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LEXICAL AND TERMINOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF “ISTIWA”: APPROACHES OF THE MATURIDI AND ASH'ARI SCHOOLS OF KALAM

Abstract: *The perspectives of the Maturidi and Ash'ari schools regarding the concept of istiwa' constitute the core methodology for interpreting anthropomorphic or ambiguous (mutashābih) texts, which serve as a fundamental basis of Islamic creed ('aqidah). Imam al-Ash'ari's position of isbāt bi-lā kayf (affirmation without specifying modality) in his work Al-Ibanah and Imam al-Maturidi's rational-logical argumentation in Kitāb al-Tawhīd exhibit a profound conceptual harmony. The divergences between the two schools are not of a fundamental nature but rather consist of methodological nuances in applying the methods of ta'wīl (metaphorical interpretation) and tafwīd (relegation of meaning to God). These linguistic foundations are comprehensively validated from a lexical-semantic perspective through Raghib al-Isfahani's analysis in Al-Mufradāt concerning the syntactic patterns of the verb istiwa' when suffixed with the prepositions 'alā and ilā.*

This moderate and systematic approach of Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamā'ah is directed toward defending the pristine, scholarly creed concerning the Essence and Attributes of Allah, while establishing the invalidity of the doctrines held by the anthropomorphic (mushabbihah, mujassimah, karrāmiyyah) and anti-anthropomorphic (mu'tazilah) sects. All methodological measures, intellectual proofs, and scholarly interpretations advanced by these two schools strictly rely upon the absolute principle of tanzīh (transcendence) encapsulated in verse 11 of Surah ash-Shura.

Key words: maturidiyyah, ash'ariyyah, istiwa, ta'wil, tafwid, tanzih, mutashabih verses.

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Introduction

The role of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah in preserving the pure creed ('aqidah), which constitutes the foundation of Islamic doctrine, and protecting it from all forms of extremism and deviation, is of unparalleled significance. This great intellectual tradition has historically functioned and continues to function today with remarkable unity and ideological cohesion. In particular, regarding the understanding of

istiwa', one of the mutashābih (ambiguous) expressions found in the Noble Qur'an, there exists no fundamental or doctrinal disagreement between the Māturīdī and Ash'arī theological schools, which are regarded as the twin pillars of Sunnī theology. Both traditions are firmly united upon the principle of tanzīh – the absolute transcendence of Allah from corporeality and spatial confinement (tajsīm and

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tahayyuz) as well as from any resemblance to created beings (*tashbīh*).

Nevertheless, various heterodox and partisan groups seeking to create division among Muslims periodically revive these specialized theological discussions in an attempt to sow ideological discord within society and undermine the teachings of *Ahl al-Sunnah*. Therefore, conducting a scholarly analysis of the lexical and technical meanings of the term *istiwā*, demonstrating the methodological coherence of both theological schools, and exposing the groundlessness of artificially constructed alien interpretations are matters of considerable academic and practical importance for strengthening society's intellectual and ideological immunity.

In the Arabic language, the word *istiwā* (استوى) is derived from the root *sawiya* (سوى) and appears in the eighth verbal form (*ifta'ala* pattern). The renowned Arab lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), in his dictionary *Lisān al-'Arab*, records several primary meanings of *istiwā*, including: "to become complete," "to attain maturity," "to become straight or upright," "to rise," "to gain mastery," and "to overcome" [9:414]. Likewise, the famous lexicographer Majd al-Dīn al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1415), in *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, notes these meanings and additionally includes the senses of "to intend" and "to direct oneself toward" [10:1297].

One of the most prominent scholars of Qur'ānic lexicography, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108), provides a detailed analysis of the semantic field of the term *istiwā* in the Qur'ānic context in his celebrated work *al-Mufradāt fī Ḡharīb al-Qur'ān*. According to the scholar, this verb exhibits different layers of meaning depending on its contextual environment and the accompanying linguistic indicators. Consequently, its semantic value must be determined in light of the particular stylistic and contextual characteristics of each Qur'ānic verse.

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī emphatically states that whenever this term is attributed to Allah, it must be understood as being entirely free from any material or corporeal connotations. He further explains that, according to the principles governing the verb's combination with prepositions, when it occurs with the preposition *'alā* (على), it conveys the meaning of *al-istīlā*, that is, "establishing authority, dominion, and control"; whereas when it appears with the preposition *ilā* (إلى), it signifies the completion and perfection of the Creator's act with respect to the created order [11:439].

Imam Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, in his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, analyzes the lexical meanings of the term *istiwā* as follows:

"Three principal lexical meanings have been proposed concerning the usage of the word *istiwā*. The first is 'to gain mastery' or 'to take possession', as illustrated by the Arabic expression: 'So-and-so gained mastery over (istawā upon) such-and-such a

land'. The second is 'to rise' or 'to ascend', as evidenced by the statement of Allah Most High: 'And when you have boarded the ship, you and those with you, then say...' (Qur'an 23:28). The third is 'to attain perfection and completion', as indicated by the divine statement: 'And when he attained his full strength and was [mentally] mature...' (Qur'an 28:14). It has also been said that the term may convey the meaning of 'to intend' or 'to direct oneself toward'" [4:238–239].

Accordingly, in Imam al-Māturīdī's terminology, the word *istiwā* possesses three primary lexical meanings in Arabic: mastery, ascent, and perfection. Throughout the Qur'ān, the term appears in different contexts and therefore carries different meanings. The most significant occurrences from a theological perspective are the seven verses that mention Allah's *istiwā* upon al-'Arsh.

These verses are:

1. "Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne..." (Qur'an 7:54).
2. "Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne..." (Qur'an 10:3).
3. "It is Allah who erected the heavens without pillars that you [can] see; then He established Himself above the Throne..." (Qur'an 13:2).
4. "The Most Merciful [who is] above the Throne established" (Qur'an 20:5).
5. "He who created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days and then established Himself above the Throne" (Qur'an 25:59).
6. "It is Allah who created the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them in six days; then He established Himself above the Throne..." (Qur'an 32:4).
7. "It is He who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne" (Qur'an 57:4).

A structural analysis of these verses reveals that six of them employ the expression *thumma istawā 'alā al-'Arsh* ("then He established Himself over the Throne"), whereas only Qur'an 20:5 uses the formulation *al-Raḥmān 'alā al-'Arsh istawā* ("The Most Merciful established Himself over the Throne").

It is important to note that throughout Islamic history, the scholars of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, particularly the Māturīdī and Ash'arī schools, fully understood these grammatical and stylistic differences while remaining united upon the principle of declaring Allah transcendent above all imperfections. They never regarded this issue as a source of internal doctrinal conflict. However, in contemporary times, these verses have been deliberately misinterpreted by extremist groups such as pseudo-Salafis, the Mujassimah, and the Mushabbihah, who approach the texts through a purely literalist methodology. In reality, such attempts represent recurring

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manifestations of ideological discord intended to undermine the unity of Muslims and disrupt the integrity of orthodox Islamic creed.

The Qur'an also employs the term *istiwā'* in other meanings. Imam al-Māturīdī cites these examples and explains them in detail. For instance, the verse, "And when you have boarded the ship, you and those with you, then say..." (Qur'an 23:28), uses *istiwā'* in the sense of boarding, mounting, or settling upon something. Likewise, the verse, "And when he attained his full strength and was [mentally] mature..." (Qur'an 28:14), employs the term to signify attaining maturity, perfection, and completion.

Imam Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī elaborates extensively on the issue of *istiwā'* in *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. His fundamental methodological principle is the absolute rejection of any corporeal, material, or spatial interpretation of the term when attributed to Allah, and the affirmation of divine transcendence above all created attributes.

He writes:

"To say that Allah is in the Throne or in a place cannot escape one of three possibilities: either that thing completely encompasses Him; or it is equal to Him; or it exceeds Him and encompasses Him.

If the first possibility is true, then He would be limited, enclosed, and deficient in relation to creation, for He would thereby be smaller than it. If it were permissible to describe Him as encompassed by places, it would likewise be permissible to describe Him as encompassed by times. Consequently, He would become a being bounded by limits and deficient in comparison to creation.

If the second possibility is true, then even if He were equal to creation, He would still be deficient in relation to it.

If the third possibility is true, it would imply need, incapacity, and divisibility. Such notions are even considered defects in the conduct of earthly kings, whose thrones are proportionate to them. This would necessitate division, with one part contained and another extending beyond. All of these are characteristics of created beings, whereas Allah is exalted above them all." [4:236]

Through this rational argumentation, Imam al-Māturīdī demonstrates that if Allah were believed to be physically located upon the Throne, only three possibilities would exist: either the Throne encompasses Him, is equal to Him, or is smaller than Him. Each possibility necessarily entails limitation, corporeality, composition, or dependency all of which contradict Allah's absolute perfection and majesty. Therefore, every interpretation implying that Allah occupies a spatial location is categorically rejected on both rational and scriptural grounds.

Having refuted anthropomorphic interpretations, Imam al-Māturīdī proceeds to explain the correct meaning of *istiwā'* with respect to Allah. He states:

"If the meaning is mastery (*isti' lā'*), then the Throne signifies dominion and sovereignty, and the verse indicates that Allah has brought the entirety of creation under His authority. Other verses concerning the divine attributes are interpreted according to this same principle. Likewise, Allah's statement, '...He is the Lord of the Great Throne' (Qur'an 9:129), refers to supreme sovereignty and dominion" [4:239]

Accordingly, within this theological framework, the verse "The Most Merciful established Himself over the Throne" signifies that Allah exercises absolute authority, dominion, and sovereignty over all existence.

Imam al-Māturīdī further explains:

"If the meaning is perfection or exaltation, then Allah informed us that He created the world in six days. Thereafter He summarized this by saying: 'Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne...' (Qur'an 7:54). In other words, He created the heavens and the earth and those who are to be tested. Thus, the perfection of His dominion became manifest and His sovereignty became supreme." [4:240]

According to this interpretation, *istiwā'* signifies the completion and perfection of Allah's creative act (*takwīn*) and the full manifestation of His absolute sovereignty.

In interpreting *istiwā'* and similar ambiguous expressions, Imam al-Māturīdī adopts as a foundational methodological principle the verse:

'And in anything over which you disagree –its ruling is [to be referred] to Allah' (Qur'an 42:11).

According to him, this verse establishes two fundamental principles: first, it completely rejects likening Allah to His creation (*tashbīh*); second, it affirms the reality of Allah's attributes while maintaining that they bear no resemblance whatsoever to created qualities (*tanzīh*). This methodological principle later became a shared doctrinal standard for both the Māturīdī and Ash'arī theological traditions.

The prominent Māturīdī theologian and systematizer Imam Abū al-Mu'tīn al-Nasafī (d. 508/1115) discusses the issue of *istiwā'* extensively in his *Tabsirat al-Adillah*, further developing and systematizing his teacher's approach. According to al-Nasafī, whenever *istiwā'* is attributed to Allah, it must be understood free from all corporeal and physical implications and interpreted in terms of dominion, sovereignty, or perfection. He strongly refutes the views of the mushabbihah and karrāmiyyah on this matter [5:167].

Al-Nasafī argues that attributing place, direction, or physical limitation to Allah necessarily entails that He is bounded, originated, and dependent upon space like created beings. Such implications directly contradict Allah's essential attributes of oneness (*waḥdāniyyah*), pre-eternity (*qidam*), and self-subsistence (*qiyāmuḥu bi-naḥsih*). Therefore,

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interpreting *istiwā'* in a physical or corporeal sense is unacceptable both rationally and scripturally.

The founder of the Ash'arī theological school, Imam Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936), advanced a distinctive scholarly and methodological approach to the issue of *istiwā'*. Modern studies generally analyze his position on this subject as a coherent and systematic theological framework.

In his work *al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-Diyānah*, Imam al-Ash'arī adhered firmly to the path of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) and adopted the methodology of *ithbāt bilā kayf* (affirming the attribute without attributing modality) with respect to *istiwā'* and other revelational (*khabarī*) or ambiguous (*mutashābih*) attributes. He writes:

“Allah Most High performed *istiwā'* over the Throne in the manner that He informed of Himself and according to the meaning that He intended. This *istiwā'* is not described by modality (*kayfiyyah*) and is exalted above meanings associated with created beings, such as contact, settlement, occupation of space, indwelling, or movement from one place to another. The Throne does not carry Him. Rather, the Throne and those who bear it subsist only through Allah's power and grace and remain under His dominion. He is above the Throne and above all things. However, this exaltedness does not imply proximity to the Throne or the heavens, nor does it indicate a spatial relationship. Just as He is exalted above the Throne, so too is He exalted above the lowest depths of the earth. At the same time, He is near to every created being; He is nearer to His servant than the jugular vein, and He is Witness over all things” [6:21].

This approach of Imam al-Ash'arī closely reflects the authentic tradition of the early Muslim generations. Unlike the Mu'tazilah, he does not adopt the path of negating the divine attributes (*ta'īl*). At the same time, unlike the Mushabbihah and Mujassimah, he categorically rejects interpreting the scriptural texts in a corporeal or anthropomorphic manner.

Following Imam al-Ash'arī, the Ash'arī school was further systematized and developed by a number of eminent scholars, including Imam Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), Imam al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and Imam Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). In responding to the intellectual challenges of later centuries, these scholars refined the Ash'arī understanding of *istiwā'* and increasingly employed the methodology of *ta'wīl* (interpretative explanation) in their treatment of scriptural texts.

In particular, Imam al-Ghazālī discusses the issue of *istiwā'* in his *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*, explaining that, with respect to Allah, the term signifies sovereignty, supreme authority, and absolute dominion. He states:

“To understand the term *istiwā'* with respect to Allah in a physical sense is irrational, for such an

interpretation contradicts the divine majesty. The correct approach is to understand that Allah established His sovereignty over the Throne and brought it under His dominion. This interpretation is fully consistent with the principles of the Arabic language, the overall objectives of the Qur'an, and the pure doctrine of divine unity (*tawḥīd*)” [3:38–41].

Imam al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), in his work *al-Asmā' wa al-Ṣifāt*, also discusses the issue of *istiwā'* in detail. In this context, he transmits with an authentic chain the famous foundational statement of Imam Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), which he presents as one of the principal theological proofs of the Ash'arī tradition:

“The Most Merciful performed *istiwā'* as He described Himself. It is not said: ‘How?’ For modality (*kayfiyyah*) is inapplicable to Him” [2:304].

Although the Māturīdī and Ash'arī schools maintain highly compatible and closely related approaches to the issue of *istiwā'*, some subtle methodological differences can nevertheless be observed.

From an early stage, the Māturīdī school demonstrated a greater inclination toward *ta'wīl* when interpreting the term *istiwā'*. This tendency is clearly evident in Imam al-Māturīdī's *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. The Ash'arī school, particularly during its formative period, tended more toward *tafwīd*, namely entrusting the ultimate reality of the expression to Allah Himself. This distinction, however, is not fundamental but rather methodological in nature, since both schools unequivocally reject attributing corporeal or material meanings to Allah.

Furthermore, the Māturīdī school generally accords a somewhat greater epistemological role to reason than does the Ash'arī school. Imam al-Māturīdī extensively employs rational argumentation to demonstrate the absurdity of believing that Allah occupies a spatial location. The early Ash'arīs, by contrast, tended to rely more heavily on transmitted proofs (*naql*) while employing rational arguments as supporting evidence. Nevertheless, this distinction is relative, as both schools ultimately achieved a balanced synthesis of reason and revelation.

Another major Ash'arī theologian, Imam Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, subjected the issue of *istiwā'* and other ambiguous attributes to a profound philosophical and theological analysis in his *Asās al-Taqdīs*. According to al-Rāzī, such texts must be interpreted in a manner befitting Allah's majesty and transcendence, while absolutely negating any implication of direction, spatiality, corporeality, or other contingent characteristics [8:109].

These consistent approaches collectively represent the authentic and enduring doctrinal position of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* regarding the issue of *istiwā'*. The balanced and rigorous methodology of Imam al-Māturīdī and Imam al-Ash'arī, together with the refinements introduced by later scholars, remains

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highly relevant today. The contemporary researcher H. Aminov accurately summarizes this reality:

“The approaches of the Māturīdī and Ash‘arī schools to the issue of *istiwā*’ are sound, balanced, and scholarly. They protect the doctrine of Allah from the anthropomorphism of the Mushabbihah, from the Mu‘tazilite negation of the divine attributes, and from the Karrāmiyyah conception of Allah as a body” [7:17].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the shared strategic approach of the Māturīdī and Ash‘arī schools regarding the concept of *istiwā*’ may be summarized as follows:

1. According to the conventions of the Arabic language, the term *istiwā*’ is polysemous and possesses multiple meanings, among which the most prominent are: mastery or dominion, ascent, perfection or completion, and intentional direction.

2. To understand *istiwā*’ with respect to Allah in a material or corporeal sense—such as sitting, physically ascending and settling, or occupying a specific place—is entirely erroneous and

fundamentally incompatible with the Islamic doctrines of pure monotheism (*tawhīd*) and divine transcendence (*tanzīh*).

3. According to the methodology of *ta‘wīl*, the sound interpretation of *istiwā*’ when attributed to Allah is that of dominion and sovereignty; namely, that Allah has brought all creation under His absolute authority and governance. At the same time, because the ultimate reality of this expression transcends human comprehension, the methodology of *tafwīd* – entrusting its final and complete meaning to Allah Himself has likewise been accepted by the scholars of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah* as a legitimate and authoritative scholarly approach.

4. The supreme principle governing all methodological approaches, intellectual arguments, and theological interpretations employed by both schools is the Qur’anic declaration: ‘And in anything over which you disagree –its ruling is [to be referred] to Allah’ (Qur’an 42:11). This verse constitutes the definitive, unequivocal, and comprehensive foundation upon which their understanding of *istiwā*’ ultimately rests.

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