in strengthening and managing disaster risk perception through community disaster preparedness based on scientific explanation and its relationship to the religious perspectives. The findings from this study could be included through the disaster risk reduction effort, policy, programs.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** The originality of this study lays on the fact that the religious leaders in the community such as *Tengkus* or *Ulama* of post the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami take roles in constructing the community disaster perceptions. Researchers have not yet fully studied the development process of disaster perception based on the religious perspectives of post-disaster and how to deal on it.

**Keywords:** disaster risk, capacity, ulama, disaster theology, religion

## INTRODUCTION

Aceh is recognized as a starting entry point for spreading Islam in Southeast Asia. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam ruled, Aceh had become the center of Islamic studies and international trades ([Hilhorst, 2013](#)). Many scholars and international students from various regions studied in Aceh to learn the Islamic studies subject, or they stayed awhile in and then continuing to learn Islam in Mecca. Since that time Aceh was known as the 'Veranda of Mecca', which means the front entrance of Mecca ([Reid, 2004](#)). The Islamic values are rooted through the culture and law system for hundred years in Aceh society ([Pringle, 2010](#); [Reid, 2004](#)). So, the religious perspective should be considered when researchers conduct further studies in the context of Aceh.

Aceh had also faced the longtime conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (FAM) and the Indonesian Armed Military for more over 30 years (1976-2005) ([Gaillard, Clavé, & Kelman, 2008](#)). On December 26, 2004, Aceh suffered the 9.2  $M_w$  of earthquake triggered the massive tsunami, reached 7 km inland ([BRR, 2009](#)). This situation has been made Aceh as the lacking capacity in coping with the development processes in many sectors ([Bryant, 2014](#)). Six months after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami both of the parties agreed to stop conflict by signing Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Helsinki on August 15, 2005 ([Gaillard et al., 2008](#); [Sukma, 2012](#)). Since that time the Sharia Law is implemented through Aceh society. As consequences, the role of Islamic leader called *Tengku*<sup>1</sup> or *Ulama* is strengthened in constructing the society common perception and knowledge ([Aspinall, 2007](#)). The longtime conflict was contributed to the lack of Aceh development processes both structural and non-structural, including the human development capacity ([Aspinall, 2009](#)). Even though there have been improvements could be seen after recovery and rehabilitation phases of post the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, but this situation is not met significant changes to construct the disaster preparedness ([TDMRC & IRP, 2012](#)).

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the National Law on DRR efforts formally established by Indonesian Government to manage every possibility the occurrences of disasters in the future time by including the local resources into DRR efforts ([Butt, 2014](#)). In 2007 Indonesia released the Disaster Law No. 24/2007. As results, Indonesia established the Disaster

<sup>1</sup> Tengku is a religious leader in Aceh. Tengku is also defined as Ulama that regarded as the guardians, transmitters, and interpreters of religious knowledge of Islamic doctrine and law through the community.

Management Agency in National, Province, and District level. Since that time, the disaster paradigm has been changing from the response into a comprehensive disaster management. Many actors have taken the role based on their concern and background in promoting, implementing the new DRR approaches ([Butt, 2014](#)) and it is continuing until now.

Even though the DRR efforts already implemented and conducted by many related agency and stakeholders, but it seems not a significant impact to make people more readiness in facing the disasters. The major problem is the lack of human resources capacity who are pointed in managing disaster risk ([Dougall, Horsley, & McLisky, 2008](#); [Kusumasari, 2012](#); [Kusumasari & Alam, 2012](#)). In the level of community, some of challenges and issues have appeared. For example, the role of local leaders in taking and mainstreaming DRR efforts is not yet fully included, the integration of disaster education through the curricula is not yet implemented, the political and reintegration after the conflict have also made Aceh faces another transition situation ([Callaway, Yim, Stack, & Burkle, 2012](#); [Comfort, 2000](#); [I Kelman, 2006](#); [Ilan Kelman, 2018](#); [Waizenegger & Hyndman, 2010](#)).

Before the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, disaster still considered as unavoidable such as the act of God or the collection of people sins ([Ghafori-Ashtiany, 2009](#); [Ramli, Mokhtar, & Abdul Aziz, 2014](#)). As consequences disaster trended and focused on the crisis and emergency stages. After 2004, it was starting changes to be recognized that the vulnerabilities in disaster should be considering into a comprehensive approach which includes many factors such as population growth, urbanization, environmental degradation, climate change ([Hilhorst, 2013](#)). It has been made to see the disaster more comprehensively.

## PURPOSE AND METHOD

The purpose of this study is to present the empirical theory on the relationship between the Islamic conception of disasters and its practices through disaster perception after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. This is a qualitative study that data were collected from semi-structured interviews with the key persons in tsunami-affected areas where *Tengkus* or *Ulamas* take the role in constructing the community disaster perception. The data was also formulated from literature reviews in the context of the Islamic values on the disaster issues and challenges.

## THE ISLAMIC INTERPRETATION ON DISASTER

Every Muslim believes that Islam has a comprehensive teaching system in guiding human daily activities. Qur'an and Hadith are used as basic sources in translating a variety of basic values on human problem. The classical Islamic scholars taught that all dimensions of human practices and rituals should be based on an interpretation from the *Ulama*. This interpretation is often functioned as a guideline for Muslims. Even though there are different interpretations on the basis of this religion among scholars, it should be no matter due to the differences occurred will direct to the similar goal which is being closer to Allah.

## THE CLASSIC CONCEPT ON DISASTER

The concept of disaster and its relationship to the religious perspective has emerged the new concept of disaster in the past few decades. From the traditional point of view, the classical Islamic scholars have not any details and clear interpretations on the disasters. Most of the classical Islamic scholars associated the disaster to a dimension, which interprets as the relationship between human and their faith in God. For example, a disaster is caused by the collection of human sins or manifested of the angry of God.

Most of the classical Islamic scholars see the term of disaster in an anthropocentric view that God has unlimited power to the human ([Iqbal, 2013](#)). God has a progressive right to give a reprimand or even a punishment on the sins that human committed ([Iqbal, 2013](#)). This point of views has been made the disaster accepted as committed of sins by humans.

Some textual verses in the Qur'an interpret to support this assumption. Some verses mention the disaster as follows: disaster is interpreted as a disaster (Quran-Ash-Shura; 42:30), disaster is seen as reinforcements or tests (Qur'an; Al-Mulk: 67:2) and, more than 60 words the Qur'an say that the disasters as slander with reinforcements. For example, as mentions in the Quran; 3:186, 8:28, 21:35, and 64:15. These verses interpret that human sins could cause or trigger disasters. This interpretation could probably occur due to the lack of capacity to see the inter-relationship between religion, science, society.

However, at least three are three Islamic perspectives have been accepted in guiding the interrelationship disaster and Islam ([see Table 1](#)). Firstly, the disaster is manifested of a calamity; secondly, the disaster is a test; thirdly, the disaster is a punishment. These perspectives are not only found in Islamic society but could also be found in other religion and belief. In theological discourses, it is common to find that the disaster has the tight relation between human activities and God. This interpretation cannot be separated from the messages conveyed in the scriptures, which are simply understood that God has the power to make a decision on humans as a consequence of what human had done.

Moreover, the interpretation of disaster based on the Quran point of view has been popular among Islamic scholars ([Shihab, 2006](#)). This interpretation could also be a foundation to see the comprehensive perspectives on the view of Islam on disasters. Firstly, the disaster interpreted as a calamity. The disaster is something that accepted as an unpleasant thing. For example, that Allah delivers a test to humans with fear, hunger, lack of wealth (Qur'an: Al-Baqara; 2:155-156). In

another verse, the calamity is a result of human actions (Quran: Ash-Shura; 42:30, An-Nisa; 4:79). Disaster in the term of a calamity is also interpreted as the result of human sin (Quran; Al-A'raf: 7;100). Al-Maghari, a classic *mufasssir* (a person who has the ability to interpret context or commentary for a clear understanding of the Qur'an content) explains that the disaster is caused by the human bad deeds and sins. The bad deeds and sins here are not limited what the common perceptions that accepted in the most of Islam society as a kind of action that disobey of God commands, but it also interpreted as the bad behavior on managing the society needs. So, the corruption behavior, the unmanaged vital infrastructure for society are also sins (Ghaforly-Ashtiany, 2009).

**Table 1. The Terminology of Disaster in Islamic Perspective**

No	Terminology	Cause	Form	Object	Aim
1	A calamity	Sins and human behavior, both physical and non-physical activities.	Something unpleasant	Sinners	To forgive and recount that human being so as not to despair despite the consequences of their actions
2	An exam	The authority of God even without human error	Something fun ( <i>minhah</i> ) and something unpleasant ( <i>mihnah</i> )	All humans	To forgive the sins, To increase the level of <i>taqwa</i> , To clean the soul, To test the quality of faith
3	A punishment	Human iniquity	Destructive torture	All humans	To remind, so the human won't repeat any negligent actions in the future time

Secondly, disaster is a test. In the Qur'an, a test interprets as a disaster (*bala*) or *fitna*. A test is given to whomever God wants with a specific purpose. For example, a death is a phase in a human life cycle that human could not avoid it (Quran: Al-Mulk; 67:2). A death is a kind of disaster to test the quality of human faith (Quran: Muhammad: 47:31). According to al-Zamakhsyari, God wants to test the quality of human faith in order to make him/her stronger (Hidayatullah, 2009). Even the Prophets, like Prophet Ibrahim was also tested (Qur'an: Al-Baqara; 1:124). The disaster in the sense of a test is not only a bad thing that happens to humans so they don't like it, but also the fun things could be associated as a disaster. An example of a disaster that associate as fun things could refer to the story of Prophet of Sulaiman that Allah gave him so many blesses and power. The power was given to Prophet Sulaiman as a test on his faith in Allah. The power that Allah sent to Sulaiman could be a disaster if he could not perform it in the right track for his people prosperity.

Thirdly, disaster is also interpreted as a punishment. The Qur'an mentions that the punishment is a painful punishment (Qur'an: An-Naml: 27:21, Al-Baqara; 1:10). A torment is given to those who are ungodly. Many verses in the Qur'an mentions about the punishment or the disaster hit the followers of previous Prophet's was earlier due to the disobedient to Allah. But at the end of the day they will get the God forgiveness if repent or ask on it (Qur'an: Al-Anfal; 8:33). Therefore, in the context of denying this teaching, they will be given a warning first. Occasionally Allah will not punish those who have not received a warning (Surah al-Shura: 15). These dooms have the purpose that they continue good deeds and no longer repeat ungodly acts as they did before (Quran; Taha: 134; Al-Anbiya:46; Yunus:54). Three main terminologies proposed by Qur'an could be summarized in the table 1 (Zainuddin, 2015).

## ENRICHING THE CLASSICAL CONCEPTION ON DISASTER OF POST THE 2004 INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the new concept on disaster reduction efforts has been introduced by an individual, groups, and related institutions. The new approach has tried to strengthen the vital concept of the disaster based on the religious perspectives. Disaster is not only accepted as the destiny that human should accept it, but also human could change destiny by improving their capacity. But, most DRR efforts seem to be separated and done based on their background. As consequences, the interpretation of religion based on DRR does not sustain based on DRR approach.

Even though that there already the increasing the number of various efforts in accepting the disaster through dealing with it, but we could still find some of unlinked between DRR efforts and the capacity of the community to take the right decisions and actions when disasters occur (Rahman, Sakurai, & Munadi, 2017). Since the emergence of a new concept in which disaster is interpreted as an ordinary "natural law", the modern scholars in Islam societies have also been tried to reformulate their understanding on the natural phenomena more comprehensively.

This concept is based on the scientific point of view that nature (include the natural disasters) is also has their own rule as manifest an obedience to Allah's command. So, nature is a member of the universe where human need to be considered to be apart of them. For example the movement of the earth plate as a manifestation of an obedience to Allah's command. The human feels it as an earthquake. This interpretation has been made the Islamic scholars could develop the wider interpretation of sins and its relationship to the occurrences of disasters. Sins are not only interpreted as human disobeyed on God commands but also must be entered to the essential and basic concept of sins (macro and micro interpretations).

According to Ghafory and Ashtiany (2009), there are noble correlations between religion and DRR. The understanding of disaster based on the scientific approach could reduce the disaster misconceptions, for example as a necessary step in the process of DRR and any kind of the improvement to make our society better is viewed and explained as the love of God for humankind (Ghafory-Ashtiany, 2009).

1. Even though there has been a complicated situation in understanding the disaster mitigation aspect and its relationship to the Islamic values. Several verses in the Qur'an could potentially be interpreted and related to disaster mitigation and risk reduction efforts. For example, there are five aspects in disaster management efforts raised by the National Disaster Management Agency in 2011 that could be a platform in interpreting the disaster from the Islam point of views as follows: (1) the desired future impact must be involved a planning and process in determining the impact (impact analysis);
2. The desired future situation should be based on the present reality so that the gap can be identified (gap analysis);
3. The various endeavours and alternatives should be formulated (emergency scenario);
4. The effectiveness and efficiency must be concerned with a good alternative (allocation of tasks and resources);
5. The efforts should be detailed in order to provide a clear line in helping to create an appropriate decision and policy (synchronization and harmonization).

From the platform above, there are relevant verses could be found in the Qur'an, for example, the person who is believed to always be in a state of alert before a dangerous thing could happen and occur.

"O you who have believed persevere and endure and remain stationed and fear Allah that you may be successful." (Qur'an; Ali-Imran: 3;200) (Al-Hilali & Khan, 2018).

"That is because your Lord would not destroy the cities for wrong doing while their people were unaware." (Qur'an; Al-An'am: 6:131) (Al-Hilali & Khan, 2018).

## RESULTS

The interpretation of disaster has started to integrate through the Islamic point of view after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. However, the interpretation is based on limited assumption and still far from the way on what should we take forward in reducing the worst impact of disasters. For example, the acceptance of the disaster as a natural phenomenon that could occur anytime as the result of the universe system, but only comes from limited *Tengkus* or *Ulamas*.

The results show that most *Tengkus* or *Ulamas* interpreted the disaster based on the limited assumption that the disaster occurs as a result of the human bad deeds and sins. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was interpreted based on the religious point of views as a result of human bad deeds. But, some *Tengku* and *Ulamas* regarded it as a test for Muslims in Aceh for their faith.

Moreover, another context showed that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami did not only struck Muslims but also various other religious backgrounds of people. For the Muslim, the disaster could be accepted as a "*hikmah*" (the lessons learned to make a Muslim better). The study found that the "*hikmah*" had been important when talks the term of disaster and Islam. This is the way to accept what had happened to humans and what could probably occur in the future time without blaming others.

In fact, it can be a very personal lesson that is only obtained by someone and not by others. The *hikmah* is that people who experience a calamity know that God loves him; God way to raise his/her faith level ; so that human should not have any kinds of arrogance; human get closer to God; human will always aware that only God is omnipotent; human will more knowledgeable himself and his creator; human will always on the trackway to heaven; human can grow the collective solidarity as a member of nature. With this in mind, some contemporary Muslim scholars believe that disaster is a part of the scenario of God to summon people to return to His way again (Hidayatullah, 2009).

In addition, a new interpretation of the verses that have been quoted by classical scholars in understanding disasters and looking for other verses that are relevant in dealing with disasters.

"Has appeared the corruption in the land and the sea for what have earned (the) hands (of) people, so that He may let them taste a part (of) that which they have done so that they may return." (Qur'an; Ar-Rum: 30:41) (Al-Hilali & Khan, 2018).

A disaster occurred in order to make a human go back to the right track. In this new understanding, this verse is understood to show that natural disasters occur not by chance, but because of human sin. "Sin" here could be interpreted as a negligence in managing and adapting with nature or environment.

## DISCUSSIONS

The interpretation of disasters is the way for Muslim in understanding the changes in nature or environment and could adapt within appropriate manners. In another hand that a natural disaster could occur as the way for nature to commit on the God will and accept by a human as a destiny. This point of views could be interpreted that the disaster can be mitigated by strengthening the disaster capacity. The local context should be considered when the DRR approach that should



disseminate to *Tengkus* or *Ulamas*. It is not easy to change and penetrate to the *Tengkus*'s disaster perception based on the DRR approach. The interpretation of the disaster on the Islamic values show that the disaster has to be implemented through a comprehensive understanding.

## CONCLUSION

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami has been made improvements into various aspects of Aceh lives including the disaster preparedness. The development process of the disaster preparedness is also influenced by Aceh conflict and the peace situation post the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In Aceh society, roles of *Tengkus* are significant in guiding the community knowledge through the decision.

The disaster knowledge that believed by most of *Tengkus* or *Ulamas* based on the understanding that the disaster occurs caused by human sins or human bad deeds. The *Tengkus* or *Ulamas* seems does not have enough knowledge in reducing the risk and it could also contribute to the increase of the vulnerability. The statement such as "the tsunami chapter two" will occur when *Tengkus* frequently state many people far from their religious activities *Tengkus* but far from the scientific explanation. This situation has created the confusion through the fatalism in accepting the natural phenomena such as the disaster.

It is important to intervene and provide the *Tengkus* knowledge with the appropriate concept of DRR based on the Islamic approaches since *Tengkus* and *Ulamas* has significant roles in constructing the community perception and knowledge.

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