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Some Islamic Responses in the Aftermath  
of the Asian Tsunami

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# “Conspiracy, Sign or Silence?” Some Islamic Responses in the Aftermath of the Asian Tsunami<sup>1</sup>

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The tsunami that hit many parts of Asia on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004 naturally evoked different responses from the adherents of the various faiths represented in the region, namely, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and, to a small degree, Christianity. This paper will focus only on the Islamic response to the disaster which can be conveniently classified into three main categories: conspiracy theory, sign, and silence. Some of the reasons for the differing responses from Islam will be explored. As Malaysia was one of the countries in the path of the Asian tsunami, particular focus will be placed on the Malaysian Islamic response which attempts to give a more balanced view of interpreting the disaster. The paper will consider a reading of selected texts from the Quran quoted by some key Malaysian Islamic scholars in their response to the tsunami.

## **CONSPIRACY THEORY**

The first category of response is the conspiracy theory that arose in many Islamic quarters, stretching from Egypt to Turkey. The concocted theories generally put the blame on America, Israel or India for testing underground nuclear devices in the Indian Ocean and hence disturbing

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the 2005 SBL International Meeting in Singapore.

the earth’s tectonic plates.<sup>2</sup> For example, *Al-Jazeera.com* reported that many people put the blame, not on Mother Nature, but on “government cover-ups, top secret military testing in the waters of the Indian Ocean and even aliens attempting to correct Earth’s ‘wobbly’ rotation.”<sup>3</sup> The Egyptian newspaper *Al-Usbu* and the Turkish newspaper *Yeni Safaki* both said it was all caused by a US/Israeli/Indian nuclear test.<sup>4</sup>

Writing in his article on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 in the *Al-Usbu*, Mahmoud Bakri suggested that “it was some kind of human intervention that destabilised the tectonic plates, an intervention that is caused only in nuclear experiments and explosions – the three most recent tests appeared to be genuine American and Israeli preparations to act together with India to test a way to liquidate humanity.”<sup>5</sup> He continued, “... although so far it has not been proven that secret Indian-Israeli nuclear testing is what caused the destructive earthquake, there is evidence that the recent nuclear tests, the exchange of nuclear experts between India and Israel, and the American

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<sup>2</sup> Conspiracy theories also abound among others in the West. See, for example, Joe Wallis, “Did New York Orchestrate the Asian Tsunami?” <<http://www.viallis.com/sublimalsuggestion/tsunami.html>>, Date Accessed: 14<sup>th</sup> February 2005; and Cindy-Lou Dale, “The Asian Tsunami: Another Manmade Disaster” <<http://www.etherzone.com/2005/dale040805.shtml>>, Date Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> April 2005. Wallis lays the blame on Wolfowitz and the company of Wall Street bankers who sent a large American thermonuclear weapon to the bottom of the Sumatran trench to trigger the tsunami; while Dale suggested either induced seismic activity from Australia or repeated American nuclear testing triggered the Asian tsunami. The *India Daily* voiced similar sentiments in its 29<sup>th</sup> December 2004 posting but blamed the earthquake on the testing of an eco-weapon by its own government.

<sup>3</sup> See Julie Stahl, “America, Israel, India Caused Tsunami, Conspiracy Theory Says”, *Cybercast News Service*, 7th January 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Edwards, “Tsunami was ‘Allah’s Revenge’: Mainstream media spin bizarre theories”, *The National Post of Canada*, 12th January 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Ross Clark, “Tsunami was All Allah’s Doing” <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2005/01/16/do1604.xml>>, Date Accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

pressure on Pakistan regarding its nuclear cooperation with Asian and Islamic countries — all these pose a big question mark regarding the causes of the severe earthquake in Asia.”<sup>6</sup> He went on to theorize that America’s nuclear tests were also responsible for the devastating Turkish earthquake in 1999 that killed 18,000 people. As the columnist Ross Clark in the *Daily Telegraph* pointed out, “If they were, the Americans clearly still have to perfect the technology: presumably they were aiming for Iraq or Iran rather than one of their allies.”<sup>7</sup>

The basis for many of these controversy theories is not based on any particular interpretation of the Quran but often on the volatile situation in the world, especially the West-East divide, hatred for the US and Israel, a locked medieval mindset, and the great philosophical divide between Islam and the West. Whenever something goes bad and it affects the Muslims, the tendency has been to put the blame on the perceived “enemies” of Islam, and in this case, the US and Israel. Such bizarre conspiracy theories will continue to be rife in the minds of many Muslims as long as they remain suspicious of the aims of the US and Israel, and in general, the West. These conspiracy theories will also continue to find resonance in the minds of those who are the educated elite of a part of the world deliberately locked into a medieval mindset. This medievalism, often in the guise of Islam, rages in fury at the world beyond itself. It extols the virtues of suicide bombers, blames Jews and infidels for the ills of the world, and declares war on the West. These conspiracy theories are sometimes concocted and propagated by well-educated Islamists who give a certain measure of legitimacy to their theories, which are then well received by the general public. Such ravings, seen as not from “in misguided madmen” but part of respectable thought, are more likely to

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<sup>6</sup>Salim Mansu, “Were waves the fault of ‘infidels’?” *The Toronto Sun*, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

<sup>7</sup>Clark, “Tsunami was All Allah’s Doing”.

increase donations for anti-Western and anti-Israeli terrorism than buy humanitarian relief for tsunami survivors, most of whom live in Indonesia. Unfortunately, these anti-Western diatribes are also routinely delivered by traditional news outlets across the Middle East. Such a medium also provides a measure of legitimacy that at best encourages hate and at worst facilitates terrorist recruitment.

### **SIGN**

The second Islamic response is a spectrum of responses ranging from interpreting the tsunami as a sign of natural disaster ("an act of God"), or a sign of the impending End Times (*Hari Kiamat*), or a sign of punishment from God for the sins of humanity. The idea that the tsunami was a form of punishment from God is prevalent. There are numerous examples coming from Muslim imams commenting on the tsunami in recent sermons stretching from Saudi Arabia to the Palestinian territories. In the wake of the disaster, Islamic television stations, newspapers and chatrooms were full of theories as to why Allah should have targeted the beaches of South-East Asia. "Don't these countries have witchcraft, sorcery, deceitfulness and abomination?" asked Ibrahim al-Bashar, the advisor to the Saudi justice minister, on the State-controlled religious satellite television, *Al-Majd*. He emphasized that the countries that were struck "refrain from adopting Allah's law, which is a form of heresy...Whoever reads the Koran, given by the Maker of the World, can see how these nations were destroyed. There is one reason: they lied, they sinned, and (they) were infidels."<sup>8</sup>

A Saudi Cleric Muhammad Al-Munajjid concludes that the tsunami was caused by Christian holidays "accompanied by forbidden things, by immorality, abomination, adultery, alcohol, drunken dancing and revelry.

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<sup>8</sup> Mansu, "Were waves the fault of 'infidels'?"

A belly dancer costs 2,500 pounds a minute, and a singer costs 50,000 pounds an hour, and they hop from one hotel to another from night to dawn. Then they spend the entire night defying Allah.”<sup>9</sup> He expanded this idea: “Those celebrating spent (the holiday) in vacation resorts, pubs, and hotels. At the height of immorality, Allah took revenge on these criminals. Allah struck them with an earthquake. He finished off the Richter scale. All nine levels gone. Tens of thousands dead.”<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, preaching on Palestinian Authority TV in his Friday sermon in Gaza on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Sheik Ibrahim Mudeiris, a Palestinian prayer leader, reasoned that the waves struck Indonesia because of “Zionist and American investments.”<sup>11</sup> He said, “When oppression and corruption increase, the law of equilibrium applies. I can see in your eyes you are wondering what is the ‘universal law of equilibrium’. This law is a divine law. If people are remiss in implementing God’s law and in being zealous and vengeful for His sake, Allah unleashes his soldiers in action to take revenge.”<sup>12</sup>

A Saudi professor from the Al-Imam University in Beirut, Sheik Fawzan Al-Fawzan, said also on *Al-Majd*, that the earthquake and tsunami in south Asia were punishment from Allah for homosexuality and fornication committed by residents and visitors of affected countries at Christmastime.<sup>13</sup> “These great tragedies and collective punishments that are wiping out villages, towns, cities and even entire countries, are Allah’s punishments of the people of these countries, even if they are Muslims...

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://memri.org/bin/media.cgi?ID=115905>>, Date Accessed: 17<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Arnaud de Borchgrave. “Commentary: Allah Off The Richter Scale”, *United Press International*, 4th January 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, “Tsunami was All Allah’s Doing.”

<sup>12</sup> de Borchgrave, “Commentary: Allah Off The Richter Scale.”

<sup>13</sup> “Homosexuality, Fornication Cause of Tsunami?” <[http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=42242](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=42242)>, Date Accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

Some of our forefathers said that if there is usury and fornication in a certain village, Allah permits its destruction.” The professor singled out beach resorts as places of sexual sin. “We know that at these resorts, which unfortunately exist in Islamic and other countries in south Asia, and especially at Christmas, fornication and sexual perversion of all kinds are rampant...The fact that it happened at this particular time is a sign from Allah. It happened at Christmas, when fomicators and corrupt people from all over the world come to commit fornication and sexual perversion. That’s when this tragedy took place, striking them all and destroyed everything. It turned the land into wasteland, where only the cries of the ravens are heard. I say this is a great sign and punishment on which Muslims should reflect.”<sup>14</sup> Al-Fawzan urged Muslims to atone for their sin. “All that’s left for us to do is to ask for forgiveness. We must atone for our sins and for the acts of the stupid people among us and improve our condition. We must fight fornication, homosexuality, usury, fight the corruption on the face of the earth, and the disregard of the lives of protected people.”

As Paul Marshall noted, “These are not isolated rants by errant preachers: They reflect official government positions. Al-Bashar is an adviser to the Saudi justice minister, and Al-Fawzan is a professor at the Al-Imam Mohamed bin Saud Islamic University, a position that he, like Al-Munajjid, cannot hold without government approval. All their sermons were shown on the state-controlled *Al-Majd* TV channel and reflect the *Wahhabi* ideology that is the state religion of Saudi Arabia...(which) is assiduously propagated around the world, including in the United States.”<sup>15</sup>

The basis for such claims is often from a rather literal or liberal interpretation of the Quranic texts. Even though the tsunami is recognized as a form of punishment, there are divergent views here: The tsunami

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<sup>14</sup>Stephen Schwartz, “Allah and the Tsunamis”, *Tech Central Station*, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Marshall, “Saudis and Tsunamis” <<http://memri.org/bin/media.cgi?ID=115905>>, Date Accessed: 17<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

has been perceived variously as punishment for homosexuality and sins committed during Christmas; for judgement on the non-*wahabi* Muslims; judgement on the sex-tourist trade in Thailand; judgement for the war between the extremist Muslim south in Thailand and the Buddhist majority Thai government, as well as for the Thailand government supporting “the Christian crusaders in the war on terror”; judgement for the sins of war between Acehese rebels and the Indonesian government (because the *Kufr* (non-Islamic) government of the apostate Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is fighting against the *mujahideen* in Aceh who want to establish an Islamic Sultanate where the *Syriah* (Islamic laws) prevail); judgement for the war between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government (as well as for Sri Lanka giving “its full backing to the Christian Crusaders inside the White House”); and judgement on India for its *Shirk* (polytheism).<sup>16</sup> It is easy to see the convoluted logic of some of the arguments: For example, because the tsunami struck on the 26<sup>th</sup> December, it is convenient to associate the recently concluded Christmas celebrations as the immediate cause of the disaster (hence, the arguments of Al-Munajjid and Sheikh Fazwan).

## SILENCE

There is a third Islamic response from some quarters, especially the Islamic extremist groups of *Al Qaeda* and other terrorist-linked groups. This response is a strange, restrained and muted silence. Osama bin Laden had issued a statement on the Iraqi election a day after the tsunami occurred but did not mention anything about the tsunami. In his message,

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<sup>16</sup> The prominent Islamist website *Jihad Unspun* maintains that the tsunami struck for these above reasons. The website does not explain why Aceh, the most Islamist of any Indonesian province, suffered the worst damage. See Dr Abu Ziyad, “Important Lessons from the South Asian Tsunami” <[http://www.jihadunspun.com/intheatre\\_internal.php?article=101163&list=/home.php](http://www.jihadunspun.com/intheatre_internal.php?article=101163&list=/home.php)>, Date Accessed: 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2005.



he asserted that “jihad in Iraq was a duty and that those who fail to engage in such activities were committing a grave sin.”<sup>17</sup> In the weeks following the tsunami, the only words attributed to bin Laden on *Al-Jazeera*, the Arabic television station that broadcasts the champion of terror’s views, had to do with his prevailing mission – to kill and, in this case, spawning more deaths in war-torn Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Neither were there any messages of condolences from bin Laden or any *Al-Qaeda*-linked terrorist leaders or those who identify themselves as *mujahid fi sabilillah* (the true crusaders for the religion of Allah). Bin Laden’s silence and repeated disregard to this humanitarian emergency is all the more amazing since the worst hit country is Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim nation and the province of Aceh which has a higher percentage of Muslims than other parts of Indonesia.

The silence in the face of the tsunami tragedy has drawn some comments from the affected region. In Indonesia, Zakiyuddin Baidhaway, a presidium member of the *Muhammadiyah* Scholars Network (JIMM), argues that bin Laden would have a more positive impact on the Muslim world if his “jihad” was related to the reconstruction and rebuilding of infrastructure in Aceh and North Sumatra. Baidhaway also noted that bin Laden “had done nothing to respond to this greatest of natural disasters” or “helped emergency operations to reduce the misery of the tsunami victims.” It seems to show that the *Al-Qaeda* leader and his cohorts appear to be strangely out of touch with reality and this reveals them as “political opportunists.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Zakiyuddin Baidhaway, “Tsunami Calls for ‘Jihad’” <<http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20050127.E02>>, Date Accessed: 4<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Marwaan Macan-Markar, “TSUNAMI-IMPACT: Muslim Solidarity Missing in the Aftermath of Killer Waves Analysis”, *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 31st January 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Baidhaway, “Tsunami calls for ‘Jihad.’”

Thailand's *Bangkok Post* noted on Tuesday, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2005 that "the fastest, biggest aid providers to the staunchly Muslim victims of Aceh, Indonesia, were the Australian and U.S. military."<sup>20</sup> "The regional arms of al-Qaeda spared not even a message of condolence for those who suffered in their own countries, let alone abroad...the man who has called for the proclamation of a new caliphate said nothing about the plight of millions of distressed Muslims." The *Bangkok Post* expressed the hope that the "heartless lack of response," contrasted with Western generosity, would refute anti-Western propaganda and expose terrorists' true values.

While the Islamic extremists elsewhere in the world showed a muted silence concerning the tsunami, at the ground level in Indonesia, where the Muslims in Aceh are more conservative and some elements of the *Sharia* law are already in vogue in this province, the presence of radical groups such as the Indonesian *Mujahideen* Council, Islamic Defender's Front and *Laskar Mujahideen* were seen in Banda Aceh mobilizing their cadres, though with the ostensible aim of providing aid and offering "spiritual guidance and strength."<sup>21</sup> Some of these organizations are known for their anti-Western sentiments and their violent activities against night clubs and places where Westerners gather. These extremist groups purport to have a humanitarian mission but their history suggests otherwise. They would like to see Western aid fail so that the foreigners will exit and that they can take a leading role in filling the void and have greater influence in the province.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Goodenough, "No Comment from Bin Laden on Tsunami Disaster", *CNSNews.com*, 26th January 2005.

<sup>21</sup> C. S. Kuppusamy, "Indonesia: Aceh – Hopes for a Better Future!" <<http://www.saag.org/papers13/paper1281.html>>, Date Accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> March 2005.

<sup>22</sup> James Van Zorge, "High Stakes in Post-Tsunami Aceh", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 2005, pp. 41-43.

## **THE ISLAMIC RESPONSE FROM MALAYSIA**

The Islamic response from the countries directly affected by the tsunami like Indonesia and Malaysia was more sympathetic and considerate when compared with the vitriol rhetoric of some of the Islamic voices from elsewhere in the world. Instead of casting stones at “whoever was deemed responsible” for the killer waves as espoused in the conspiracy theories, the customary response was to interpret the disaster as a sign from God which was then subsequently understood as a call to self-searching and repentance. The disaster that also struck Malaysia with a loss of 66 lives drew immediate response from the King to the Prime Minister to key religious leaders of the various faiths in the country. All stood united over the loss of lives and property. The coming 2005 New Year celebrations were cancelled. The Prime Minister also directed all mosques in the country to conduct sermons on Friday related to the catastrophic event, to focus their prayers of request (*solat hajat*) and *tahlil* prayers for those affected by the tsunami, and to reach out to the tsunami victims to help them overcome their grief and hardship. They were also to make prayers for the country against future calamities. Request was also made to the other religious groups to conduct similar prayers and to pray for whatever would be for the best of the people and the country according to their own practices and beliefs.<sup>23</sup> Immediately, the nation’s major newspapers launched a relief fund to help the disaster victims. *The Star*, together with the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS) and Mercy Malaysia, launched the *The Star* Earthquake/Tsunami Relief Fund. The next day, the Fund received RM 1 million from the Public Bank.

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<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news.php?id=111197>>, Date Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2004 said the public should refrain from pointing fingers at anybody for the tsunami. Abdullah said, “We had least expected a Tsunami to strike with such devastating effect and nobody should be blamed for it. What is important for us now is to learn from such an occurrence.”<sup>24</sup> The 28<sup>th</sup> December edition of the country’s English newspaper *The Star* did not carry any condemnation or explanation of the tsunami’s origin from any religious leaders in the country. Instead, the mood expressed was, “This is a natural disaster of tragic proportions for our country and others in the region are even more severely hit. We share in the anguish of those who have lost their loved ones... We do not point fingers or apportion blame.”<sup>25</sup>

For the common man in the street, the major response of Muslim family members and relatives who had lost their loved ones was to blame themselves for being holidaymakers and picnickers at the beachfront in Penang as it was a Sunday. Many had planned the trip for their families, as it was a public holiday. Another response by the Muslim families was to hope that the bodies of the victims would at least be quickly recovered so that a proper burial according to Muslim rites could be carried out. A third response by the many Muslims who lost their loved ones was to accept the tragedy as fate. “I do not regret allowing my wife and children to go picnicking because it is beyond my power to change what is predetermined by God,” said Hassan Harun who lost his wife and four children to the tsunami which hit the Penang shores.<sup>26</sup> Three other children of his who were also picnicking at the Miami Beach in Batu

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<sup>24</sup> <<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news.php?id=111536>>, Date Accessed: 27<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Soo Ewe Jin, *The Star*, 28th December 2004, p.6.

<sup>26</sup> <<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news.php?id=110868>>, Date Accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

Feringghi survived the killer waves. “My family was not keen on recreational activities but they had gone picnicking anyway, and so I accept everything that has happened as fate which cannot be changed.”

The response from some key Malaysian Islamic scholars revealed a more sombre and cautious approach. Dato Dr Harun Din, in his article “Bala Bencana – Apakah Sebab DiSebaliknya?” (“Disaster and Trouble – What is the Real Reason?” *Translation mine*), argued that disasters and troubles have visited humans since early times.<sup>27</sup> For example, *Surah Hud* tells us there were floods from the time of Noah, with “waves towering like mountains” (The Prophet Hud, 11:42). *Surah al-Ankabuut* reads, “Each one of them We seized for his crime: of them, against some We sent a violent tornado (with showers of stones); some were caught by a (mighty) Blast; some We caused the earth to swallow up; and some We drowned (in the waters): It was not Allah Who injured (or oppressed) them: They injured (and oppressed) their own souls” (The Spider, 29:40). *Surah al-Haqqah* reads, “But the Thamud – they were destroyed by a terrible Storm of thunder and lightning! And the Ad, they were destroyed by a furious Wind, exceedingly violent; He made it rage against them seven nights and eight days in succession: so that thou couldst see the (whole) people lying prostrate in its (path), as they had been roots of hollow palm-trees tumbled down!” (The Sure Reality, 69:5-7).

Al-Quran has given several examples as *iktibar* (signs) to guide humanity towards the *hidayah* (guidance) of Allah for the good of humankind. The fact is that earthquakes have already been mentioned in the Al-Quran publicly as a *isyarat* (warning) or *petunjuk* (guide). Thus, *Surah al-Thaariq* reads, “And by the Earth which opens out (for the gushing of springs or the sprouting of vegetation)” (The Morning Star,

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<sup>27</sup> Dato’ Dr Harun Din, “Bala Bencana – Apakah Sebab Disebaliknya?” <<http://www.partipas.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=493>>, Date Accessed: 4<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

86:12) and *Surah Abasa* reads, “And We split the earth in fragments” (He Frowned, 80:26). *Surah Al-Zalzalah* reads, “When the earth is shaken to her (utmost) convulsion, And the earth throws up her burdens (from within), And man cries (distressed): ‘What is the matter with her?’ – On that Day will she declare her tidings: For that thy Lord will have given her inspiration. On that Day will men proceed in companies sorted out, to be shown the deeds that they (had done). Then shall anyone who has done an atom’s weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom’s weight of evil, shall see it” (The Earthquake, 99:1-8). It is believed that there will be an earthquake greater in magnitude which will usher in the Judgement Day and this will be the supreme world-shaking event.

Two questions are raised by Harun: why did the event happen and who or what is the cause behind it? He believes that human knowledge sometimes reaches a *cul-de-sac* and that there are no physical explanations possible. The only way is to look at the Al-Quran from the angle of Allah’s *ilmu* (knowledge). From the stories of the prophets, it is clear that there is one consistent teaching: troubles and disasters occur because of the evil and sinfulness of humanity which causes Allah to be angry towards them. This raises another question: why is Allah angry towards his servants when he is *ar-Rahman* (the All-Compassionate) and *ar-Rahim* (the All-Merciful)? *Surah as-Syura* reads, “Whatever misfortune happens to you, is because of the things your hands have wrought, and for many (of them) He grants forgiveness...Or He can cause them to perish because of the (evil) which (the men) have earned; but much doth He forgive” (Consultation, 42:30, 34). Allah allows these disasters on humanity because of their sin. We are to study these signs in the right spirit. Even though Allah forgives their sins, he allows disasters to befall them to ensure that they return to the true path. Thus disasters, small or large, are given to humanity as a reminder, for disasters can never happen without a cause or reason.

In *al-Maraghi juzuk 26 halaman 87*, it reads, “Allah’s army in the sky and on earth are angels, humans, Jinns, voice from the sky, thunder, rain, typhoons, earthquake and many others.” These are used by Allah to act against humanity that is cruel in order to awaken and make them realize their acts. Thus, these natural disasters are a result of the sins of humanity (*Surah Ghafir 40:21, Surah Al-A’raf 7:100-101*).

However, not everyone who is affected by the disaster has committed sin. Within the community there will be those who are *soleh* (upright), who obey Allah, people who did not commit sin, the little ones who do not understand what sin is, animals and other created beings that have not sinned. Yet, sometimes these innocent ones also suffer the same fate as the evil-doers. *Surah Al-Anfaal* reads, “And fear, tumult or oppression, which affecteth not in particular (only) those of you who do wrong: and know that Allah is strict in punishment” (Spoils of War, 8:25). Good people are also everywhere but when the good are with the evil, when Allah brings the disasters, everyone will receive the same fate.

In another online article, Harun pointed out that the word “tsunami” could stand as an acronym:

T(uhan) S(udah) U(ji) N(amun) A(da) M(anusia) dan I(ngkar) [God has Tested, if there are Humans who are Disobedient].<sup>28</sup>

He believed that the tsunami was for all humanity to experience. We have to realize that when the disaster strikes, it does not select only those who do evil but even the upright will be affected. He quoted some data of previous earthquakes and their measurements on the Richter scale:

24<sup>th</sup> December 2003, earthquake with a 4.1 magnitude near New Zealand

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<sup>28</sup> Harun Din, “Rahmat Allah Terputus, bala Pula Diundang” <<http://www.parti-pas.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=494>>, Date Accessed: 4<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

26<sup>th</sup> December, whales died in Tasmania believed to be caused by a strong undersea earthquake

26<sup>th</sup> December, earthquake of 9.1 magnitude

26<sup>th</sup> December, earthquake in China

26<sup>th</sup> December, earthquake in Turkey

26<sup>th</sup> December, earthquake in Bam, Iran

26<sup>th</sup> December 2004, the Asian tsunami

He queried why these earthquakes occurred on those dates – before and after 25<sup>th</sup> December. Is this a *isyarat* (warning) of a *petunjuk* (guide) that must be reflected upon? Does the Al-Quran give any indication that on that date a huge disaster will occur as has happened recently? He went on to quote *Surah Al-Maryam* which reads, “They say: ‘(Allah) Most Gracious has begotten a son!’ Indeed ye have put forth a thing most monstrous! At it the skies are ready to burst, the earth to split asunder, and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin, That they should invoke a son for (Allah) Most Gracious. For it is not consonant with the majesty of (Allah) Most Gracious that He should beget a son. Not one of the beings in the heavens and the earth but must come to (Allah) Most Gracious as a servant” (Mary, 19:88-93). Harun did not say anything further on this matter but one can see what he was implying: these earthquakes all occur around the date of 25<sup>th</sup> December which is of course the commonly accepted date for Jesus’ birth, hence his quoting from *Surah Al-Maryam* on how even the earth “will split asunder” to even consider the possibility that Allah can have a son!

He raised another question: can mortal men hope to prevent disasters from Allah? From a scientific and technological point of view, we can set up sophisticated equipment to foresee and prevent possible disasters. But what if the disaster is not a tsunami but something which occurs on land like storms, landslides, fire, and chronic diseases? *Surah Al-A’raf*



reads, “To those who inherit the earth in succession to its (previous) possessors, is it not a guiding, (lesson) that, if We so willed, We could punish them (too) for their sins, and seal up their hearts so that they could not hear?” (The Heights, 7:100). The argument is that the stories which have been related before should give ample warning to present and future generations.

In a similar vein, Nik Aziz, the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of the state of Kelantan ruled by the Opposition party PAS, commented that the tsunami was a reminder for humans about their conduct before this.<sup>29</sup> The event has a direct connection but humans do not understand it. *Surah Al-An'aam* reads, “Say: ‘He hath power to send calamities on you, from above and below, or to cover you with confusion in party strife, giving you a taste of mutual vengeance – each from the other.’ See how We explain the signs by various (symbols); that they may understand” (The Cattle, 6:65). Here, the calamities can be understood as storms, blizzards, torrential rain or earthquakes, floods and landslides.

Dr Shafie Abu Bakar also argued that the tsunami was a sign that our earth is caught up in the process of decay and destruction that we are heading towards the day of what Muslims commonly term as *Kiamat* (the Judgement or the End).<sup>30</sup> Humanity is to live in agreement and harmony with nature but when humanity upsets and destroys nature and becomes unfaithful to Allah, the result will be to bring disasters upon themselves and upon nature, so reads *Surah Al-Rum* (The Romans, 30:41). He believed the tsunami was not a “nature disaster” but a reminder, threat,

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<sup>29</sup> Tuan Guru Dato' Nik Aziz, “Bencana Besar adalah Peringatan Dari Allah” <<http://www.parti-pas.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=487>>, Date Accessed: 4<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Dr Shafie Abu Bakar, “Tsunami: Nektah Keinsafan” <<http://www.harakahdaily.net/print.php?sid=11395>>, Date Accessed: 17<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

and punishment from the physical, mental, spiritual and psychological aspects so that all these become a lesson to bring humanity to consciousness and awareness. The tsunami is a *petanda hari Kiamat* (sign of the Judgement). The destruction that leads to the End will come when there will be *gegaran* (shaking) and *perlanggaran* (collision) among the planets and stars as prophesized in *Surah Al-Infitar* (The Cleaving Asunder, 82:1-19) and *Surah Al-Inshqaq* (The Rending Asunder, 84:1-25). It is a reminder that a similar or larger disaster can happen anywhere and at anytime. The tsunami, on the other hand, is to bring humanity ever closer to Allah.

## CONCLUSION

While Islam has constantly sought to portray itself as a monolithic entity, the varying and far-ranging responses to the tsunami show it to be otherwise. Why is it that there is a strikingly contrary and discordant note in the responses from Islam from around the world, from bizarre controversy theories to muted silence, from signs of God of the coming End times to a vitriolic attack on the sinfulness of humanity? Why is it that many of the Islamic responses seem cold and distant and lacking in empathy for the victims of the tsunami, especially since the majority who died were Muslims from Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation? Part of the reason was that the disaster occurred far from the Middle East and what was seen on television could only remain a distant event in the minds of many people. That the destruction was also widespread, inundating two continents and many countries as diverse as India to Sri Lanka with a Hindu and Buddhist majority, from Somalia and Tanzania to Kenya with a folk religion background, from Myanmar and Thailand to Malaysia and Indonesia with a Buddhist and Islam majority, also somewhat watered down the Islamic response, if compared with the scenario where Indonesia alone was affected by the tsunami.

Thankfully, all is not merely denunciation. The Beirut-based newspaper *Dar al Hayat* lamented in an editorial that conspiracy theories and the initial poor Arab response to tsunami relief efforts would, in the long run, cause the rest of the world to forget about Arab struggles.<sup>31</sup> The paper asks, “Why was Europe concerned about a disaster that has hit primarily Muslims before we even cared? While the world grows closer we intensify our isolation and separation.” Writing in the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Watan*, Saudi columnist Jamal Khashokji advised Saudi charities to focus on “moderation and tolerance” and resist being “hijacked” by extremists.<sup>32</sup> The Malaysian Islamic response has a lot to teach us on how to respond to disaster. Generally, the response is one of heart-searching and generosity to help those in trouble. For the Malaysian Islamic scholars, their response was to understand the tsunami as a result of the sins of humanity and that the tsunami was given as a *isyarat* (warning) and *gejala* (omen) to us. Thus, humanity is to take heed of disasters like the tsunami and to realize that humanity and nature are subjected under *kefanaan* (transitory). Humanity is to refrain from acts that are unhelpful but to be eager to help to do good.

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<sup>31</sup> Edwards, “Tsunami was ‘Allah’s revenge’: Mainstream media spin bizarre theories.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

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