

The Concept of Istawa in Quranic Discourse: Between Literalism and Metaphor

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Abstract—This study examines the Qur’anic verse al-Rahmān ‘alā al‘arsh istawā (20:5), a formulation that appears in multiple places within the Qur’an, and has long been central to discussions of divine transcendence and authority. Focusing on its linguistic structure, exegetical treatments, and theological implications, the paper surveys classical and contemporary interpretations across major Islamic intellectual traditions, Ashari, Maturidi, and Salafi/Athari school. Through a close reading of key tafsir works and an analysis of conceptual debates surrounding istawā’, ‘arsh, and the attributes of God, the study highlights the ways in which notions of mercy, sovereignty, and non-anthropomorphic descriptions are articulated in the Qur’anic discourse. The findings underscore both the shared commitment to divine transcendence across theological schools and the interpretive diversity shaped by methodological and historical contexts. The paper concludes by considering the contemporary relevance of these discussions for intra-Muslim dialogue and for understanding how interpretive plurality can coexist within a unified theological framework.

Index Terms—istawā’, theology, authority, Rahman, ‘Arsh, anthropomorphism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the most discussed verses in Islamic theology are those which describe God in terms that raise questions of humanistic, supremacy, and metaphor. One of these is a repeated phrase: Al- Rahman-ala-al-Arsh-Istawa is central in this regard, since it links God’s attribute of mercy with His sovereignty over the Throne. The Quran mentions God’s Istawa (establishment) over the throne several times (Qur’an, 7:54; 10:3; 13:2; 20:5; 25:59; 32:4; 57:4), which together form an essential component of Islamic

cosmology and theology. It raises profound theological debates: Is God sitting on the Throne in a literal sense, or does the verse symbolize His supremacy and control? Should it be taken literally, metaphorically or accepted (bi la- kayf) “without asking how”?

Muslim scholars across history have devoted substantial attention to the meanings of this verse, resulting in a rich diversity of interpretations. This paper seeks to present a comprehensive study of the verse from multiple angles: linguistic, exegetical, theological, hadith based and comparative. It also aims to show how Muslims across history and today engage with the concept of God’s Throne while avoiding anthropomorphism (humanistic feature).

II. LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

The verse comprises three essential terms: ‘Al-Rahman’ (The Most Merciful), ‘Arsh’ (Throne), and ‘Istawa’ (establishment). The word Rahman is derived from the trilateral root word r-h-m, which signifies mercy and compassion. The form Rahman indicates the most intense and universal degree of mercy, covering all creation.¹ The word ‘Arsh’ literally denotes a throne, but in classical Arabic, it also signifies authority, dominion and majesty. The term ‘Istawa’ is derived from the root word s-w-y, means: to rise, ascend, establish or perfect.² Thus, even at the linguistic level, the verse is open to multiple readings: a literal anthropomorphism. A metaphor of power, or a signifier of ultimate perfection of divine order.

Linguistically, the verse allows readings such as: Possible linguistic renderings include: the Most Merciful rose above the Throne; the Most Merciful established authority over the Throne; the Most

¹ Dar Sadir edition (Beirut, 1956, 15 vols.) of *Lisan al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manzur, Volume 12, pages 231-233.

² Dar Sadir edition (Beirut, 1956, 15 vols.) of *Lisan al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manzur, Volume 14, page 410 – 414.

Merciful perfected His dominion. This flexibility enabled varied interpretive positions across Islamic intellectual history.³

III. QURANIC CONTEXT

The Qur'an refers to God's establishment upon the Throne on seven occasions, and these occurrences form a coherent thematic pattern. Each verse situates the expression *istawā* 'alā al-'arsh within a larger account of creation, governance, and divine authority. The first instance appears in Surah al-A'rāf, where the narrative of creation concludes with the affirmation: "Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then established Himself above the Throne."⁴ The sequence links creative power with sovereign rule.

Surah Yūnus repeats this formulation while adding an explicit reference to divine administration: "Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne, arranging the matter."⁵ The verse continues by restricting intercession to God's permission, reinforcing the exclusivity of His authority. In Surah al-Ra'd, the phrase follows a description of cosmic order: "It is Allah who raised the heavens without pillars you can see; then He established Himself above the Throne."⁶ The mention of the sun and moon running their courses underscores the Throne's association with regulation and sustained order.

A similar pattern appears in Surah al-Furqān: "He who created the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them in six days; then He established Himself above the Throne – the Most Merciful, so ask about Him one well informed."⁷ The attribution of mercy directly alongside sovereignty reinforces the theological linkage between power and compassion. Surat al-Sajdah reiterates that God alone governs creation and that no protector or intercessor exists apart from Him. The verse once again follows the structure of creation followed by enthronement,

supporting the Qur'anic emphasis on divine governance: 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. You have not besides Him any protector or any intercessor; thus, will you not be reminded?"⁸

The final two occurrences in Surah al-Ḥadīd and Surah Tā Hā maintain this thematic alignment. Surat al-Ḥadīd presents God's knowledge of all realms immediately after the mention of the Throne: "It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne. He knows what penetrates into the earth and what emerges from it, what descends from the heaven and what ascends therein; and He is with you wherever you are. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing."⁹ while Surat Tā Hā encapsulates the entire formulation in the brief statement: The Most Merciful [who is] above the Throne established."¹⁰

Across all such occurrences, the Qur'an presents 'Istawa' in direct relation to God's Lordship, authority, and ongoing control of the cosmos. Importantly, these references never attribute to the physical form of God, but instead stress His Transcendent (Tanzih) role. Thus, the pattern is consistent.

IV. CLASSICAL TAFSIR

Exegetes approached the phrase in distinct ways. Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) emphasized that 'Istawa' should be understood as God's control and authority over creation, not a physical sitting.¹¹ Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE) restated the Athari creed of (Bi la- kayf), accepting the verse as it stands without delving into any technique.¹² Fakhr-al-din al Razi (d. 1210 CE) stressed rational analysis, interpreting 'Istawa' as a metaphor for God's domination and mastery.¹³ Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273 CE) engaged both literalist and allegorical approaches, noting the consensus that God cannot be likened to creation, even if the wording

³ Maktaba shamila - Tasir al Kabir, Volume 22, page :5.

⁴ Qur'an. 7:54.

⁵ Qur'an. 10:3.

⁶ Qur'an.13:2.

⁷ Qur'an. 25:59.

⁸ Qur'an. 32:4.

⁹ Qur'an. 57:4.

¹⁰ Qur'an. 20:5.

¹¹ Al- Tabari, *Jami al bayan*. Volume: 16, 20:5.

¹² Ibn Kathir, *tafsir ibn Kathir*. Volume:3, 7:54.

¹³ Al Razi, *tafsir Kabir*. Volume: 22, 20:5.

suggests otherwise that is affirming the verse while acknowledging God's incomparability.¹⁴

V. THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

Debates surrounding al-istiwā' became central to the development of Islamic theology, since they touched on broader questions about how divine attributes should be understood. The major Sunni schools approached the expression al-Raḥmān 'alā al-'arsh istawā through different interpretive methods while maintaining a shared commitment to divine transcendence.

The Athari and later Salafi approaches emphasized direct affirmation of the revealed text without engaging in figurative reinterpretation. Their principle of bi-lā kayf held that the wording of scripture should be accepted as it stands, while refraining from asking about modality. The well-known report in Sahih Muslim concerning the servant girl illustrates this tendency. When asked, "Where is Allah?", she answered, "He is in the heaven," and the Prophet affirmed her belief. Athari scholars cited such reports as evidence that certain expressions should be received without speculative probing.¹⁵

Imam Malik's response to a question regarding the meaning of al-Raḥmān 'alā al-'arsh istawā became foundational for this approach: al-istiwā' ma'lūm, wa-l-kayf majhūl, wa-l-īmān bihi wājib, wa-s-su'āl 'anhu bid'ah.¹⁶ The basic meaning of istiwā' is known in language, its modality remains unknown, belief in it is required, and questioning its modality constitutes an unwarranted innovation. This formulation captured the Athari balance between affirming the text and safeguarding divine incomparability.

The Ash'ari school, while equally committed to transcendence, adopted a different method. When literal readings implied corporeality or spatial location, Ash'ari theologians allowed ta'wīl, interpreting ambiguous terms figuratively in light of clearer scriptural principles. Many therefore understood istawā in the sense of istilā' (dominion or authority), emphasizing sovereignty rather than spatial elevation.¹⁷ Their aim was to preserve coherence

between revelation and the Qur'anic insistence on divine incomparability.

The Maturidi tradition shared much of the Ash'ari theological framework but employed figurative interpretation more cautiously. Maturidi scholars affirmed that God transcends direction, form, and place, yet they generally avoided ta'wīl unless the literal sense clearly conflicted with essential theological principles.

Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina approached throne-related expressions symbolically, reading them as references to metaphysical order rather than spatial acts. From this perspective, Qur'anic language reflects the limits of human expression, pointing toward realities that lie beyond literal description.

These diverse approaches demonstrate the breadth of interpretive strategies within Islamic intellectual history. Though differing in method, all sought to reconcile scriptural language with the conviction that God is utterly transcendent, not subject to corporeal form or spatial limitation.

VI. HADITH EVIDENCE

Several well-known hadith contribute to the broader discourse on al-'arsh and al-istiwā'. These reports do not describe the Throne in corporeal terms but situate it within a cosmological and theological framework that emphasises divine authority, mercy, and transcendence. They also illustrate how early Muslims understood key aspects of the unseen world.

i. The Hadith of the Servant Girl

Mu'āwiyah ibn al-Ḥakam al-Sulamī narrated that he slapped his slave girl after a wolf took one of his sheep. When he consulted the Prophet, the Prophet asked her, "Where is Allah?" She replied, "Above the heaven," and when he asked, "Who am I?" she answered, "You are the Messenger of Allah." Her responses led the Prophet to affirm her faith and instruct that she be freed. This report has been cited in theological discussions because it shows how early believers expressed God's transcendence using familiar

¹⁴ Al Qurtubi, *al Jami-al Ahkam al- Qur'an*. Volume: 7, 7:54.

¹⁵ Sahi Muslim, *Kitab al- Masjid wa Mawadi as-Salah*, hadith number: 537.

¹⁶ *Sharh Uṣūl I'tiqād Ahl al-Sunnah*, Vol. 3, p. 432, no. 665 (Dār Ṭayyibah edition).

¹⁷ Al Juwayni, *al-Irshād ilā Qawāṭi' al-Adilla fī Uṣūl al-I'tiqād*. Page number: 59,60.

language, though scholars later debated the interpretive weight of the narrative.¹⁸

ii. The Bearers of the Throne

A report from Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh describes one of the angels who carry the Throne. According to the narration: “I have been permitted to speak about one of the angels of Allah, one of the bearers of the Throne: the distance between the lobe of his ear and his shoulder is like a distance of seven hundred years’ travel.”¹⁹

iii. The Divine Inscription Above the Throne

Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: “When Allah completed the creation, He wrote in His Book, which is with Him above the Throne: ‘Indeed, My Mercy has overcome (or outstripped) My Wrath.’”²⁰

iv. The Throne and Primordial Creation

Imrān ibn Ḥuṣayn reported: “Allah existed, and there was nothing else besides Him, and His Throne was above the water, and He wrote in the Book (al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz) everything that would happen, then He created the heavens and the earth.”²¹

VII. COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS

The Quranic presentation of God’s enthronement (establishment) differs markedly from other religious traditions. In Biblical texts, (from the Hebrew bible Old Testament) says:

In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple.²²

The Qur’an, by contrast avoids corporeal depictions while still affirming God’s authority and sovereignty in highly evocative language that is, Qur’an avoids any image of embodiment, focusing on God’s majesty and transcendence (Tanzih). The phrase ‘bi la kayf’ encapsulates the Muslim attitude: affirming what God has said of Himself, without attributing to Him form, place or limitation.

¹⁸ Sahi Muslim, Kitab al- Masajid wa Mawadi as-Salah, hadith number: 537.

¹⁹ Sunan Abu Dawood, hadith number: 4727.

VIII. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

In the modern era, Muslim thinkers emphasize the importance of unity despite diversity of interpretation. While some communities adopt the Athari literalist attitude that is they affirm the verse as it is, without asking how, while Ashari’s, Maturidi’s interpret it figuratively to emphasize transcendence.

Thus, all agree upon the transcendence of God, His incomparable nature and ultimate authority. The verse continues to serve as the reminder of divine mercy and sovereignty, themes that resonate with believers navigating the complexities of modernity. Its interpretations demonstrate the richness of Islamic thought and the humility required in theological discourse.

IX. CONCLUSION

The verse ‘Al- Rahman ala Arsh Istawa (the most merciful rose over the throne), stands as one of the most profound expressions of the divine majesty in the Quran. Linguistically, the phrase ‘Istawa’ carries multiple shades of meaning, ranging from elevation and establishment to mastery and dominion, making it a position of rich theological interpretation and reflection throughout Islamic history.

Classical exegetes and theologians approached the verse from different yet complementary perspectives. The early Salaf affirmed the verse as it came, without likening Allah to His creation (bi la kayf wa la tashbih), emphasizing submission to the revealing wording. The Ashari and Maturidi scholars, on the other hand tended toward figurative understanding (Ta’wil), reading Istawa as a metaphor for divine sovereignty and governance. Despite methodological diversity, both approaches converged upon a central principle: The absolute transcendence of God (Tanzih), free from spatial limitations direction.

Thematically, the verse portrays Allah as both Majestic and Merciful, the one whose authority encompasses all creation and whose compassion sustains it. The throne ‘Arsh’ symbolizes not a physical location, but the ultimate seat of divine order, power and mercy. In this way, the verse unites the concepts of Jalal (majesty)

²⁰ Sahi Bukhari, Book 97, Hadith 33 (also numbered 7404).

²¹ Sahi Bukhari, hadith number: 3191.

²² Isaiah 6:1 (New International Version).

and Jamal (beauty), reminding believers that Allah's rule is at once absolute and benevolent.

For the contemporary Muslim, this verse is an invitation to balance faith and reason, humility and reflection. It teaches that while human language and intellect can gesture toward divine realities, they can never fully grasp them. The believer's role is to affirm what Allah has revealed, seek understanding through sound scholarship, and maintain reverence and the mystery of His being.

Ultimately, 'Al- Rahman ala al Arsh Istawa' summarize the harmony between revelation and transcendence, affirming God's presence, authority, and mercy while preserving His incomparable nature. It stands as a timeless reminder that divine knowledge calls not only for intellectual inquiry but also for admiration, humility and worship before the one who is beyond all comprehension yet nearer to us than our very selves

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