

## EAST OR WEST: REVISITING MARTYRDOM IN THE QUR'AN

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### Abstract

This study tackles the underexplored concept of 'Istishhad' (martyrdom) in Sunni Qur'anic commentaries, comparing the classical commentaries with the modern ones. It undertakes a thorough content analysis of classical interpretations of al-Qurtubi and al-Razi with contemporary interpretations from the late nineteenth century by Rashid Riḍa and al-Sha'rawi enabling critical and comparative analysis of these diverse interpretations to capture the evolution of the term *Istishhad* throughout history. It finds prevalent misunderstanding(s) and misrepresentation(s) of martyrdom in some modern Western literature, underscoring the urgency for more accurate and nuanced comprehension in modern religious and geopolitical dialogues. The study contributes to how a sound and diverse understanding of '*istishhad*' as arrived at by the consulted classical and modern interpretations can potentially solve some modern socio-cultural dynamics within and beyond Muslim societies. Significantly, it shows how the concept of '*istishhad*' as understood or practiced can influence global religious views about Islam within the realm of socio-political discourse. Finally, the study advocates for the incorporation of a broader array of Islamic perspectives in future scholarly work, moving beyond mainstream Sunni interpretations of the Qur'an to find complementary interpretations in the Prophetic Sunnah.

*Penelitian ini menyelidiki konsep 'Istishhad' (kesyahidan) yang belum banyak diteliti dalam tafsir al-Qur'an Sunni, dengan membandingkan tafsir klasik dan modern. Melalui analisis konten yang mendalam terhadap interpretasi klasik oleh al-Qurtubi dan al-Razi, serta interpretasi kontemporer oleh Rashid Riḍa dan al-Sha'rawi dari akhir abad ke-19, penelitian ini memungkinkan analisis kritis dan komparatif terhadap berbagai interpretasi tersebut untuk mengungkap evolusi istilah Istishhad sepanjang sejarah. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi kesalahpahaman dan representasi yang keliru tentang kesyahidan dalam beberapa literatur Barat modern, menekankan pentingnya pemahaman yang lebih akurat dan berdimensi dalam dialog agama dan geopolitik kontemporer. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada bagaimana pemahaman yang komprehensif dan beragam tentang 'istishhad', yang dihasilkan dari interpretasi klasik dan modern yang dianalisis, dapat membantu mengatasi beberapa dinamika sosial-budaya kontemporer, baik di dalam maupun di luar masyarakat Muslim. Secara signifikan, temuan ini menunjukkan bagaimana konsep 'istishhad', baik dalam pemahaman maupun praktiknya, dapat mempengaruhi persepsi global terhadap Islam dalam diskursus sosial-politik. Penelitian ini mengakhiri dengan merekomendasikan inklusi perspektif Islam yang lebih luas dalam studi ilmiah mendatang, melewati batasan interpretasi Sunni mainstream al-Qur'an untuk mengeksplorasi interpretasi pelengkap dalam Sunnah Nabi.*

## Background

The Qur'anic concept of '*istishhad*' (commonly translated as martyrdom) has garnered significant attention across the centuries, either from the classical and modern Muslim thinkers or from non-Muslim academia. Yet, a comprehensive examination of each of them, especially of a Sunniexegetical interpretational perspective, remains



conspicuously underdeveloped. This lacuna often leaves a fragmented understanding of '*istishhad*', limiting its varied applications in the modern world<sup>1</sup>. The present study aims to bridge this gap by addressing three crucial questions: What is the contribution of Sunni Qur'an exegetes in elucidating the concept of martyrdom? How do classical and modern interpretations align with or diverge from this exegetical context? And, do these exegetes align with or differ from the non-Muslim Western understanding of '*istishhad*' in the Qur'an? This study will attempt to fill an existing gap about '*istishhad*' in the Qur'an as reflected by the selected Sunniclassical and modern interpretations.<sup>2</sup> The methodology of content analysis is employed in this study, considering its efficacy in examining historical and contemporary Qur'anic interpretations. This method is pivotal in understanding the transformation of religious and intellectual discourses over time.<sup>3</sup>

The *tafsir* (exegesis) of the Qur'an serves as a foundational pillar in understanding the evolving notions of '*istishhad*'. The interpretation of Qur'anic verses related to jihad and martyrdom has undergone significant transformations over time. Afsaruddin maintained that this transformation, which started from the formative period of Islam to modern times, has led to changing and challenging approaches in understanding jihad and martyrdom because of prevailing political and social circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Our study, therefore, focuses on the following selected Qur'anic verses, which include, Q. 3: 169–171; 4: 69; 9: 111 and 33: 55. These main verses are selected because they, first, provide a diverse and rich space for interpretation by the selected interpreters. Second, they are frequently quoted by non-Muslims to convey specific meanings of both martyrdom and the term '*shahid*' and its various connotations in the Qur'an. This approach is not only essential for shedding light on the Qur'anic exegetical perspective, but could potentially be utilized by non-Arabic-speaking peoples who may wish to grasp some additional linguistic and interpretative depths of '*istishhad*' in the Qur'an.

Our analysis primarily revolves around the interpretations of two classical exegetes: al-Qurtubi (d. 1272), al-Razi (d. 1209), and two modern exegetes: Rashid Riḍa (d. 1935), and al-Sha'rawi (d. 1998). Al-Qurtubi's works, as detailed by Mashhur Hasan Mahmud Sulayman in "Al-Imam, al-Qurtubi: Shaykh A'immat al-Tafsir," are particularly insightful, given his context of Andalusian interfaith tensions.<sup>5</sup> Al-Razi, known for his analytical and thematic exegesis, provides a multifaceted understanding of Qur'anic verses, as discussed by 'Abd al-Mun'im Al-Nimr in '*Ilm al-Tafsir*'.<sup>6</sup> The modern perspectives of Riḍa and al-Sha'rawi, who witnessed the 20th-century sociopolitical upheavals, bring a reformist critique to classical notions of jihad and '*istishhad*', as reflected in Riḍa's *Tafsir al-Manaras* well as al-Sha'rawi's *al-Tafsir*. In

<sup>1</sup>David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, Chad. Jr, Robert H. Woods. "Content Analysis." In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, pp. 109–122.

<sup>4</sup> Afsaruddin, Asma. "Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought and History." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Published online March 3, 2016. p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Sulayman, Mashhūr Ḥasan Mahmūd. *Al-Imam, al-Qurṭubī: Shaykh A'immat al-Tafsir*. Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1993/1413. p. 22f.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Nimr, 'Abd al-Mun'im. '*Ilm al-Tafsir: Kayfa Nasha' wa-Taṭawwara Ḥatta Intaha Ila Aṣrina al-Ḥaḍir*. Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Miṣri, 1985/1405. pp. 99–105, 128.

exploring these exegetical perspectives, the study also delves into some modern sources by contemporary scholars. This approach is instrumental in our attempt to present the evolving meaning of '*istishhad*'.

Interestingly, some remarkable modern works have delved into martyrdom in the Qur'an. First, Asma Afsaruddin's 'Dying in the Path of God: Reading Martyrdom and Moral Excellence in the Qur'an'. While her work provides an extensive Sunni coverage of martyrdom in the Qur'an, her analysis is apparently limited to very few and brief selected classical interpreters that do not include al-Qurtūbi and al-Rāzi, the two classical interpretations consulted in this paper. In her work, no reference is made to modern Qur'an interpreters as well. Her main argument is limited to military martyrdom in Q 2:154, 3:157–8 and 3:169 as explained by pre-modern exegeses. Her work also attempted to link martyrdom to moral excellence and views the Qur'anic concept of martyrdom from a pure eschatological and hereafter understanding.<sup>7</sup>

Second, Elseyed Amin's seminal work, 'Terrorism from a Qur'anic Perspective: A Study of Selected Classical and Modern Exegeses and Their Interpretation in the Modern Context,' is widely regarded as an essential text for comprehending '*istishhad*' in the Qur'an. Amin's dissertation delves deeply into the notion of martyrdom, with a particular emphasis on the ideological nuances between martyrdom and suicide operations in the Israeli–Palestinian context. Despite its rich analysis, the relevance of some aspects of Amin's work may have diminished due to evolving military strategies and socio–political dynamics in the region. Furthermore, while it was conceived as a Sunni response to global perceptions linking jihad and terrorism, it is worth noting that the work, being over a decade old, might not fully encompass the latest scholarly insights on '*istishhad*', especially those that extend beyond the traditional Arab and Middle Eastern discourse.<sup>8</sup>

Third, David Cook's 'Martyrdom in Islam' extensively dealt with martyrdom from a non–Muslim lens that may have overlooked a balanced reading of Sunni exegetical literature. In addition, Cook's reading of martyrdom is not thorough, as far as Qur'an's interpretations are concerned. Regrettably, it is apparently biased viewing its insistence to project the martyrdom operations in Palestine as a suicide. Beyond the literature review presented here, the choice of exegetes for this research was methodically considered. Al-Qurtūbi, who resided during a time characterized by heightened Muslim and non–Muslim discord in Andalusia, endeavored to elucidate comprehensively on '*istishhad*' and the Qur'an. His exegeses, as presented in the writings of Sulayman, demonstrate a sophisticated grasp of the proactive stance towards non–Muslims. This underscores the intricate relationship between religious doctrines and the socio–political context within Islamic legal theory.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, al-Rāzi is

<sup>7</sup>Afsaruddin, Asma. "Dying in the Path of God: Reading Martyrdom and Moral Excellence in the Qur'an." In *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, edited by Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, Vol. 1, p. 17, pp. 162–181.

<sup>8</sup>Amin, El-Sayed Mohamed Abdalla. *Terrorism from a Qur'anic perspective: a study of selected classical and modern exegeses and their interpretation in the modern context*. Diss. University of Birmingham, 2010. p. 218–284..

<sup>9</sup>Sulayman, Al-Imam, al-Qurtūbi, 22 f.

renowned for his comprehensive methodology in *tafsir*, integrating thematic, linguistic, juristic, and doctrinal interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, contemporary exegetes such as Rashid Rida and al-Sha'rawi experienced eras of substantial socio-political transformation. Afsaruddin's examination of Rida's *Tafsir al-Manar* reveals a reformist perspective challenging traditional notions of warfare and '*istishhad*', indicative of the 20th-century shifts in Islamic intellectual discourse.<sup>11</sup> The late al-Sha'rawi, an eminent figure in modern Egypt, offered interpretations significantly influenced by contemporary events, such as the occupation of Palestine and his role in mediating Egypt's internal conflicts. His expositions remain critically relevant in understanding contemporary interpretations and applications of '*istishhad*', reflecting on how socio-political contexts shape religious discourse and understanding. His legacy endures in the ongoing dialogue around martyrdom and its place within the modern Islamic world.

Furthermore, this study broadens its scope to incorporate secondary materials from a diverse array of contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim academics. This approach guarantees a comprehensive grasp of '*istishhad*', embracing a spectrum of interpretations and perspectives. The viewpoints of Western scholars like Santoso and Choi are subjected to critical analysis. Santoso's investigation into the reassessment of martyrdom in early Islam offers a viewpoint that diverges from the conventional Islamic interpretation of '*istishhad*'.<sup>12</sup> Choi and Acosta, equating '*istishhad*' with terrorism, underscores the controversial aspects of interpreting Qur'anic verses within the framework of contemporary geopolitical challenges.<sup>13</sup> These varied perspectives emphasize the necessity for a nuanced and balanced examination of '*istishhad*', considering both the Muslim and non-Muslim viewpoints.

In summing up, this research endeavors to bridge a significant schism in contemporary Qur'anic studies, marked by a pronounced discord between some Western scholarly views and established Islamic interpretations. Through a detailed examination of the expansive notion of '*istishhad*', employing diverse exegetical perspectives, the study seeks to elucidate and situate the term within its proper framework. This effort is geared towards enriching the overall grasp of '*istishhad*'s role and relevance, traversing both its historical roots and its implications in the present-day Islamic discourse.

## Meanings and Occurrences of '*istishhad*' in the Qur'an

The Qur'an presented diverse occurrences of the word '*istishhad*'. The verb *shahida* generally refers to witnessing or seeing an event. According to al-Qurṭubī, in Q. 2: 185, the 'witnessing' relates to the month of Ramadan's crescent as part of a

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<sup>10</sup>Troudi, Khaled. Qur'anic Hermeneutics with Reference to Narratives: A Study in Classical Exegetical Traditions. PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Exeter, 2011. pp. 80–82.

<sup>11</sup>Afsaruddin, Asma. "*Jihad and Martyrdom*". p. 21.

<sup>12</sup>Santoso, Dri "The Dynamics of Muslim Interpretation of Jihad Verses: Between Morality and Military." *Altahrir* 22, no. 1 (2022): 49–70; Choi and Acosta. "Sunni Suicide Attacks and Sectarian Violence." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (2020): 1371–90, p. 1373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1472585>.

<sup>13</sup>Choi and Acosta. "Sunni Suicide Attacks, p. 1374.

Muslim community collective effort to witness the *hīlal*.<sup>14</sup> The Arabic verb 'shahida' and its multiple literal occurrences can be seen in one hundred and fifty eight times in the Qur'an.<sup>15</sup> This vivid presentation and the word's derivatives is neither mentioned nor even taken into account by Western writers who unfortunately, reduces 'istishhad and *shahid* to terrorism.<sup>16</sup> Noticeably, the literal occurrences and their meanings especially for the words *shahida* and *shahid*, which follow each other in Q. 46: 10 refer to the person who attests to the divine source of the Qur'an.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, both *shahida* and *shahid* occur in Q. 12: 26. Moreover, according to Q. 3 :18, *shahida* means knowledge. Allah in Q. 33 : 55 is a *shahid* or omniscient.<sup>18</sup>

In his interpretation of this verse, *Al-Qurṭubi* maintains that both the word *shahid* and *mashhud* can not be linked to a specific meaning where we can assume that this specific meaning should or should not be given priority over other meanings. *Al-Qurṭubi* attributed this to the non-occurrence of a sound Prophetic *ḥadīth* to specify the meaning(s) or to prioritize one meaning over the other. As a result, multiple meanings can be considered for both words. These meanings can include Allah Himself, Muhammad (peace be upon him) as well as the Day of Judgement as a *mashhud* day.<sup>19</sup>

The above interpretations show that the root word *shahid* and its possible plural *shuhada* and *shuhud* or witnesses can be explained in multiple ways, and can, therefore, refer to diverse meanings. For relevancy purposes, the discussion in this study will only highlight the word *shahid* and its possible plural *shuhada* as they occur in the Qur'an. This is because of the apparent possible link between martyrdom, as an English term, and *shahid*, as an Arabic and Qur'anic term, as will be explained.<sup>20</sup>

### Meanings and Occurrences of *Al-Shahid* in the Qur'an

The term *shahid*, specifically, refers to someone who attempts 'istishhad/*shahadah* for the sake of Allah. The Qur'anic words 'ustushhida, 'istashhada, and tashahhada refer to the Muslim who fights and is killed while fighting in the cause of Allah.<sup>21</sup> In English, this is called a 'martyr', and the act itself (i.e. *istishhad*) is called 'martyrdom'.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that term 'shahid', as an Arabic and a Qur'anic word, and the English word 'martyr' are not exact linguistic equivalents, as sometimes

<sup>14</sup> Al-Qurṭubi, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣar. *Al-Jami' li Aḥkam al-Qur'an*. Vol. 2. Cairo: Dar al-Sha'b, n.d. p. 299.

<sup>15</sup> Badawi, Elsaid M., and Muhammad Abdel Haleem. *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*. Leiden: Brill, 2008. p. 497; Amin, *Terrorism from a Qur'anic Perspective*, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Santoso, "The Dynamics of Muslim Interpretation of Jihad Verses," 60.

<sup>17</sup> Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, 498; Shehata, Asmaa. "Martyrdom in Early Islam: The Role of Martyrs' Mothers." *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies* 2, no. 7 (2022): 228–34. <https://doi.org/10.55677/ijssers/V02I07Y2022-01>.

<sup>18</sup> Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*. 498.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Qurṭubi. *Al-Jami' li Aḥkam al-Qur'an*. Vol. 12. p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> 'Aleqani, Maḥmūd, Murtadha Muahhari, and Ali Shar'ati. *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*. Edited by Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen. Houston, Texas: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986. p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, p. 498.

<sup>22</sup> Hornby, A.S. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Edited by Jonathan Crowther. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. p. 719.

presumed by Western scholars and non-native speakers of Arabic.<sup>23</sup> The semantic scope of '*shahid*' traditionally encompasses dying in battle, which is a more specific context compared to the broader implications of 'martyr', an English term that may refer to dying for both religious and non-religious convictions. This distinction might underpin some of the misunderstandings inherent in the Muslim versus non-Muslim or western perspectives when grappling with the concept of '*Istishhad*' and its representation in the Qur'an. Despite these nuances, the English term 'martyr' is arguably the nearest equivalent for '*shahid*', and similarly, 'martyrdom' serves as the closest translation for '*istishhad*'.

As a term, '*shahid*' occurs 'no less than fifty-six times'<sup>24</sup> in multiple forms in the Qur'an that may reveal specific grammatical, morphological, as well as lexical meanings such as the meaning of a "witness" as in Q. 2: 282, a person paying attention as in Q. 50 :37, a person who is present as in Q. 4: 72, a person watching something as in Q. 5: 117, and a person who acts as a judge as in Q. 10:29. None of the above meanings shows a connection, with the exception of the meaning in Q. 2: 282, to the word 'martyr'. Having stated the above, it is evident now that the word *shahid* is connected to the word 'witness' in English. This becomes vivid when the word 'witness' is used to denote meanings beyond dying on the battlefield. The apparently equivalent English word 'martyr', however, should remain frequently used as an equivalent or a near equivalent to the Arabic word *shahid*. This should not rule out the possible interpretation that one of the meanings of the Arabic word *shahid* is 'witness', as stated above, because angels attend the death of the *shahid* and give him/her glad tidings to his/her place in Paradise.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, Western scholars like Bernard Lewis and others limitedly trace the origin of the English word 'martyr' to the Greek word '*martyr*'<sup>26</sup> adding to the more confusion experienced by many Western scholars about Qur'anic terms like the *shahid* and other related derivatives for the same probable reason mentioned above; the lack of Arabic language proficiency or the in-depth research into the connotational and lexical meanings of Qur'anic terminologies of the word the *shahid* and other related derivatives. Interestingly, not only Western and non-Arab scholars showed apparent confusion in understanding the multiple lexical and connotational aspects of '*istishhad*' in its various derivatives and manifestations, al-Razias a reputable Muslim exegete may have contributed to this (mis)understanding narrative.

In his non-conforming view with the majority of classical and modern exegetes consulted in this study who view that the martyr in the Q. 4: 69 is the one who fights and is killed by non-Muslims, al-Razi showed reservations to limit or reduce the meaning of the martyr to the one who is killed in the battlefield with the hands of

<sup>23</sup> Ganor, Boaz. "Targeted Killings: Ethical & Operational Dilemmas." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 2 (2021): 353–366. p. 357, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222873-11>; Slavicek, David Jan. "Deconstructing the Shariatic Justification of Suicide Bombings." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (2008): 553–71. P. 564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802064833>.

<sup>24</sup> Lawson, B. Todd. "Martyrdom." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, edited by John L. Esposito, Vol. 3, 54. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Misbah, 'Adil Jasim 'Ali. *Al-Shahid fi al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah: Min Waqi' al-Kutub al-Sittah*. Kuwait: Maktabat al-Imam al-ḥababi li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzhi', 2008/1429. p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003. p. 38; Amin, *Terrorism from a Qur'anic Perspective*, p. 225.

non – Muslims. To substantiate his claim, al – Razi opines that when a Muslim wishes to die in the battlefield, this wish is fulfilled by a Muslim being killed by disbelievers. This wish, according to him, is unlawful in Islam. Acknowledging the status of al – Razi as a *mufasssir*, his view here cannot be accepted as a mainstream interpretation, as far as battlefield Muslim martyrs are concerned.<sup>27</sup>

Turning to modern exegetes like Riḍa shows that seeking martyrdom according to the Q. 4: 69 should not necessarily mean that the person wishes to be killed by non – Muslims in the battlefield as claimed by al – Razi. The interpretation, which could be deemed correct as viewed by Riḍa here, is that a believer in Allah indulges into the battlefield with the hope of reaching one of the best outcomes: attaining victory in this worldly life or gaining reward in the afterlife, if killed by non – Muslims in the battlefield; a thing which may warrant a brief discussion of martyrdom in the Qur'an as a highly rewarding act.<sup>28</sup>

### **'Istishhad as a Highly Rewarding Act in the Qur'an**

"Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their wealth in exchange for Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah, so they kill and are killed. It is a promise binding upon Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an. Who is truer to his covenant than Allah? Rejoice then in your bargain that you have contracted. And that is the great victory." (Q. 9:111). This verse signifies a divine covenant with believers, who in devotion and struggle for justice and truth, as interpreted by Riḍa in his *Tafsir of al-Qur'an al-Hakim*, engage in battle for the cause of Allah, with the ultimate promise of Paradise.<sup>29</sup> It conveys the concept of martyrdom as a sacred commitment and sacrifice in the path of righteousness and divine truth.

Al – Sha'rawi stated that the two words of 'purchased' and 'bargain'<sup>30</sup> are used figuratively.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, this holistic interpretation raised by al – Sha'rawi solves a central confusion in the understandings of Western scholars like Moghadam<sup>32</sup> who may unknowingly link the two words in the verse with a transactional relationship; to be killed in the battlefield to become eligible recipient of physical pleasure from Allah in the afterlife. The relationship with Allah, our creator, should not necessarily follow this limited transactional attitude as maintained by Moghadam. Holistic relationship with Allah is what derives the believer to sacrifice his soul, family, and money for the sake of the Creator.

While the above ayah used a seemingly transactional word 'sell', it is used non – literally but rather holistically affirming a sense of sacrifice for the noble cause of dying in the path of Allah. Realistically, for a transactional relationship to be effective, the

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<sup>27</sup> Al – Razi. *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir*. Vol. 10. p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Riḍa, Muḥammad Rashid. *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim: Al-Mushtahir bi 'ism Tafsir al-Manar*. Vol. 10. 2nd ed. Cairo: Dar al – Manar, 1947/1366. p. 558.

<sup>29</sup> Riḍa. *Tafsir al – Qur'an al – Hakim*. Vol. 11. p. 49

<sup>30</sup> In the Q. 4: 74 the word "trade", and in the 61: 10 – 11 the word "bargain" occur, conveying almost the same rhetorical meaning. See: Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, pp. 57, 370 f.

<sup>31</sup> Al – Sha'rawi, Muḥammad Mutawalli. *Tafsir Al – Sha'rawi*. Vol. 9. p. 5509.

<sup>32</sup> Moghadam, Assaf. "Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, no. 2 (2003): p. 72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100390145215>.

'seller' and the 'buyer' need to execute the deal immediately or contractually at intervals where specific terms and conditions are followed; a thing which is not feasible with martyrdom as a non-materialistic deal where a person sacrifices his/her soul. This holistic approach in interpretation can help modern Muslim interpreters and non-Muslim scholars understand better this verse and some other similar verses in the Qur'an such as Q. 2 :216, Q. 4 :74, and Q. 61 :10–11. This modern holistic understanding is, in our view, capable of defending noble values such as martyrdom in the Qur'an and correcting some of the tarnished images about Muslim martyrs in modern times. A clear example of that is the people of Palestine who find themselves forced to defend their creed and honor in their old–new daily struggles. They do that, not as claimed by Moghadam and Cook above<sup>33</sup>, to solely gain pleasure in Paradise, but they altruistically take the initiative to defend their religion, as stated, regardless of the reward, which is surely promised by Allah. In scholarly discourse, a frequently cited verse by Western academicians when discussing 'the martyrs' is as follows:

"Do not regard those who have been slain in the cause of Allah as deceased. Rather, they are alive, sustained in the presence of their Lord, rejoicing in what they have received of His bounty. They are comforted by the absence of fear and grief for those who are yet to join them, celebrating the divine blessings and grace assured that Allah does not allow the reward of the believers to perish" (Q. 3:169–171).

This verse provides a profound insight into the Islamic view of martyrdom, depicting it as a continued and blessed existence rather than an end. Al-Qurtubi's view is that martyrs in the above verses(verses) are not only revealed to praise the *shuhada* of *Uḥud* as the second battle in the history of Islam. Rather, the interpretations of these verses can be generalized to include all the *shuhada* who die while defending the path of Allah.<sup>34</sup> Unlike some other verses such as Q. 2: 154 which confirm that martyrs are alive in paradise, these verses provide some details about the type of life and enjoyment the *shuhada* experience in paradise. This is one of the very few interpretations where an agreement is identified among non-Muslim western scholars and modern Muslim Qur'anic interpreters.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, al-Sha'rawi thoughtfully remarks on the enigmatic essence of the martyr's existence, a reality solely within the divine knowledge of Allah, as noted in his *Tafsir*.<sup>36</sup> This contemplation effectively addresses a contentious theological dialogue among Islamic scholars, including al-Qurtubi. The discourse delves into whether the recompense for martyrs is tangible sustenance or is limited to spiritual commendation, a topic debated vis-a-vis Western academic assertions. The provision for the *shuhada* is described by some as primarily the vocal admiration for their ultimate sacrifice.<sup>37</sup> Yet, al-Qurtubi himself leans towards a literalist view, affirming that martyrs are bestowed with nourishment and dwell within avian forms in Paradise, a stance corroborated by the canonical *Ḥadith* narrated by Ka'b ibn Malik, elucidating, "The spirits of the martyrs dwell in the insides of green birds and eat of the produce of the trees of Paradise"<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid; Cook, David. *Martyrdom*. p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Qurtubi. *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an*. Vol. 4. p. 268.

<sup>35</sup> Cook, David. *Martyrdom*. p. 31

<sup>36</sup> Al-Sha'rawi, Muhammad Mutawalli. *Tafsir Al-Sha'rawi*. Vol. 3. p. 1870..

<sup>37</sup> Al-Qurtubi. *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an*. Vol. 4. pp. 269 f.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Tirmizi. *Jami' al-Tirmizi*. No. 1641. In *Mawsū'at al-ḥadith al-Sharif: Al-Kutub al-Sittah*. Riyadh: Dar al-Salam li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1999. p. 1820

The discourse culminates with a clear invocation of the term *shuhadain* its plural form, signifying the collective embodiment of martyrdom.

"وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ وَحَسُنَ أُولَٰئِكَ رَفِيقًا" (سورة النساء: 69).

*"Whosoever obeys God and the Messenger will be among those He has blessed: the messengers, the truthful, those who bear witness to the truth, and the righteous – what excellent companions these are!" (Q. 4 : 69).*

Classical and contemporary scholars exhibit a spectrum of interpretations regarding the reference to "*al-shuhada*" (those who bear witness to the truth) in the mentioned verse. Al – Qurtubi, in his commentary on this ayah, posits two dimensions: a broad and a narrow interpretation. Broadly, he suggests that the verse encompasses anyone who has been martyred in Allah's path. More narrowly, he specifically cites the martyred Rightly – Guided Caliphs: 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with them), as the primary referents.

While al – Qurtubi's general interpretation is widely embraced, reflecting the esteemed status of all martyrs in the afterlife, his specific identification of the three Caliphs as the sole referents is presented without explicit evidentiary support in his exegesis. Although it is undisputed that these Caliphs are embraced within the broader martyrs' category, the critique lies in the absence of detailed justification for the exclusive focus on these three figures in the specific interpretative scope. This points to a scholarly expectation for comprehensive evidence when delineating such specific exegeses.

Turning to modern exegetes like Rida, *al-shuhada*' in the ayah above are the ones who are determined to defend truth on earth. Their determination, which is translated into a practical fighting demonstration through the sacrifice of their souls in the path of Allah, shows that they are genuine seekers of truth and justice. This modern Muslim view is rarely reflected, let alone embraced, by non – Muslim Western scholars, as far as their writings on martyrdom in the Qur'an is concerned. This Islamic understanding is systematically misrepresented and equated with terrorism and violence.<sup>39</sup> This study is a warning siren that may hopefully appeal to non – Muslim Western scholars who sometimes approach the noble martyrdom in the Qur'an loaded with their anti – Muslim cultural and religious packages. It is also a call to humbly dig deep into classical and modern exegetical sources to reach fair judgement that may help them understand martyrdom in a better way and heal the wounds that continuously bleed as a result of offending mainstream Muslim scholars and general members of the international community of Muslims.

A closer look at the Qur'anic verses and their interpretations above reveals that the Qur'an did not actually mention minute details about who the martyrs are. Rather, it mentioned relevant details to how they are rewarded in the after life. Like many other themes in the Qur'an, the Prophetic Sunnah explains in detail what is mentioned in passing or left unexplained by the Qur'an. While this study is focused on the Qur'anic view of martyrdom, it is necessary, with the arrived at conclusion here, to briefly state

<sup>39</sup>Cheong, Pauline Hope, and Jeffry R. Halverson. 2010. "Youths in Violent Extremist Discourse: Mediated Identifications and Interventions." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 12: 1104 – 23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2010.523862>, p. 1118.

that many of the lexical and technical definition of martyrs, the difference between 'martyrs' and 'witness', many issues and questions related to martyrs are explained in detail by the Sunnah; an area that may arouse the intellectual curiosity of modern Muslim researchers to delve into using English and other languages as a medium of communication to reach out to a wider non-Muslim academic readership. The possible misunderstanding or potential bias of non-Muslim Western scholars may have led them to claim that *'Istishhad'* is not a pure Qur'anic term.

## Conclusion

This above inquiry has effectively unraveled the nuanced dimensions of *'Istishhad'* as delineated in the Qur'an. By drawing a scholarly comparison between the classical exegetical works of luminaries like al-Qurṭubī and al-Rāzī, and the contemporary interpretations of Rashīd Riḍā and al-Sha'rāwī, this research has attempted to make a significant contribution to Islamic scholarly discourse providing some helpful insights into "*shahid*" how a progressive evolution of the understanding of martyrdom across different exegetical epochs can be made. Furthermore, the study critically addresses the oversimplification of *'istishhad'* in prevalent Western discourses, advocating for a more layered and well-informed international conversation on this pivotal Qur'anic concept.

The research highlights the imperative of integrating a more diverse array of Islamic perspectives in future scholarly endeavors. This expansion should go beyond the Sunni-centric approach in classical and modern exegeses to encompass a variety of Islamic doctrinal schools will undoubtedly deepen the comprehension of pivotal concepts such as *'istishhad'*. Additionally, the study recommends engaging with non-Islamic academic perspectives on martyrdom to cultivate a more comprehensive and ecumenical understanding, thus fostering meaningful interfaith and intercultural dialogues. The study also underscores the importance of contextualizing *'istishhad'* within contemporary socio-political and global religious narratives, thus ensuring its relevance and applicability in current discourse.

In terms of future scholarly pathways, this study suggests undertaking comparative analyses of the concept of martyrdom across diverse religious traditions. Such explorations are poised to yield insightful interfaith and cross-cultural perspectives. Investigating how various interpretations of *'istishhad'* resonate within Muslim communities globally could shed light on the intricate socio-cultural dynamics prevalent within the Muslim *ummah* today. Furthermore, a critical analysis of the portrayal of martyrdom in global media narratives and its consequent impact on the public perception of Islam and Muslims is warranted, offering vital insights into counteracting prevalent stereotypes and misconceptions.

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