



TEXTUAL AND RATIONAL REFUTATIONS OF PSEUDO-SALAFI CLAIMS REGARDING THE CONCEPT OF “ISTAWA”

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Abstract. *In the contemporary context of globalisation, the literal and superficial interpretation of theological terms found in Quranic verses and hadiths has become increasingly prevalent, generating doctrinal confusion particularly around the question of whether God possesses physical attributes. This article examines pseudo-Salafi claims concerning the concept of “istawa” – God’s “settling upon the Throne” – and presents comprehensive textual (naqliy) and rational (aqliy) refutations drawn from the Hanafi-Maturidi theological tradition. The study analyzes the Quranic distinction between clear (muhkam) and ambiguous (mutashabih) verses, examines the distorted use of classical sources by Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and presents authentic transmissions from Imam Malik and the early pious predecessors (salaf al-salih). The findings affirm that the mainstream Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a position – that God exists without place, direction, or bodily attributes – is firmly grounded in Quranic exegesis, sound hadith, and incontrovertible rational argument.*

Keywords: *istawa; divine attributes; Ahl al-Sunna; pseudo-Salafism; tashbih; tajsim; Maturidiyya; muhkam; mutashabih; Islamic theology.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context of globalisation, superficial and literal interpretations of theological terms found in sacred texts have spread widely, and views that tend to associate the attributes of God with physical, bodily characteristics are causing doctrinal confusion and instability not only among young people but across all age groups. One of the most pressing of these issues is the question of “God’s istawa upon the Throne.” The claims advanced by pseudo-Salafis on this subject, departing from the true intent of the Quran and hadith and contrary to the explanations of the authentic early pious predecessors (salaf al-salih), are cultivating a creed of tashbih (anthropomorphism) and tajsim (corporealism) with respect to God. This leads to the misinterpretation of textual



proofs, the disregard of rational principles, and the weakening of the unity of the Muslim community.

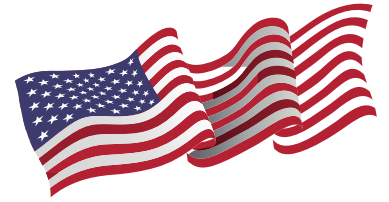
It is therefore a pressing necessity of the present era to elucidate this problem on a rigorous scholarly basis, to analyze it through classical and contemporary sources of the Hanafi-Maturidi doctrinal heritage, and to cultivate a sound approach through the harmony of textual and rational proofs – thereby protecting and ensuring the stability of the pure doctrinal tradition that has been transmitted across centuries.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach combining classical Islamic hermeneutics (*usul al-tafsir*) with comparative theological analysis. The primary method is the critical examination and comparison of primary Quranic, hadith, and tafsir sources alongside the theological literature of the Hanafi-Maturidi school. Sources examined include the Quran with its classical commentaries, canonical hadith collections, the heresiographical and theological works of al-Nasafi, al-Taftazani, al-Shahrastani, and Ibn Kathir, as well as the polemical writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Contemporary Uzbek scholarship, particularly Aminov (2021) and Tojiboev (2021), is used to contextualize the findings within the Central Asian Hanafi-Maturidi tradition. The study proceeds through three analytical layers: first, the clarification of Quranic hermeneutical categories (*muhkam* and *mutashabih*); second, the critical examination of pseudo-Salafi textual claims and the distortion of classical sources; and third, the presentation of both authentic textual proofs from the *salaf* and four incontrovertible rational arguments against the attribution of place or body to God.

MUHKAMANDMUTASHABIH: FOUNDATIONALHERMENEUTICAL CATEGORIES

The term “*istawa*” (Arabic: استوى) appears seven times in the Quran in relation to doctrinal matters. In six of these instances – in Surah al-A‘raf (7:54), Yunus (10:3), al-Ra‘d (13:2), al-Furqan (25:59), al-Sajda (32:4), and al-Hadid (57:4) – the expression “*istawa ‘ala al-‘arsh*” (ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ) appears, meaning “...then He became *mustawi* upon the Throne” (Mansur, 2004:249). In the seventh instance, Surah Taha (20:5), the expression “*al-Rahmanu ‘ala al-‘arshi istawa*” (الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَىٰ) appears, meaning “It is the Most Merciful Who became *mustawi* upon the Throne” (Mansur, 2004:305).



The Quranic verses are divided into two categories. Those whose meaning is clear, unambiguous, and readily comprehensible, leaving no room for doubt, are called “muhkam.” Those whose meaning resembles other verses, admits of several possible interpretations, or contains an implicit and non-apparent sense are called “mutashabih.” Before proceeding to the main topic, it is necessary to grasp the lexical meanings of these two terms. The word “muhkam” is derived from “ahkama,” meaning to do something well and prevent its corruption, thus signifying “well-made, firmly established, inviolable.” The word “mutashabih” is derived from “tashabuh,” meaning “mutual resemblance,” and is applied in Arabic when two things resemble one another so closely that they become confused and difficult to distinguish (Muhammad Yusuf, 2022:350–351).

According to Imam Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), the technical meanings of these two terms are as follows: muhkam refers to verses whose meaning is transparent and clear, leaving no room for any obscurity; mutashabih refers to verses in which the intended primary meaning contains an element of hiddenness or concealment (al-Itr, 2021:122). The Prophet’s wife A’isha (may God be pleased with her) narrated that the Messenger of God recited the verse: “It is He who has sent down to you the Book; in it are clear (muhkam) verses – they are the foundation of the Book – and others ambiguous (mutashabih). As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they follow that of it which is ambiguous, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation. And no one knows its true interpretation except God. But those firm in knowledge say: ‘We believe in it. All is from our Lord.’ And none will be reminded except those of understanding” (Surah Al ‘Imran, 3:7) (Mansur, 2004:50), and then said: “If you see those who follow the ambiguous verses of it, know that they are the ones whom God has said ‘Beware of them!’” (al-Bukhari, 2008:49–50). The duty of the believer is accordingly to interpret ambiguous verses in light of the clear ones and to reconcile them with unequivocal meanings – for this is the sign that the heart is safe from deviation and misguidance.

PSEUDO-SALAFI CLAIMS AND DISTORTIONS OF CLASSICAL SOURCES

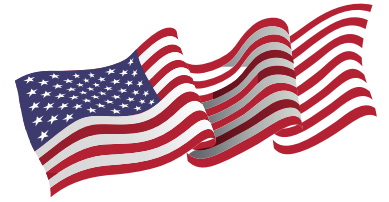
The concept of istawa belongs among the ambiguous (mutashabih) theological matters of the Quran. The individual whom pseudo-Salafis claim as their Shaykh al-Islam – Ibn Taymiyya al-Harrani (d. 1328 CE), who belonged to the Hanbali school of



law but became notorious for opposing many of the positions upon which Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a scholars had reached consensus, as well as numerous matters upon which the entire Muslim community had reached unanimous agreement – stirred controversy on this question and became the cause of confusion among the broader Muslim community and of complete misguidance among those today called pseudo-Salafis or Zahiris. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya took this view from an earlier scholar, Abu Bakr al-Khallal (d. 923 CE) of the tenth century, who was known for his extremism, and from al-Khallal’s work “al-Sunna” – a book filled with views of corporealism and anthropomorphism entirely alien to the teaching of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a. Pseudo-Salafis have even published this book under the claim that it was authored by ‘Abd Allah (d. 903 CE), the son of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE) (Aminov, 2021:6–7).

The first scholar to draw attention to and refute Ibn Taymiyya’s statement that “God sits upon the Throne” was his contemporary Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi (d. 1344 CE) – a great scholar who lived from 1256 to 1344 and who had initially been an admirer of Ibn Taymiyya. He later began examining Ibn Taymiyya’s doctrine with a critical eye. In his tafsir entitled “al-Nahr al-Madd,” when discussing the istawa question in his commentary on the Verse of the Throne, Abu Hayyan writes: “I read in a book of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya – who is our contemporary – which he titled ‘Kitab al-‘Arsh’ in his own handwriting: ‘Indeed God sits upon the Kursi. He has left a space vacant on it to seat the Prophet (peace be upon him) alongside Himself. Muhammad ibn ‘Ali ibn ‘Abd al-Haqq al-Nurtiyari also inclined to this view; he was the most outspoken of those who called to it, and he transmitted it from Ibn Taymiyya and recited it to us’” (Aminov, 2021:8–9).

Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya in his “Majmu‘ al-Fatawa” presents his creed that “God sits upon the Throne” as something sacred, falsely claims that he received it from scholars and saints who transmitted hadiths on the matter, and dishonestly asserts that only a Jahmite would deny it (Aminov, 2021:9). In the sixteenth volume of his “Majmu‘ al-Fatawa,” Ibn Taymiyya cites a narration concerning God’s sitting upon the Throne, supposedly transmitted from ‘Umar (may God be pleased with him) via the Prophet (peace be upon him) and reported by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahid al-Maqdisi (d. 1245 CE) in his “al-Mukhtar.” A group of hadith scholars rejected this narration due to its idtirab (inconsistency in transmission), a judgment expressed by, among others,

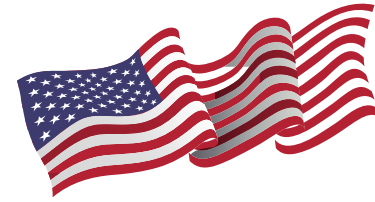


Abu Bakr al-Isma‘ili (d. 981 CE) and Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201 CE). What is remarkable is that even the pseudo-Salafis’ own “hadith specialist,” Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999 CE), noted in a footnote on that very page of the book that this narration is weak and fabricated (Aminov, 2021:10).

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792 CE), the founder of the Wahhabi movement and one of the guiding figures of contemporary pseudo-Salafism, also employed expressions such as elevation (uluww), rising (irtifa‘), settling (istiqrar), and ascending (su‘ud) in his interpretation of God’s istawa upon the Throne, claiming that these views accord with the path of the salaf al-salih and the approach of Imam Malik ibn Anas (d. 795 CE). He cited as evidence the well-known narration attributed to Imam Malik in response to a question about istawa: “The istawa is known, its modality is unknown, believing in it is obligatory, and asking about it is an innovation.” He further claimed that scholars and saints of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a had all agreed that “God is above the heavens” and that none had ever said “God is not in the sky” or “He is not above the Throne” or “pointing to Him physically is impermissible” (Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, n.d.).

When the narration cited by pseudo-Salafis was investigated, approximately ten transmissions from Imam Malik (d. 795 CE) were identified. When these transmissions are collated, the overall meaning conveyed is: “The istawa is known; the modality is rationally inadmissible (ghayr ma‘qul).” Only a single transmission uses the phrase “the modality is unknown (majhul),” and that transmission is classified as weak. The version “The istawa is known; the modality is unknown” has not been authentically established as a saying of Imam Malik (d. 795 CE). To attribute this wording to Imam Malik in order to present him as supporting a creed of corporealism is a fabrication (al-A‘yidi, 2022:80–81).

The authentic narration, as transmitted by Imam al-Bayhaqi (d. 1114 CE) in “Al-Asma’ wa al-Sifat” from ‘Abd Allah ibn Wahb, reads as follows: “We were in the presence of Imam Malik ibn Anas (d. 795 CE) when a man entered and said: ‘O Abu ‘Abd Allah! The Most Merciful settled upon the Throne – how did He settle?’ Malik lowered his head and sweat covered his body. He then raised his head and said: ‘The Most Merciful settled upon the Throne as He described Himself. One does not say “how,” for the “how” has been lifted from Him (i.e., such a concept does not apply to Him). You are a man of



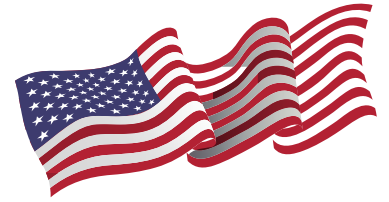
innovation, an evil man. Remove him!’ And the man was expelled.” A second authentic narration from Yahya ibn Yahya al-Tamimi (d. 840 CE) records that Imam Malik said: “The istawa is not unknown; the modality is rationally inadmissible. Believing in it is obligatory; asking about it is an innovation. I consider you only an innovator.” He then ordered the man to be expelled. Both Hafiz Ibn Hajar in “Al-Fath” and Imam al-Dhahabi in “Al-Uluww” have authenticated Ibn Wahb’s narration (al-A’yidi, 2022:80–81). If, as pseudo-Salafis claim, there were a “modality” pertaining to God’s attributes that was merely unknown to us, why did Imam Malik accuse the questioner of innovation? It would have sufficed to say: “This matter is unknown to us.” The questioner was expelled precisely because he asked about a “bodily modality” – something rationally impossible to attribute to God.

TEXTUAL REFUTATIONS FROM THE QURAN, HADITH, AND THE SALAF

The scholars of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a hold the firm position that God has no place, does not settle in any location, and does not sit in any place. This is the doctrinal stance from which they do not deviate. As textual proof, one may cite the hadith recorded in Sahih al-Bukhari: “God existed, and there was nothing else alongside Him” (Bukhari, 2008, hadith no. 3191). This establishes that when God existed, there was no Throne, no above, no below, and no place of any kind. All of these were subsequently created by God for His creation. The “Tafsir of al-Nasafi” states explicitly in Arabic:

“The interpretation of the Throne as a seat and of istawa as settling – as the Mushabbiha claim – is false! For God existed before the Throne, and at that time there was no place. He is now as He was before. For change is among the attributes of contingent beings” (Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi, 1988:56).

On the question of interpreting ambiguous verses, the famous exegete Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi (d. 1373 CE) – acknowledged as a student of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE) – in his commentary on Surah al-Ra‘d (13:2) says the very opposite of his teacher’s position: “In this regard, the path of the early and later salaf al-salih is followed: Malik (d. 795 CE), al-Awza‘i (d. 774 CE), al-Thawri (d. 778 CE), al-Layth ibn Sa‘d (d. 791 CE), al-Shafi‘i (d. 820 CE), Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE), Ishaq ibn Rahawayh (d. 853 CE), and other imams of Islam. This path consists of passing such verses as they have



come without affirming a modality, without anthropomorphism (tashbih), and without negating the attributes (ta‘til). The outward meanings that come to the mind of those who liken God to His creation are not attributed to God. For there is nothing like Him: ‘There is nothing like Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing’” (Surah al-Shura, 42:11) (Mansur, 2004:484) (Ibn Kathir, 1999, vol. 3, p. 427).

Indeed, the authoritative position on this matter is as stated by Nu‘aym ibn Hammad al-Khuzai (d. 843 CE), the teacher of Imam al-Bukhari (d. 870 CE): “Whoever likens God to His creation has committed unbelief. And whoever denies the attributes with which God has described Himself has also committed unbelief” (Zayriyev & Qudratulloh, 2022:250–251). Surah al-Shura, verse 11, serves as a general hermeneutical rule for understanding ambiguous verses. Regarding Surah al-Ikhlās, verse 4 – “Nor is there to Him any equivalent” (Mansur, 2004:604) – exegetes such as Imam al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) and Imam Abu Hafs al-Nasafi (d. 1142 CE) have noted that the word “kufu’an” in this verse conveys the meanings of “equal, likeness, peer, equivalent, companion,” absolutely negating any “likeness,” “resemblance,” “equal,” “partner,” or “companion” being attributed to God from among His creation (al-Tabari, 2001, vol. 24, pp. 738–739; al-Nasafi, 2019, vol. 15, p. 539).

The great Companion ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (may God be pleased with him) was once asked: “Where was our Lord before He created the Throne?” He replied: “‘Where’ is a question about place. God existed when there was yet no place and no time, and He is now exactly as He was before” (al-Nasafi, 2014:127). The great Successor (tabi‘i) Abu Muhammad Sa‘id ibn al-Musayyab (d. 715 CE) stated: “We say He settled upon the Throne without modality. We do not affirm any place for Him, because God existed before the creation of place, and He is now as He was before” (Tojiboev, 2021:50). These two narrations from a major Companion and a major Successor constitute textual proofs establishing the mainstream Ahl al-Sunna position.

RATIONAL REFUTATIONS OF PSEUDO-SALAFI CLAIMS

The scholars of Ahl al-Sunna provide the following four rational refutations of pseudo-Salafi claims regarding the concept of istawa (Tojiboev, 2021:50):

First: God is pre-eternal and without beginning. The universe is contingent and created. The Throne is a part of this created universe. If, as pseudo-Salafis claim, one



were to say “God settled upon the Throne,” the logical conclusion would be that “the pre-eternal, beginningless God settled upon a contingent thing that came into existence later.” This is rationally untenable. For a beginningless, pre-eternal Being to settle upon a contingent thing brought into existence subsequently is a logical impossibility and a corrupted belief with respect to the majesty of God.

Second: God existed before the Throne, and the Throne was created afterwards. If one were to say “God settled upon the Throne,” the implication would be that “God is in need of the Throne.” Yet God is the one omnipotent Being who is in need of nothing whatsoever. Alternatively, it would imply that “the Throne is also pre-eternal and without beginning alongside God” – which is equally false and void.

Third: God has been, from eternity, a Being without place – before the creation of the Throne and the heavens. If one were to say “Once the Throne was created, God settled upon it,” this would imply that “God changed at some point: before the creation of the Throne He had no need of a place, but after the Throne and the heavens were created He became in need of the Throne – that is, His original state changed.” Mutability is an attribute unworthy of the majesty of God.

Fourth: If one were to say that God settled upon the Throne, it would logically follow that God is either equal to the Throne in size, smaller than it, or larger than it. This conception is also a false and void notion unworthy of the majesty of God.

This principle demonstrates that God is absolutely independent of not only the Throne but of all created things. For place and time are themselves created. It is rationally and scripturally impossible for the Creator to be in need of what He Himself created, or to be contained within it.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated, through a convergence of Quranic exegesis, authentic hadith, the testimony of the salaf, and incontrovertible rational argument, that the pseudo-Salafi claims concerning the concept of istawa – specifically the attribution of physical location, direction, or bodily settlement to God upon the Throne – are without foundation in the authentic Islamic scholarly tradition. The mainstream Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a position, as articulated by Imam al-Maturidi, Imam al-Nasafi, and the great exegetes,



is unambiguous: God is pre-eternal, without place, without direction, and without any attribute of contingent beings.

The analysis has shown that Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's claims rest on distorted transmissions, misattributed narrations – including one rejected as weak or fabricated by al-Albani himself – and a selective reading of classical sources that reverses the authentic positions of Imam Malik and the salaf al-salih. The authentic narrations from Imam Malik (d. 795 CE), 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (may God be pleased with him), and Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab (d. 715 CE) all converge on the same position: God's *istawa* is affirmed without a modality; no place is affirmed for God; and God is now as He was before the creation of the Throne and the heavens.

The four rational arguments presented confirm that any attribution of place, settlement, or physical dimension to God leads inescapably to theological contradiction: it implies either that God is in need of created things, that He is mutable, that He is co-eternal with the Throne, or that He is spatially bounded. All four of these implications are incompatible with the most fundamental attributes of God as understood across the entire classical Islamic scholarly tradition. The findings of this study carry direct implications for contemporary efforts to counter pseudo-Salafi ideology in Central Asian and global Muslim communities, and affirm the Hanafi-Maturidi heritage as a rigorous and enduring doctrinal framework.

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