

Al-Isti'ārah in the Qur'an: A Rhetorical Analysis of Its Forms, Functions, and Semantic Significance

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Abstract

This article examines *al-isti'ārah* in the Qur'an as a central rhetorical-semantic mechanism through which Qur'anic discourse shapes theological meaning, moral perception, and interpretive response. The study addresses a conceptual and methodological problem in existing scholarship: Qur'anic metaphor is often treated either as an aesthetic feature of *balāghah* or as a general cognitive mapping without sufficient attention to its Arabic-rhetorical specificity and hermeneutical function. Using a qualitative textual research design, the article analyzes selected Qur'anic passages through close reading, classical Arabic rhetorical classification, semantic analysis, and an adapted metaphor identification procedure. The findings show that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* appears in multiple forms, including lexical, phrasal, implicit, explicit, extended, and discourse-structuring patterns. These forms operate through recurring semantic networks such as trade, light, darkness, disease, the heart, obstruction, constriction, rootedness, and eschatological illumination. The analysis further demonstrates that *isti'ārah* does not merely clarify abstract meanings but also persuades, warns, intensifies moral awareness, and renders unseen realities affectively and intellectually accessible. Its semantic significance lies in linking guidance, disbelief, accountability, divine-human relation, and eschatological destiny within coherent figurative structures. The article contributes to Qur'anic studies, *Ushuluddin*, and Islamic rhetoric by integrating classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, and contemporary metaphor theory into a systematic framework for examining the relation between rhetorical form, communicative function, and theological interpretation.

Keywords: *al-isti'ārah*, qur'anic rhetoric, semantic mapping, *balāghah*, qur'anic interpretation.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji *al-isti'ārah* dalam Al-Qur'an sebagai mekanisme retorik-semantik utama yang berperan dalam membentuk makna teologis, persepsi moral, dan respons interpretatif pembaca. Kajian ini berangkat dari persoalan konseptual dan metodologis dalam studi terdahulu, yaitu kecenderungan untuk memperlakukan metafora Qur'ani hanya sebagai aspek keindahan *balāghah* atau sebagai pemetaan kognitif umum tanpa perhatian memadai terhadap kekhasan retorika Arab dan fungsi hermeneutisnya. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif-tekstual, artikel ini menganalisis sejumlah ayat Al-Qur'an melalui pembacaan dekat, klasifikasi retorika Arab klasik, analisis semantik, dan adaptasi prosedur identifikasi metafora. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *isti'ārah* Qur'ani hadir dalam berbagai bentuk, meliputi pola leksikal, frasal, implisit, eksplisit, ekstensif, dan pengorganisasi wacana. Bentuk-bentuk tersebut bekerja melalui jaringan semantik yang berulang, seperti perdagangan, cahaya, kegelapan, penyakit, hati, hambatan, penyempitan, keberakatan, dan iluminasi eskatologis. Analisis ini juga menunjukkan bahwa *isti'ārah* tidak sekadar menjelaskan makna abstrak, tetapi juga membujuk, memperingatkan, menguatkan kesadaran moral, serta menjadikan realitas gaib lebih dapat dipahami secara intelektual dan afektif. Signifikansi semantiknya terletak pada kemampuannya menghubungkan hidayah, kekufuran, pertanggungjawaban, relasi Tuhan-manusia, dan nasib eskatologis dalam struktur figuratif yang koheren. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada kajian Al-Qur'an, *Ushuluddin*, dan retorika Islam dengan mengintegrasikan *balāghah* klasik, semantik Qur'ani, dan teori metafora kontemporer dalam satu kerangka analisis yang sistematis.

Kata kunci: *al-isti'ārah*, retorika qur'ani, pemetaan semantik, *balāghah*, interpretasi al-qur'an



Introduction

The Qur'an occupies a distinctive position in global religious, intellectual, and linguistic history: it is at once scripture, liturgical text, legal-ethical source, and an enduring object of philological and literary inquiry for a Muslim population of roughly two billion people worldwide.¹ Within Islamic Studies and *Ushuluddin*, the Qur'an is not approached merely as a historical document or theological archive, but as a living text whose meanings are continuously mediated through language, interpretation, and reception. Over the last two decades, Qur'anic studies has moved beyond narrowly confessional or purely historical approaches toward a more interdisciplinary field that includes philology, *tafsīr* studies, discourse analysis, literary criticism, translation studies, corpus-based inquiry, and comparative scriptural hermeneutics.² In this wider scholarly movement, rhetorical analysis remains crucial because the Qur'an's semantic force is inseparable from its linguistic form. Its use of imagery, ellipsis, contrast, rhythm, repetition, parable, and metaphor does not simply embellish doctrinal content; it participates in the construction of meaning itself.³

Among the major devices of Arabic rhetoric, *al-isti'ārah* occupies a particularly important position because it involves the transfer of meaning from one semantic domain to another, enabling abstract realities to be expressed through concrete and affective images. Qur'anic discourse frequently speaks of guidance as light, unbelief as darkness, hearts as diseased or sealed, human action as trade, and divine mercy as nearness or opening. Such expressions cannot be reduced to lexical substitution. They shape theological cognition, moral imagination, and interpretive response. In classical *balāghah*, *isti'ārah* was commonly discussed under *'ilm al-bayān* as a form of *majāz* grounded in resemblance and contextual indication, while modern metaphor theory understands metaphor as a cognitive and semantic mapping between domains.⁴ The tension between these two intellectual traditions creates a productive problem: how can Qur'anic *isti'ārah* be read in a way that respects the internal categories of Arabic-Islamic rhetoric while also benefiting from contemporary theories of metaphor, semantics, and discourse?

Previous scholarship has provided valuable foundations, but it has not fully resolved this problem. One group of studies has examined the Qur'an through classical and modern literary lenses, emphasizing its structure, poetics, historical texture, and communicative power.⁵ These works have strengthened the argument that Qur'anic meaning must be studied through textual arrangement, rhetorical

¹ Pew Research Center, "How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020" (Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/>.

² Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 1–5 (Brill, 2001), <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/>; N Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction, The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction: The Qur'an*, 2017, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85212730983&partnerID=40&md5=a21fde1ceb5ab73c4440175a64fcdac>.

³ Al Fiqri Ardiansyah, "Kritik terhadap Hermeneutika dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Perspektif Ulama Tradisional dan Kontemporer," *Al-Muhith: Jurnal Ilmu Qur'an dan Hadits* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1.

⁴ Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/metaphor-9780195374940>; Raymond W Gibbs Jr., *Metaphor Wars: Conceptual Metaphors in Human Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/metaphor-wars/>; Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/arabic-poetics/>.

⁵ The Holy Qur'an and M A S Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

strategy, and intertextual resonance. A second group has contributed lexical and semantic tools for Qur'anic interpretation, especially by clarifying the semantic range of Qur'anic vocabulary and the difficulty of rendering Arabic expressions into other languages.⁶ A third body of research, developed largely in linguistics and cognitive studies, has shown that metaphor is not merely decorative but constitutive of conceptualization, reasoning, emotion, and persuasion.⁷ These studies are important, yet they often remain separated: Qur'anic rhetoric is frequently treated within traditional taxonomies of *balāghah*, while cognitive metaphor studies rarely engage deeply with the theological, exegetical, and Arabic-rhetorical specificity of the Qur'an.⁸

The gap addressed by this article is therefore conceptual, methodological, and interpretive. Conceptually, many discussions of Qur'anic metaphor continue to oscillate between two insufficient options: treating *isti'ārah* as an aesthetic ornament or translating it into a general theory of conceptual metaphor without sufficient attention to classical Islamic rhetorical categories. Methodologically, existing studies often focus on selected examples without clearly explaining how the forms, functions, and semantic effects of *isti'ārah* are identified and related to one another. Interpretively, there remains a need to explain how Qur'anic metaphors operate not only as beautiful expressions but also as semantic mechanisms that shape doctrinal understanding, ethical persuasion, and existential orientation. This limitation is significant for *Ushuluddin* because the study of divine discourse requires a careful account of how language mediates meaning without collapsing figurative expression into literalism or, conversely, detaching it from the theological seriousness of the text.

This article therefore asks three focused questions. First, what major forms of *al-isti'ārah* can be identified in selected Qur'anic passages when examined through the categories of Arabic rhetoric? Second, what rhetorical functions do these metaphors perform in shaping persuasion, affect, moral judgment, and theological reflection? Third, how does *isti'ārah* contribute to the semantic significance of Qur'anic discourse, particularly in relation to guidance, faith, disbelief, accountability, and divine-human relations? Correspondingly, the objectives of this study are to classify selected forms of Qur'anic *isti'ārah*, analyze their rhetorical functions within their textual contexts, and explain their semantic contribution to Qur'anic interpretation. The study does not aim to impose a modern linguistic model on the Qur'an, nor does it merely repeat inherited classifications. Rather, it seeks a dialogical reading in which classical *balāghah* and contemporary metaphor theory illuminate different dimensions of the same rhetorical phenomenon.

The theoretical framework of this article combines three perspectives. The first is Arabic rhetorical theory, especially the distinction between literal expression, *majāz*, *tashbīh*, and *isti'ārah* as developed in the *balāghah* tradition

⁶ Elsaid M Badawi and M A S Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Brill, 2008), <https://brill.com/display/title/12559>; M A S Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

⁷ Praggeljaz Group, "MIP: A Method for Identifying Metaphorically Used Words in Discourse," *Metaphor and Symbol* 22, no. 1 (2007): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926480709336752>; Gerard J Steen et al., *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU* (John Benjamins, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1075/cecl.14>; X Zhang et al., "The Roles of Sex and Minority Status in Children's Motivation and Psychomotor Learning," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 128, no. 6 (2021): 2849–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00315125211046446>.

⁸ Niswa Mawaddah, Hilya Mahfuza, Syifa Farizkha Indriani, and Dinda Silvani Paranginangin, "Hadith as an Epistemic Tradition: Toward a Dialogue Between Classical Criticism and Modern Academic Inquiry," *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 50–76, <https://journal.bahsisfkr.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/16>.

and re-examined in recent studies of Arabic poetics.⁹ The second is semantic analysis, which treats Qur'anic vocabulary as context-sensitive and relational rather than isolated lexical units.¹⁰ The third is cognitive metaphor theory and metaphor identification, which help explain how metaphorical expressions map concrete domains onto abstract theological and ethical realities while still requiring careful textual control.¹¹ By integrating these perspectives, the study positions *isti'ārah* as a rhetorical-semantic act: it organizes perception, intensifies meaning, and guides interpretation.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to bridge classical Islamic rhetoric and contemporary semantic theory without subordinating one to the other. Its academic contribution is threefold: it refines the analysis of Qur'anic *isti'ārah* beyond ornamental description, proposes a more systematic link between form, function, and semantic significance, and contributes to ongoing debates on how Qur'anic language should be studied in contemporary Islamic Studies. In doing so, the article argues that *al-isti'ārah* is not a secondary feature of Qur'anic style, but one of the central mechanisms through which the Qur'an renders unseen realities intelligible, persuasive, and existentially compelling.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual research design with a rhetorical-semantic orientation. It is not designed as a quantitative survey of all metaphorical expressions in the Qur'an, nor as an empirical study involving human participants. Rather, it examines selected Qur'anic passages to explain how *al-isti'ārah* operates as a rhetorical and semantic device within Qur'anic discourse. The qualitative design is appropriate because the main object of inquiry is not numerical frequency but the interpretive relation between linguistic form, rhetorical function, and semantic significance. In this respect, the study combines close reading, classical Arabic rhetorical classification, semantic analysis, and an adapted metaphor identification procedure. Such a design allows the research to evaluate metaphorical expressions not as isolated lexical phenomena, but as meaning-producing structures embedded in verse-level and discourse-level contexts.¹²

The primary source of this study is the Arabic text of the Qur'an. The study gives methodological priority to the Arabic wording because *al-isti'ārah* is a rhetorical phenomenon grounded in Arabic lexical relations, grammatical structure, and contextual indication. English translations are used only as secondary aids, especially Abdel Haleem's translation, to clarify how certain metaphorical expressions may be rendered for non-Arabic readers; they are not treated as substitutes for the Arabic text. Lexical and semantic consultation is supported by Badawi and Abdel Haleem's *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, while grammatical and morphological verification is assisted by the *Quranic Arabic Corpus* where relevant.¹³ Classical and modern Qur'anic

⁹ Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature*.

¹⁰ Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*.

¹¹ Steen et al., *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU*; Zoltán Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/extended-conceptual-metaphor-theory/>.

¹² Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Sage Publications, 2018); Group, "MIP: A Method for Identifying Metaphorically Used Words in Discourse."

¹³ Eric D Dukes, "The Quranic Arabic Corpus: A Bridge Between the Sacred Text and Computational Linguistics," *Proceedings of the Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC)*, 2010; Kais Dukes, "The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus: Annotated Linguistic Resource for the Holy Qur'an," *Language Resources and Evaluation* 47 (2013): 123–55.

commentaries may be consulted selectively to determine whether the metaphorical reading is supported by established interpretive traditions, but the central analysis remains rhetorical and semantic rather than doctrinal or legal.

The data are selected through purposive textual sampling. The selected verses must meet four criteria. First, the verse contains a word, phrase, or clause that shows a transfer of meaning from a basic semantic domain to another contextual domain. Second, the expression can be plausibly classified as *isti'ārah* according to Arabic rhetorical theory, especially where an implied comparison, omitted element, or contextual indicator prevents a purely literal reading. Third, the passage represents a significant Qur'anic theme, such as guidance and misguidance, faith and unbelief, the condition of the heart, divine mercy, moral accountability, worldly life, or eschatological consequence. Fourth, the expression has sufficient semantic density to allow analysis of form, function, and interpretive effect. These criteria are intended to prevent arbitrary example-selection and to ensure that the selected passages are analytically relevant to the research questions.

The analytical framework consists of three interconnected layers. The first layer is rhetorical classification. Each expression is examined according to the categories of Arabic *balāghah*, particularly the distinction between literal expression, *majāz*, *tashbīh*, and *isti'ārah*. Where appropriate, the analysis identifies whether the expression tends toward *isti'ārah taṣrīḥiyyah*, *isti'ārah makniyyah*, or other relevant subtypes in Arabic rhetorical classification. This layer is necessary because Qur'anic metaphor cannot be adequately studied if it is detached from the conceptual vocabulary through which Muslim rhetoricians historically understood figurative discourse.¹⁴

The second layer is metaphor identification and semantic mapping. This study adapts the Metaphor Identification Procedure and MIPVU by examining whether a lexical unit has a contextual meaning that contrasts with, but can be understood in relation to, a more basic meaning.¹⁵ Because MIP and MIPVU were developed mainly for modern discourse analysis, they are not applied mechanically. They are modified for Qur'anic Arabic by considering root meaning, syntactic position, immediate co-text, broader Qur'anic usage, and the presence of *qarinah*, or contextual indication, which prevents literal interpretation. The modification is methodologically necessary because *isti'ārah* in Qur'anic Arabic often operates beyond a single lexical item; it may involve a phrase, proposition, image schema, or extended semantic field.¹⁶

The third layer is rhetorical-functional interpretation. After an expression is identified and classified, the study analyzes what it does within the verse and its surrounding discourse. The analysis considers whether the *isti'ārah* intensifies persuasion, concretizes an abstract theological reality, produces emotional force, clarifies moral contrast, dramatizes eschatological consequence, or reorganizes the reader's perception of divine-human relations. In this stage, metaphor is treated not as ornamental language but as a semantic mechanism that guides interpretation and shapes religious understanding. This procedure is consistent

¹⁴ Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature*.

¹⁵ Group, "MIP: A Method for Identifying Metaphorically Used Words in Discourse"; Steen et al., *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU*.

¹⁶ Rahmayati Koto, M. Farhan Hidayat, and Maisarah Siregar, "Gender, Authority, and Qur'anic Legal Interpretation: Reframing Contemporary Debates on Women's Interpretive Agency," *Journal of Qur'anic Legal Studies and Exegesis* 1, no. 1 (2026): 1–20, <https://journal.bahsisfikir.or.id/index.php/JQLSE/article/view/8>.

with contemporary metaphor theory, which views metaphor as a mode of conceptualization rather than a mere decorative substitute for literal expression.¹⁷

The interpretive procedure follows six steps. First, the selected verse is read in Arabic and situated within its immediate textual context. Second, the relevant lexical unit or rhetorical construction is identified. Third, its basic meaning is established through lexical evidence and broader Qur'anic usage. Fourth, its contextual meaning is examined in relation to the verse's theological, ethical, or narrative setting. Fifth, the relation between the basic and contextual meanings is analyzed to determine the form of *isti'ārah*. Sixth, the rhetorical function and semantic significance of the expression are interpreted in relation to the article's research questions. This procedure is repeated across the selected examples to allow comparison between different forms and functions of *isti'ārah*.

To ensure methodological transparency, the study distinguishes between descriptive, classificatory, and interpretive claims. Descriptive claims concern the wording and grammatical structure of the verse. Classificatory claims concern whether a given expression can be categorized as *isti'ārah* according to the adopted rhetorical criteria. Interpretive claims concern the semantic and theological implications of the metaphorical expression. When an expression allows more than one plausible reading, the study does not force a single conclusion; instead, it identifies the dominant interpretation and explains the basis for preferring it. This helps reduce impressionistic interpretation and makes the analytical process academically evaluable.

The validity of the analysis is strengthened through textual triangulation. The study compares the Arabic wording, lexical evidence, selected *tafsīr* discussions, and modern metaphor theory. However, this triangulation does not mean that all sources are given equal authority. The Arabic Qur'anic text remains the primary object of analysis, while dictionaries, commentaries, translations, and metaphor theory function as interpretive supports. The study also recognizes its limitations. Since it uses purposive sampling, the findings are not intended to provide a complete statistical inventory of all instances of *isti'ārah* in the Qur'an. Instead, the study aims to offer a theoretically grounded and methodologically explicit model for analyzing how selected Qur'anic metaphors operate at the intersection of form, function, and semantic significance.

Results and Discussion

Forms of Qur'anic *Isti'ārah*: From Classical *Balāghah* to Textual Classification

The first major finding of this study is that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* does not appear in a single fixed pattern, but moves across explicit, implicit, and extended rhetorical forms that require classification at both lexical and discourse levels. In classical Arabic rhetoric, *isti'ārah* is normally understood as a figurative transfer grounded in resemblance, where one term is borrowed from its original domain and applied to another domain because of a perceived relation between them. This differs from *tashbīh*, where the comparison is more openly marked, and from general *majāz*, which may include broader types of semantic displacement. Such a distinction is essential because Qur'anic figurative language frequently operates through compressed expressions in which the comparative structure is not fully stated but must be inferred from context, lexical selection, and theological coherence.

¹⁷ Gibbs Jr., *Metaphor Wars: Conceptual Metaphors in Human Life*; Elena Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/metaphor-in-discourse/>.

A clear example of this rhetorical compression appears in Q. 2:16: *ulā'ika alladhīna ishtarawū al-ḍalālata bi-l-hudā fa-mā rabīḥat tijāratuhum*. The verse describes the hypocrites as those who “bought error for guidance,” followed by the statement that their “commerce” did not profit. The lexical field of buying, exchange, profit, and commerce belongs to the domain of trade, yet the actual subject is not an economic transaction but a moral and spiritual misjudgment. From the perspective of *balāghah*, this construction is not merely decorative; it functions as an extended *isti'ārah* in which spiritual deviation is represented as a failed market exchange. The Qur'anic text does not say that misguidance is “like” a commodity; instead, it allows the vocabulary of commerce to structure the entire moral scene. This feature refines a purely lexical theory of metaphor, because the metaphorical force is distributed across the verbal phrase *ishtarawū*, the object *al-ḍalālata*, the counter-value *al-hudā*, and the evaluative noun *tijārah*.¹⁸

The same complexity can be seen in Q. 2:17–18, where the image of kindled fire, removed light, darkness, and loss of perception constructs a layered rhetorical scene. The verse begins with an explicit similitude through *mathaluhum kamathali alladhī istawqada nāran*, but the subsequent movement from fire to light, from light to darkness, and from darkness to blindness produces a more complex figurative network. In strict *balāghah* terms, the opening marker places the passage close to *tashbīh* or *mathal*, yet the continuation develops metaphorical density: *dhababa Allāhu bi-nūrihim* and *tarakahum fī zulumātin lā yubṣirūn* transform light into the semantic vehicle of guidance and darkness into the experiential form of misguidance. The next verse, *ṣummun bukmun 'umyun*, intensifies the condition by presenting spiritual incapacity through sensory deprivation. These expressions are best read as a rhetorical sequence rather than as isolated tropes, because their semantic force emerges from accumulation and progression.¹⁹

Another important form is found in Q. 24:35, where *Allāhu nūru al-samāwāti wa-l-arḍ* introduces one of the most discussed metaphorical constructions in Qur'anic discourse. The expression “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth” cannot be reduced to a literal physical attribution, nor should it be treated as a simple ornamental image. It represents a high-density *isti'ārah* in which light functions as a semantic field for manifestation, guidance, ontological dependence, and divine disclosure. The continuation of the verse *niche*, lamp, glass, star, blessed olive tree, and “light upon light” shows that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* can expand into an imagistic architecture. Here, the metaphor does not merely replace an abstract concept with a concrete image; it organizes a contemplative movement from sensory luminosity to metaphysical meaning. This supports modern metaphor theory's claim that metaphor may structure conceptual understanding, but it also challenges any method that ignores the theological and rhetorical specificity of Qur'anic Arabic.²⁰

These findings suggest that the forms of Qur'anic *isti'ārah* should be classified through a combined rhetorical-textual procedure. A narrow classification that only asks whether a metaphor is *taṣrīḥiyyah* or *makniyyah* risks missing extended forms, clustered imagery, and transitional cases between *tashbīh*, *mathal*, and *isti'ārah*. Conversely, a purely modern cognitive account may overlook

¹⁸ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*.

¹⁹ Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse*; Gibbs Jr., *Metaphor Wars: Conceptual Metaphors in Human Life*.

²⁰ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*; M Shah and M A Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies, The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.001.0001>.

the precision of classical *balāghah* in distinguishing overt comparison from metaphorical borrowing. The methodological contribution of this analysis lies in treating Qur'anic *isti'ārah* as a graded rhetorical phenomenon: some examples are lexical, others phrasal, and still others discourse-structuring. This classification expands earlier approaches by showing that the Qur'an's metaphorical language is not simply a stylistic feature of eloquence, but a semantic system through which theological, ethical, and existential meanings are shaped. In this sense, classical *balāghah* and contemporary metaphor theory do not compete; they offer complementary tools for describing how Qur'anic language moves from form to meaning.

Semantic Mapping in Qur'anic Metaphor: Light, Darkness, Disease, and the Heart

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* constructs meaning through patterned semantic mappings in which concrete experiential domains light, darkness, disease, and the heart are used to organize abstract theological and moral realities. These metaphors do not function as detachable ornaments added to doctrinal statements; rather, they provide the conceptual architecture through which guidance, unbelief, spiritual disorder, and moral accountability become intelligible. This finding supports the central insight of contemporary metaphor theory that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical substitution but a cognitive and semantic operation that shapes perception and reasoning.²¹ At the same time, the Qur'anic use of metaphor cannot be reduced to general cognitive mapping, because its semantic force is inseparable from Arabic diction, theological context, and the rhetorical economy of revelation.

The metaphor of light is among the most important semantic fields in Qur'anic discourse. In Q. 24:35, the phrase *Allāhu nūru al-samāwāti wa-l-arḍ* presents "light" not as a simple physical property but as a dense metaphorical field involving manifestation, guidance, truth, order, and divine disclosure. The verse then develops the image through a niche, a lamp, glass, a shining star, a blessed olive tree, and the culminating phrase *nūrun 'alā nūr*. The semantic movement is not linear explanation but layered illumination: sensory light becomes the vehicle through which metaphysical dependence and divine guidance are contemplated. In Q. 2:257, the same semantic contrast appears in the movement from *al-ẓulumāt* to *al-nūr*, where God brings believers "out of darkneses into light." The plural form *ẓulumāt* and the singular *nūr* are rhetorically significant: darkness appears as fragmented, multiple, and disorienting, whereas light appears as unified and directive. This pattern strengthens Abdel Haleem's observation that Qur'anic expression often condenses theological meaning into compact yet powerful linguistic structures.²²

Darkness, by contrast, functions as a metaphorical domain for misguidance, epistemic confusion, and spiritual incapacity. Q. 2:17–18 depicts people left in darkness, unable to see, followed by the striking formulation *ṣummun bukmun 'umyun*. The passage does not primarily describe biological deafness, muteness, or blindness; it depicts a collapse of moral receptivity. Hearing, speech, and sight are mapped onto the capacity to receive truth, articulate recognition, and perceive guidance. This mapping refines cognitive metaphor theory because the metaphor does not simply transfer a bodily experience to an abstract concept; it participates in an ethical judgment. The bodily image becomes a theological diagnosis. In this

²¹ Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse*.

²² M A S Abdel Haleem, "Qur'an and Hadith," in *The Cambridge Companion to: Classical Islamic Theology*, 2008, 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521780582.002>; Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*.

sense, Qur'anic metaphor combines semantic cognition with moral evaluation, a feature that modern metaphor theory can identify but not fully explain without attention to the text's religious discourse.²³

The metaphor of disease extends this semantic logic into the interior life of the human subject. Q. 2:10 states: *fi qulūbihim maraḍun fa-zādahumu Allāhu maraḍā* "in their hearts is a disease, and God has increased their disease." Here, *marad* does not refer to physical illness but to a corruptive condition of the inner moral self. The heart is not treated merely as an organ; it is a symbolic center of cognition, intention, faith, and ethical responsibility. This metaphor is especially significant because it shifts the analysis of unbelief from external behavior to internal disorder. Hypocrisy becomes pathological not in a medical sense, but in a spiritual and moral one. The metaphor also has rhetorical force: disease implies progression, vulnerability, hiddenness, and the possibility of worsening when left untreated. Lexical evidence from Qur'anic usage confirms that *qalb* frequently carries meanings related to understanding, responsiveness, and moral orientation rather than merely emotional feeling.²⁴

This finding expands earlier rhetorical readings by showing that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* often operates through recurring semantic networks rather than isolated figures. Light and darkness organize the epistemology of guidance; disease and the heart organize the anthropology of moral responsibility. The metaphors therefore form a coherent semantic system in which external perception and internal disposition mutually explain one another.²⁵ Compared with studies that treat Qur'anic imagery mainly as literary beauty, this analysis argues that metaphor is a mode of theological reasoning. Compared with purely cognitive approaches, it shows that Qur'anic metaphor is not value-neutral mapping; it is embedded in a discourse of salvation, accountability, and divine-human relation. The theoretical implication is that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* should be studied as a rhetorical-semantic mechanism that links language, cognition, and religious meaning. Methodologically, the analysis demonstrates the value of combining close reading, Qur'anic lexical evidence, and metaphor theory to explain how concrete images generate abstract theological understanding without losing their textual specificity.

Rhetorical Functions of *Isti'ārah*: Persuasion, Moral Imagination, and Affective Force

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* functions not only to clarify meaning, but also to persuade, disturb, warn, and ethically reposition the reader before the message of revelation. Its rhetorical power lies in the ability to transform abstract spiritual states into visible, bodily, and affective scenes. In this sense, *isti'ārah* operates as a communicative strategy that joins semantic density with moral urgency. The Qur'an does not merely state that rejection of truth is dangerous; it stages rejection through images of obstruction, constriction, sealing, rust, and confinement. Such imagery confirms the view that metaphor is not simply a stylistic replacement for literal language, but a discourse

²³ Steen et al., *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU*; Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*.

²⁴ Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*; Dukes, "The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus: Annotated Linguistic Resource for the Holy Qur'an."

²⁵ Al Fiqri Ardiansyah and Marhamah Annazah Tambunan, "From Normative Citation to Critical Analysis: Evaluating Methodological Problems in Contemporary Indonesian Qur'anic Scholarship," *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 1–26, <https://journal.bahsisfikir.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/12>.

mechanism that shapes perception, judgment, and response.²⁶ Yet the Qur'anic case also refines modern metaphor theory, because the emotional force of these metaphors is inseparable from a theological horizon in which language calls the subject to recognition, repentance, and responsibility.

A striking example appears in Q. 36:8–9, where the Qur'an portrays persistent rejection through the image of shackles placed around necks, raised chins, barriers before and behind, and a covering that prevents sight: *innā ja'alnā fī a'nāqihim aghlālan fa-hiya ilā al-adhqān fa-hum muqmaḥūn*. The passage does not merely report unbelief as an intellectual error. It visualizes it as a condition of forced rigidity, blocked movement, and perceptual closure.²⁷ The image of the chained neck creates an affective scene of humiliation and incapacity, while the barriers before and behind remove the possibility of moral orientation. From the perspective of *balāghah*, this figurative structure works through a dense correspondence between physical obstruction and spiritual refusal. Its persuasive effect arises because the reader is invited to see unbelief not as neutral disagreement, but as a self-disfiguring state that destroys receptivity to guidance. This supports Abdel Haleem's observation that Qur'anic expression often communicates with extraordinary compression, where a brief image carries theological, ethical, and psychological implications.²⁸

The metaphor of the locked or covered heart intensifies this rhetorical logic. Q. 47:24 asks: *afalā yatadabbarūna al-Qur'āna am 'alā qulūbin aqfāluhā* "Do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts?" The verse turns lack of reflection into a concrete image of closure. The heart is presented as the site of understanding and moral responsiveness, while the lock represents an obstruction that prevents interpretive access. The question form is important: the verse does not simply describe a condition but confronts the audience with a diagnostic challenge. Similarly, Q. 83:14 states that what people have earned has covered or rusted their hearts: *kallā bal rāna 'alā qulūbihim mā kānū yaksibūn*. The metaphor links repeated action with inner corrosion. Moral failure is not episodic; it accumulates, hardens, and leaves traces upon the subject. This expands the analysis of *isti'ārah* beyond lexical substitution, because the metaphor carries a theory of moral formation: actions reshape perception until truth becomes difficult to receive.²⁹

The affective function of *isti'ārah* is also evident in Q. 6:125, where the one whom God leaves astray is described as having a chest made tight and constricted, "as if he were climbing up into the sky." Although the verse contains an explicit comparative marker, its rhetorical power lies in the embodied experience of breathlessness, pressure, and impossible ascent. The image makes spiritual alienation physically imaginable. Guidance is not defined abstractly, and misguidance is not reduced to doctrinal error; both are rendered through bodily affect. This passage is methodologically significant because it shows that Qur'anic rhetoric often moves across the boundaries of *tashbīh* and *isti'ārah*, producing a

²⁶ Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse*; Gibbs Jr., *Metaphor Wars: Conceptual Metaphors in Human Life*.

²⁷ Wafiq Mayada et al., "From Textual Authority to Contextual Reasoning: The Epistemology of Qur'anic Legal Interpretation in Classical and Modern Tafsir," *Journal of Qur'anic Legal Studies and Exegesis* 1, no. 1 (2026): 40–67, <https://journal.bahsisfkr.or.id/index.php/JQLSE/article/view/6>.

²⁸ Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, Abdul Aziz Hasibuan, and Yessy Sundry, "Competing Qur'anic Authorities in the Public Sphere: Textual Meaning, Social Contestation, and Interpretive Politics in Contemporary Indonesia," *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 102–124, <https://journal.bahsisfkr.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/14>.

²⁹ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*; Shah and Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*.

layered figure in which comparison, bodily sensation, and theological judgment reinforce one another.³⁰

These examples demonstrate that the rhetorical function of Qur'anic *isti'ārah* is inseparable from persuasion and moral imagination. The metaphors of shackles, locks, rust, and constricted breathing are not neutral images. They are evaluative forms that make spiritual resistance appear as bondage, closure, corrosion, and suffocation. This finding challenges approaches that treat metaphor as ornamental eloquence and qualify purely cognitive models that describe metaphor mainly as conceptual mapping. In Qur'anic discourse, metaphor does not only map one domain onto another; it summons the reader into an ethical encounter. The theoretical contribution of this analysis is to show that *isti'ārah* functions as an affective hermeneutic device: it persuades by making unseen moral realities visible, memorable, and emotionally consequential. Methodologically, the analysis confirms the value of combining close reading, Arabic rhetorical classification, and discourse-oriented metaphor theory to explain how Qur'anic language produces meaning through both intellect and affect.

The Semantic and Hermeneutical Significance of *Isti'ārah* in Qur'anic Interpretation

The central finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* has decisive hermeneutical significance because it does not merely illustrate meanings already formed elsewhere, but actively participates in shaping how divine guidance, human response, moral failure, and eschatological destiny are understood. In this sense, metaphor is not peripheral to Qur'anic interpretation; it is one of the textual mechanisms through which the Qur'an makes unseen realities available to human understanding. The semantic work of *isti'ārah* becomes especially visible when the Qur'an speaks about realities that cannot be grasped through ordinary empirical description, such as divine nearness, inner transformation, the fragility of worldly life, or the final consequences of belief and disbelief. Such expressions require more than lexical translation. They demand an interpretive method capable of tracing how figurative language organizes theological meaning within the structure of the verse and its broader discourse.³¹

A significant example appears in Q. 14:24–26, where the “good word” is presented as a good tree whose root is firm and whose branches reach the sky, while the “bad word” is likened to an uprooted tree with no stability. Although the passage is introduced through the language of *mathal*, its semantic force extends into metaphorical interpretation.³² Speech, belief, and moral orientation are not discussed abstractly; they are rendered through botanical imagery of rootedness, elevation, fruitfulness, and collapse. The image gives interpretive depth to the Qur'anic view of faith as something that is not only professed but rooted, cultivated, and productive. Conversely, falsehood is not simply incorrect; it lacks anchorage and cannot sustain life. This passage demonstrates that *isti'ārah* and related figurative forms function hermeneutically by giving the interpreter a conceptual grammar for reading ethical stability and spiritual failure.³³

³⁰ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*.

³¹ Mehdi Azaiez et al., eds., “The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages” (De Gruyter, 2016); Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*.

³² Al Fiqri Ardiansyah, Marhamah Annazah Tambunan, Randy Putra Alamsyah, Idrus Afandi Akbar, and Nuruddin Nuruddin, “Qiwamah and Epistemic Violence: A Critical Socio-Legal Analysis of Gendered Authority in Islamic Family Law,” *Mawaddah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 3, no. 2 (2025): 605–626, <https://doi.org/10.52496/mjhki.v3i2.100>.

³³ M A S Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Abdel Haleem, “Qur'an and Hadith.”

The same hermeneutical function appears in eschatological discourse. Q. 57:12–13 depicts believers moving with light before them and on their right, while hypocrites plead for light and are separated by a wall with a gate. This scene does not only describe a future event; it transforms guidance into an eschatological reality. Light, previously associated with divine guidance in earthly life, becomes a visible sign of salvation in the final passage toward judgment. The metaphor therefore links present moral orientation with future destiny. It also shows that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* often works across temporal levels: what appears as guidance in the present becomes illumination in the hereafter, while hypocrisy becomes deprivation and separation. This finding supports studies that emphasize the Qur'an's rhetorical coherence and its ability to generate meaning through recurring images across different contexts.³⁴

Another important case is Q. 39:22, where the person whose breast God has opened to Islam is contrasted with those whose hearts are hardened against remembrance. The expression *sharaha Allāhu ṣadrahu li-l-islām* gives the inner experience of guidance a spatial and embodied form: openness, expansion, and receptivity. By contrast, hardness of heart signifies resistance, insensitivity, and interpretive closure. The theological significance is substantial. Guidance is not represented merely as acceptance of information but as transformation of the inner self, while rejection is not only disagreement but a deformation of moral perception. Such metaphors complicate any interpretation that treats Qur'anic doctrine as a set of propositions detached from affect, embodiment, and ethical formation. They also refine cognitive metaphor theory by showing that Qur'anic metaphor is not a neutral mapping from bodily experience to abstract meaning; it is embedded in a revelatory discourse that evaluates the human condition before God.³⁵

These findings clarify the theoretical contribution of this article. Classical *balāghah* provides the categories needed to identify figurative transfer, distinguish *isti'ārah* from adjacent rhetorical forms, and preserve the Arabic specificity of the Qur'anic expression. Qur'anic semantics explains how words such as light, heart, opening, rootedness, and hardness acquire meaning through textual recurrence and contextual relation. Modern metaphor theory, meanwhile, helps explain why such expressions shape cognition, moral imagination, and interpretation rather than merely decorate speech. The methodological significance lies in bringing these three approaches into a single analytical procedure: classification, semantic mapping, and hermeneutical explanation. This integrated reading expands previous studies by showing that *isti'ārah* is not simply a feature of Qur'anic eloquence, but a mode of theological interpretation. It enables the Qur'an to speak of divine-human relations, guidance, accountability, and the hereafter through images that are intellectually meaningful, affectively powerful, and interpretively generative.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *al-isti'ārah* in the Qur'an is not a secondary embellishment of sacred discourse, but a central rhetorical-semantic mechanism through which Qur'anic meaning is formed, intensified, and interpreted. In response to the first research objective, the analysis shows that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* appears in multiple forms, including explicit, implicit, extended,

³⁴ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

³⁵ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*; Gibbs Jr., *Metaphor Wars: Conceptual Metaphors in Human Life*.

lexical, phrasal, and discourse-structuring patterns. These forms cannot be adequately explained through a rigid classification that separates metaphor from adjacent categories such as *tashbīh* and *mathal* without considering textual movement and semantic accumulation. The findings indicate that classical *balāghah* remains indispensable for identifying the formal structure of *isti'ārah*, yet its categories become more analytically productive when combined with close textual reading and semantic analysis.

In relation to the second objective, the study finds that Qur'anic *isti'ārah* performs significant rhetorical functions. It persuades, warns, clarifies, intensifies moral perception, and generates affective force. Images of trade, light, darkness, disease, shackles, locks, rust, constriction, rooted trees, and eschatological illumination show that metaphorical language in the Qur'an does more than represent abstract ideas in concrete terms. It shapes the reader's ethical imagination by making unseen realities perceptible and existentially urgent. The rhetorical function of *isti'ārah* is therefore inseparable from its theological function: it draws the reader into a moral encounter with guidance, disbelief, accountability, and divine-human relation.

Regarding the third objective, the study establishes that *isti'ārah* contributes substantially to the semantic and hermeneutical significance of Qur'anic discourse. Qur'anic metaphors organize core religious meanings by linking inner states, moral choices, and eschatological consequences through coherent semantic networks. Light and darkness structure the epistemology of guidance and misguidance; disease and the heart explain the anthropology of moral disorder; obstruction, closure, and constriction dramatize resistance to truth; rootedness and illumination connect present belief with future destiny. These patterns show that metaphor is not merely a linguistic substitution but a mode of theological interpretation.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in its integration of classical Arabic rhetoric, Qur'anic semantics, and contemporary metaphor theory without reducing one framework to another. Classical *balāghah* provides conceptual precision for distinguishing *isti'ārah* from other figurative forms, while semantic and metaphor theories help explain how these expressions organize cognition, affect, and interpretation. This combined approach offers a more systematic model for studying Qur'anic figurative language through the relation between form, function, and semantic significance.

Academically, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in Qur'anic studies, *Ushuluddin*, and Islamic rhetoric by showing that *isti'ārah* should be treated as an interpretive category, not only a stylistic device. Its broader implication is that the study of Qur'anic language requires attention to the way rhetorical form participates in theological meaning-making. Future research may expand this model by examining a wider corpus of Qur'anic metaphors, comparing *isti'ārah* across different thematic clusters, or investigating how classical *tafsīr* traditions interpret metaphorical expressions in relation to doctrine, ethics, and spiritual formation. Such studies would further clarify the role of figurative language in shaping Qur'anic hermeneutics across historical and contemporary contexts.

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