

Disaster Management and Faith-Based Organizations: An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Regardless their complexity which overwhelms the capacity of the affecting community to cope with, disasters are increasingly recognizing the necessity of an ultimate response drawing on an extensive variety of skills and manpower. Disaster management requires collaboration between various serving agencies including government, private sector, local communities and faith-based organizations due to the limited available resources. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the participation of faith-based organization in reducing the impacts during disaster situations. The paper therefore, focuses on the Islamic teachings in disaster management through a comprehensive review of the available literature. The paper includes an overview of disaster management, act of God, and view of Islam on disaster management, and faith-based organizations and their contribution in disaster management. It has been found that Islamic based organizations usually have advantage and great potential in terms of cultural acceptance to offer immediate assistance in disaster events and to involve in long-time recovery operations when outside agencies return back home.

Keywords: Disaster; Act of God; Disaster management; Religion; Response; View of Islam; Faith-based organizations

Introduction

In old civilizations, disaster was a part and parcel of religious traditions, for a long time people believed that Gods brought wealth and destruction. Human knowledge of floods, earthquakes, storms and eruptions was too rare to allow them understand those events properly. They admitted that dominant and random powers stand behind their sufferings and each natural disaster has its proper God [1]. In Egyptian old civilization for example, people thought in Nile River as a gift from Gods while ancient Central Americans believed that the earth has a square shape stands on four Gods. Greeks believed that the volcano that destroyed Atlantis was a punishment of its people's arrogance and Roman thought in Vulcan, the God of fire who is responsible of volcanic eruptions [2]. In Islam, a perception that disaster would be an outcome of Allah's judgment to areas of large immorality limited the reaction to such events [3]. However, there is no evidence in Hadith that disaster is a result of Allah's wrath on people's disbelief or unfaithfulness. Hence, when talking about Act of God people neglect the scientific reason which proposes that severe damages and losses in life and assets are criminal negligence and points out that human awareness can save lives [1].

Disasters are managed with a shared responsibility of local, organizational, political, professional, local and faith-based agencies. The work to overwhelm a disaster called disaster management and it consists of four phases: preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery. This continuous process is often called: disaster management cycle [4]. Also, in order to cope properly with a disaster, it is required to raise the awareness between individuals, government's bodies, local and faith-based communities about the damages caused by disasters

[5]. This paper discusses the participation of Islamic organizations as a part of faith-based agencies in disaster management; the aim is to improve their participation to minimize the losses of lives and assets during disaster situations. Also, it is to show the perspective of Islam on disasters as well as what Islam mentioned about disaster management and what we should do to cope with such events.

Methodology

The paper presents the Islamic perspective in disasters and explains the misunderstandings regarding the fatalism and Allah's will as well as it considers what Islam said about preparing for such events. This paper also addresses the participation of Islamic-based organizations in disaster management and its involvement in offering different response and relief services to the affected societies.

Islam and Disasters

In general, all studies have common agreement that disasters are extreme environmental events that occur suddenly and affect large areas and bring severe damages of lives, property or natural environment and severely affect the local activities of a community [6-8] or one of its parts in both predictable and unpredictable ways [9,10]. Hence, Natural and man-made disasters occur every day but the impact of the event differs in scale from "9.11" and SARS for example to Tsunami, volcanic eruptions and floods and so forth. The world is not only facing natural disasters and major accidents such as earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, explosions, volcano eruptions, and epidemics, but also from socio-technical and technological failures, and socio-economical disasters such as pollution, poverty, and terrorism attacks [11].

The issue of disasters and human miseries is an unsolved subject in science and religion. Several questions arise at the occurrence of every

disaster about the real causes of the disaster and the responsible for its happening [12]. Besides, People have different opinions regarding these events. A part of them considers what happens as a chance, where others believe that disasters are God's will and judgment [13]. In this context, a significant amount of literature has been published on disasters in Islam and it is increasingly requested to change the attitude of traditional societies concerning the perception that disasters are God's wrath [1]. In this part, the author reviewed some literature and highlighted some key concepts about disasters, God's wrath and view of Islam on such events.

Ashtiany [1] discusses the view of Islam on disasters specifically on earthquake risk reduction; he argues the need to a new approach to clarify the traditional belief that disasters are Allah's will or expression of Allah's wrath. In this regard, Raele [14] cited: "Many religious leaders encourage us to think of disasters not as events that can be avoided through mitigation and preparedness, but as a kind of divine retribution. Another speaker at the Parliament forum, Pakistani academic Hafiz Aziz ur Rehman, explained that, in the aftermath of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, many Islamic leaders interpreted the disaster as punishment from God". However, many reviewers in Islamic newspapers argue that the last tsunami (2004) which hits large zones in Southeast Asia was Allah's judgment against places with great immorality. Hence, some Islamic governors and clerics agree with Allah's judgment on the touched countries for their immorality; they think about what happened as a test for devoted people and a penalty for the unjust ones. Probably, this was the reason that the richest nations and bodies in the Muslim world were amongst the lowest donors of support to their afflicted brothers and sisters in tsunami, 2004 (UAE \$20 Million, Kuwait \$2 million, Qatar \$10 million, and Saudi Arabia \$10 million) [3].

Overall, Quran cites many natural disasters by name, such as Rajfah (earthquake) (29:37), (101:01), Tufan (flood) (29:14), and Hasib (violent tornado) (54:34). These disasters were addressed to specific folks in specific eras and can be used to highlight the events of the end of world and the Day of Judgment as well [15]. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said "The Hour (Last Day) will not be established until (religious) knowledge will be taken away (by the death of religious learned men), earthquakes will be very frequent, time will pass quickly, afflictions will appear, murders will increase and money will overflow amongst you". Further, Zabeer [13] highlights the perspective of Quran and Sunnah for natural disasters interpretation and he arrives at three important arguments; punishment of Allah for people with disbelief or great immorality, warning for offenders, and a test of devotees. Solihu [15] introduces a framework to understand specific disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones, and floods based on the perspective of Quran. Therefore, alike to other beliefs, Islam affords answers stand on hope and inspiration, not wrath and punishment. Muslims believe in Allah "The Just" does not penalize huge number of innocent people for the immorality of a few [16]. The Qur'an does not state that disasters happen because of Allah's wrath [12]. Instead, Quran is rich of passages (Ayat) which demonstrate at first that Allah always send a messenger to a mankind to show them the straight path and to warn them of their sin, Allah said in Surat Al-'A'raf (07:35): "O children of Adam, if there come to you messengers from among you relating to you My verses, then whoever fears Allah and reforms -there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve". Thus, the act of God is not arbitrary, it occurs only if those people intentionally neglected and rejected their messengers, then divine punishment will take place as an expression of their evil, this is stated in Qur'an at several places such as in Surat Al-'Isrā' (17:15): "Whoever is guided is only guided for [the

benefit of] his soul. And whoever errs only errs against it. And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And never would we punish until we sent a messenger" and Surat Al-Qaşaş (28:59): "And never would your Lord have destroyed the cities until He had sent to their mother a messenger reciting to them our verses. And we would not destroy the cities except while their people were wrongdoers".

It is important also to mention that the divine chastisement always distinguishes between the followers and the opposites of Allah's messenger. Several stories cited in the holy Quran describe that Allah never destroy virtuous person, which is confirmed in Surat Al-'An'am (06:47): "Say, Have you considered: if the punishment of Allah should come to you unexpectedly or manifestly, will any be destroyed but the wrongdoing people?". However, opponents got punished, for example in Surat Hūd (11:94): "And when our command came, we saved Shu'ayb and those who believed with him, by mercy from us. And the shriek seized those who had wronged, and they became within their homes [corpses] fallen prone".

Knowledge serves human beings and makes his life easier. However, beyond the advance of science and technology nowadays human felt able to master the nature. Many disasters clearly show how human and technology are weak in front of the nature. In addition, technological disasters, similar to natural disasters, happen without prior warning. Kobe, Japan 1995 for example, witnessed a large subsidence due to a 6.9 scale earthquake. Structures designed to resist such events have collapsed in few seconds in spite of the advanced technology in earthquake technology (Figure 1) [17]. Alternatively, Social disasters and backwardness in all aspects of life will obviously appear when a society starts to diverge from the divine moral values to corruption, discrimination and offensiveness. It is explained in Quran in many places such as in Surat Ar-Rūm: "Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]". It is important to mention that the Arabic word "fasaad" means corruption, encompass all kinds of community-based and environmental issues [12].

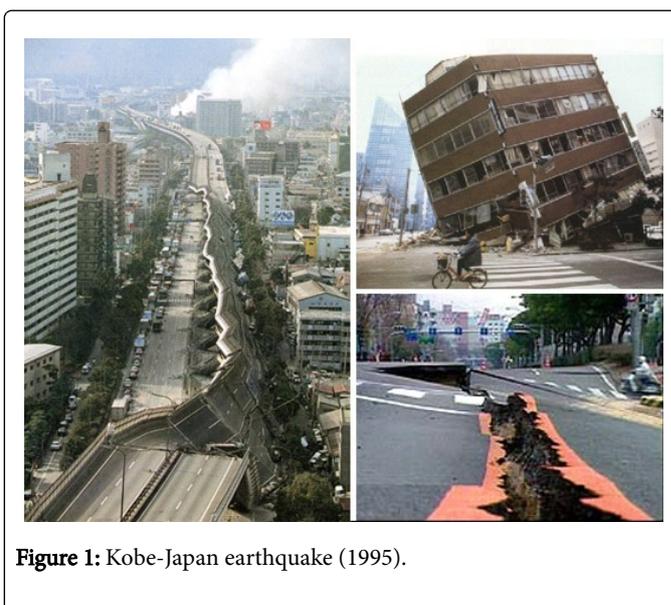


Figure 1: Kobe-Japan earthquake (1995).

Islam and Disaster Management

Disasters come suddenly, swiftly and inevitably. Thus, the occurrence of such disasters is likely to be an ultimate test to any community ability to effectively cope with. It is possible therefore, to reduce the impacts of natural hazards through an efficient disaster management, while technological disasters can be avoided or eliminated through good engineering design, optimized operation, periodic maintenance and continuous inspection activities [7,10]. Disaster management process encompasses many tasks including: preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery.

Muslims believe in Qadha-o-Qadr. However, humans have to prepare and find a way to avoid such events and to do whatever possible to reduce the losses in human and assets and to prevent the possible disasters from happening. Quran and Hadith provide many ways on how to deal with disasters. Overall, in this part the researcher cited some reported events and examples in Quran and Sunnah which provide teachings in coping with disasters and doing the best in order to minimize the losses of lives and proprieties.

Among the clearest examples of protection during disasters is what recited about the story of Prophet Noah (PBUH), Allah said in Surat Al-Mu'minun (23:27): *"So We inspired to him, 'Construct the ship under Our observation, and Our inspiration, and when Our command comes and the oven overflows, put into the ship from each [creature] two mates and your family, except those for whom the decree [of destruction] has proceeded. And do not address me concerning those who have wronged; indeed, they are to be drowned"*. This reflects a good engineering design for safety during disaster situations and the importance of disaster preparedness in reducing the loss in lives and properties when disasters take place [1]. Besides, following the story of prophet Yusuf (Josef), Allah narrated these events in Surat Yusuf (12:46) thus: [He said], *"Joseph, O man of truth, explain to us about seven fat cows eaten by seven [that were] lean, and seven green spikes [of grain] and others [that were] dry - that I may return to the people; perhaps they will know [about you]"*. Josef interpreted the dream to him, that there will be seven wealth coming years with an exceeded harvest if the land was correctly cultivated: [Joseph] said, *"You will plant for seven years consecutively; and what you harvest leave in its spikes, except a little from which you will eat"* (Quran 12:47). The crop should be stored. After this, there will be seven years of famine during this period the exceed crop would be used, *Then will come after that seven difficult [years] which will consume what you saved for them, except a little from which you will store"* (Quran 12:48). Josef also recommend that people during the famine period to keep some grain for the next seeding. As the drought come, all Egypt's surrounding areas was affected, Joseph prepared for the famine period during the seven years of good harvest, the disaster was well-managed as there is enough gain to feed the affected people. Another story of how to prevent social disasters (Terrorism and wars) is what Allah narrate about Dhul-Qarnayn in Surat Al Kahf (18:94): *"They said, 'O Dhul-Qarnayn, indeed Gog and Magog are [great] corrupters in the land. So may we assign for you an expenditure that you might make between us and them a barrier?' and 'So Gog and Magog were not able to pass over it, nor were they able [to effect] in it any penetration". Therefore, what recited in Surat An-Naml (18:27) "Until, when they came upon the valley of the ants, an ant said, 'O ants, enter your dwellings that you not be crushed by Solomon and his soldiers while they perceive not"* reflects to avoiding a disaster.

On the other hand, Takaful is the Islamic way to protect the financial losses due to disasters (insurance). According to Muhammad

Ayub, Takaful is not a new concept in Islamic commercial law. The contemporary jurists acknowledge that the foundation of shared responsibility or Takaful was laid down in the system of 'Aaqilah', which was an arrangement of mutual help or indemnification customary in some tribes at the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). In case of any natural calamity, everybody used to contribute something until the loss was indemnified". In addition, Quran and Sunnah have expressed the approaches to cope with disasters and catastrophes. These approaches according to Zaheer [13] include:

- Piety: Allah resolve peoples' difficulties and bless them when they become pious and devout, this is outlined in Surat Al-'A`raf (7:96): *"And if only the people of the cities had believed and feared Allah, We would have opened upon them blessings from the heaven and the earth; but they denied [the messengers], so We seized them for what they were earning"*.
- Repentance: Allah forgives people and removes their nuisance when they regret and repent. It is explained in Surat Al-'Anfal (8:33): *"But Allah would not punish them while you, [O Muhammad], are among them, and Allah would not punish them while they seek forgiveness"*.
- Patience: it is important to mention that patience is worthy for those are being tested by Allah, they will be prized if they show patience in face of disasters. This is described in Quran in Surat Al-Baqarah (2:155-157): *"And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, Who, when disaster strikes them, say, 'Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.'; Those are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. And it is those who are the [rightly] guided"*.

Islamic Based Organizations in Disaster Management

Many post-disaster studies clearly showed that people often use religion to handle a disaster especially when victims search for comfort and hope to return their lives back to normalcy [3]. However, Faith-based organizations work together with local and governmental agencies to assist people in need and respond effectively to various disasters. FBOs encompass any organization, agency, or project that offers human relief services and stands on integrated belief concept; it takes advantage in disaster response due to its skills that are not incorporated formally in disaster management plans [18]. Therefore, faith-based activities marked a new generation of integrated and increased partnership between government and local communities which usually religiously linked [19]. They provide a large amount of services in addition to accommodation and sheltering [20]. FBOs become a major player in international community for disaster response [21]. In the US for example, FBOs are playing an important role in social programs and they received a special support from the federal government since January 2001; the government was grateful for the capacity of FBOs to make quick decisions to help the local community after hurricane Katrina [18]. Also, the decision makers become more aware by the role which world's NGOs play in offering help during and after disasters [21]. Hence, it is observed that FBOs work in transparency, less bureaucracy, with available and diverse staff from different backgrounds and professions [18]. In this regard, FBOs become more attached to governments through partnerships, collaborations and funding provisions [20], in many countries NGOs are more active than governments, they have a whole relief programs with large fund and they carry more reliability among the donors than governmental agencies [21]. Therefore, members of faith-based

agencies frequently benefit some cultural acceptance among locals which is sometimes not important during disasters such as in Afghanistan for example; where there is a doubt of non-Muslim relief members. Instead, Islamic relief worldwide has a reason to take place in relief activities nearby Kandahar; some other Christian NGOs impelled to employ local afghan Muslim such as NGOs TEAR Australia [14].

Donating (Taba'roè) for people in need, involving in social activities, and cooperating with others in all aspects of life are highly valued acts in Islam [3]; (Taba'roè) is a kind of donation given to support the fellow in need. In this context Allah said in Surat Al-Hashr (59:09): *"And [also for] those who were settled in al-Madinah and [adopted] the faith before them. They love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts of what the emigrants were given but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul - it is those who will be the successful". Also, Mohammed (PBUH) stated: "Whosoever alleviates the difficulties of a needy person who cannot pay his debt Allah will alleviate his difficulties in both this world and the Hereafter"* [22].

Muslims across the globe collected more than 1\$ billion for victims of hurricane Katrina, Gulf oil-rich countries people were generous by donation and prayers for victims. Mosques as well as others religions' temples and churches in the US involved in collecting donations and funds to assist the victims of earthquakes [16]. However, except in UK, Islamic charities have faced several obstacles especially after 9/11; western governments suspect that they can be used to cover terrorist activities. Switzerland for example, took steps against bona fide Islamic charities [23].

In Islamic countries, the local religious people often take advantage in disaster situations. Imams, Islamic associations and charity communities are largely accepted to offer aid and to handle relief activities. They have a great potential to help in disaster situations; they are integrated in the local society, speak the same dialect and recognize the local traditions. They can absolutely profit from the weekly religious meeting on Friday prayer (Salat al-Jomoaa) to collect fund and manpower to cope with disasters. They can also open mosques as a shelter for homeless or for giving food as a Muslim's duty toward his Muslim brothers [14]. In this regard prophet Mohammed (PBUH) said: *"The example of the Muslims in their love and mercy for each other is like the body. If one part is afflicted, all the other parts rally to its aid with fever and sleeplessness"*. Moreover, Islamic local organizations involved in disaster management are available at the scene of disaster to ensure quick response, and help the community to return back to normal situations even better than governments after outside NGOs and international agencies return back home [10,23].

Rahman [10] acknowledges this point at the parliament forum regarding Kashmir earthquake: *"it was local Islamic NGOs and volunteers from across the faith community that came to the aid of victims, speeding up the response process significantly"*. However, the same thing doesn't happen in Aceh during tsunami, 2004. Muhammadiyah, an Islamic reformist and social organization of 30 million bodies in Indonesia couldn't get the necessary funding to apply its projects of reconstruction and recovery in Aceh. Therefore, there is no accredited Islamic based organization by USAID to offer post-disaster assistance in Indonesia [14,23] regardless of the US government initiative to tender religious leaders [23,24].

Conclusion

It is obvious. However, to change the perception that disasters are Allah's wrath in order to improve the communities' involvement in disaster management. Muslim is encouraged to do whatever possible to prevent the potential disasters from happening and also to do the best to minimize the losses in lives and properties if these disasters take place. Benthall [23] states: *"It must also remain a matter for speculation how powerful a force in the humanitarian movement the Islamic charities might become if they were encouraged to develop their potential as a vehicle for redistribution of resources and disaster response and preparedness in the Muslim world"*. He also cited what an informant told him that the equality of all the mankind in Islam makes a different good impression: *"It is good to see Islamic Relief's expats praying and fasting with the people and the brotherhood spirit during Ramadan. People stand shoulder to shoulder to pray and the driver may be the prayer leader, with the head of mission behind him"*.

In this paper, the researcher introduced an overview of what Islam said about disasters, clarified the misconception regarding the occurrence of such disasters, and presenting the perspective of Islam in disaster management. Besides, this paper discussed some issues of Islamic organizations' involvement in disaster management. However, In order to improve the participation of Islamic communities in disaster management, Islamic FBOs should integrate in the whole disaster management policy which encompasses all phases of disaster management.

Notes

Holy Qur'an: Sahih international English translation, by Amatullah J. Bantley, Umm Muhammad, Aminah Assami, Mary M. Kennedy, available at: <http://quran.com/>

The researcher used the Arabic interpretations of the holy Quran verses (Ayat) retrieved from <http://ar.islamway.net/>

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