Research Article

A Classical Study on Istighāthah and the Boundaries of Shirk in Islamic Creed

Alya Fasya
STAI Ali bin Abi Thalib Surabaya
E-mail: fasyaalya1@gmail.com

Annafi'atuz Zahro'
STAI Ali bin Abi Thalib Surabaya
E-mail: kizahro55@gmail.com

Agung Pranoto Kadiatmaja
STAI Ali bin Abi Thalib Surabaya
E-mail: agungpranotokadiatmaja@stai-ali.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the contribution of classical creedal literature in explaining the concept of istighāthah and defining the boundaries of shirk in Islamic theology, while also assessing its relevance to contemporary istighāthah practices that often spark debate among Muslims. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and library research methods, this study traces the major works of scholars to find the principles of faith used to determine whether a request for help is a valid act of worship or has crossed the boundaries of tawhid into shirk. The results of the study show that there are three main principles that are strongly emphasized by classical scholars: attributing divine attributes to creatures, transferring mahdah worship to other than Allah, and inner beliefs that place creatures as independent owners of supernatural abilities. These three principles have proven to remain relevant in addressing the problems of modern istighāthah, especially in distinguishing between worldly requests for help, tawassul that is still within the corridor of sharia, and supernatural requests that contain elements of shirk. This study emphasizes the importance of examining contemporary religious practices through the framework of classical creed so that the community can understand the difference between reverence, tawassul, and forms of divine attribution that are not permitted in Islam.

Keywords: Istighāthah, Tawhid, Creed.

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Alya Fasya, Annafi'atuz Zahro', Agung Pranoto Kadiatmaja

INTRODUCTION

Tawhid serves as the basic principle that forms the foundation of the entire structure of Islamic faith (Khalid ibn Ali Al-Musyaiqy, 2022, hlm. 7). One important branch of *Tawhid* is *Tawhid al-ulūhiyyah*, which is to affirm the oneness of Allah in all forms of worship, prayer, and supplication for help (Muhammad bin Khalifah al-Tamīmī, 2022, hlm. 40).

Istighāthah has long been one of the most debated topics in the Islamic world, mainly *because* it borders directly on *shirk*, which is associating partners with Allah *Subhaanahu Wa Ta'ala*. In social practice, this often mixes the belief that true help comes only from Allah with the belief that prophets or saints can be a means of bringing a person closer to His mercy. Recent studies show that people experience *istighāthah* not merely as dependence on creatures, but as a form of spiritual hope that brings inner peace (Sholihah dkk., 2024).

Since classical times, scholars have written extensively about the forms of supplication and the boundaries that must be maintained so as not to violate the principle of *Tawhid*. Some scholars permit the practice of *istighāthah* as long as there is a belief that only Allah *provides* true help, and that creatures are merely intermediaries. Others warn that if the supplicant believes that creatures have independent power, then this could border on or constitute *shirk*. This understanding shows that the classical heritage is rich in offering interpretations that do not simply support or reject *tawassul*, but rather provide guidelines on how a Muslim should understand intermediaries and spiritual dependence. Recent studies show that the views of scholars before the modern period had serious diversity regarding the practice of *istighāthah* (Faisal Muhammad Nur, 2011).

Today's Muslim communities face a dilemma. Traditional practices such as *tawassul*, pilgrimage, and *istighāthah* remain alive, while criticism of these practices intensifies with the *spread* of views that simplify the concepts of *Tawhid* and *shirk*. The risk of accusations of *shirk* against Muslim communities with different practices is increasing. This situation highlights the urgent need for in-depth study so that the community can gain a balanced understanding that is not based on prejudice. This research is a response to that need. Empirical data and contemporary literature show that the controversy surrounding *tawassul* and *istighāthah* remains relevant in today's social, academic, and religious contexts (Jamil dkk., 2025).

The concept of *istighāthah* is also understood through the dimensions of *Tawhid rububiyyah* and *uluhiyyah*, which form the normative framework for determining the limits of *shirk.* Research on verses of the Qur'an that contain the principle of monotheism shows that Allah's *rububiyyah* as the Creator and Controller of the universe and His *uluhiyyah* as the only one worthy of worship must be the basis of every request for help; that is, no creature has the independent ability to provide benefits or ward off harm without Allah's permission, so that transferring elements of prayer to creatures is seen as a violation of the principle of *Tawhid*. This framework is particularly important when discussing contemporary phenomena such as *tawassul*, *tabarruk*, and *ziyarah* makam, which are often debated in Muslim societies, because many of these practices involve different interpretations of intent and theological understanding among groups of scholars (Syahrikal & Nureni, 2025).

Today's Muslim communities face a dilemma. Traditional practices such as *tawassul*, pilgrimage, and *istighāthah* remain alive, while criticism of these practices intensifies with the spread of views that simplify the concepts of *Tawhid* and *shirk*. The risk of accusations of *shirk* against Muslim communities with different practices is increasing. This situation highlights the urgent need for in-depth study so that the community can gain a balanced understanding that is not based on prejudice. This

research is a response to that need. Empirical data and contemporary literature show that the controversy surrounding *tawassul* and *istighāthah* remains relevant in today's social, academic, and religious contexts (Samsurizal dkk., 2023a).

The purpose of this study is to identify and explain how classical scholars formulated the theological boundaries between permissible and prohibited *istighāthah*, as well as to *formulate* the main doctrinal principles used in classical literature to determine the point of *shirk*. The results of this study are expected to provide a reference for preachers, religious educators, and the general public to understand the issues of *tawassul*, *istighāthah*, and the boundaries of *shirk* objectively and in accordance with Islamic scholarly tradition. The solution proposed through this research is an educational-analytical approach, which presents a map of classical scholars' arguments, theological criteria, and the historical context of the development of the concept of *istighāthah*, so that people can make religious decisions with full awareness and responsibility. This research is expected to become a comprehensive academic reference in explaining the concept of *istighāthah* and the boundaries of *shirk* in Islamic creed in a comprehensive and thoughtful manner.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method because it focuses on analyzing the concept of *istighāthah* and the limits of *shirk* in classical Islamic literature. The data sources consist of classical texts as primary data and modern articles/journals as secondary data.

Data collection techniques were carried out through searching for relevant literature in digital libraries, in-depth reading, note-taking, and categorization based on themes. Data analysis was conducted descriptively, analytically, and comparatively: describing the views of classical scholars, analyzing similarities and differences, and interpreting their theological relevance.

This study is limited to classical literature discussing *istighāthah* and *shirk*, and does not include empirical field studies. Data reliability is maintained by selecting authentic sources and conducting literature triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistically, "*istighāthah*" is a pattern (*wazn*) of *istif'aal* استفعال from the word *al-ghauts* الغوث, which means help. One of the functions of this pattern is to indicate the meaning of طلب (request or plea). Like the word غفران, which means forgiveness, when it is included in the pattern *istif'al* اِسِتْفِعَال, it becomes istighfar استغفار, which means to ask for forgiveness. So *istighāthah* means *thalab al-ghauts*, which is asking for help (Isbah & Priyanto, 1970). In terms of terminology, *istighāthah* is the hope for someone's help because Allah's help is above all else, only Allah has the right to fulfill all kinds of human needs that become his desires. *Istighāthah* is a way of praying for help by incorporating the power of Allah, namely the combination of religion and surrender to the Creator in order to obtain peace and tranquility in life. The aspects of *istighāthah* guide a person to remember Allah, try their best, be sincere, surrender, and believe that with the power of Allah, anything is possible (M. Ahim Sulthan Nuruddaroini & Muh. Haris Zubaidillah, 2021). In other words, the essence of *istighāthah* in the view of the salaf scholars is total submission to Allah as the only being who has the power to give help.

The discussion of *istighāthah* as seeking aid is a debate that has strong conceptual roots in the separation between *Tawhid rububiyyah* and tauhid *uluhiyyah*. These two concepts determine how a Muslim understands the act of asking for help, to whom it should be directed, and to what extent it is categorized as worship. The discussion

of *istighāthah* as seeking aid is a debate that has strong conceptual roots in the separation between tauhid *rububiyyah* and tauhid *uluhiyyah*. These two concepts determine how a Muslim understands the act of asking for help, to whom it should be directed, and to what extent it is categorized as worship. In tauhid *rububiyyah*, Allah is understood as the only being who creates, regulates, and controls everything. No creature has the independent ability to provide benefits or ward off harm. However, in the realm of *uluhiyyah*, all acts of worship must be directed only to Allah, including all acts of submission, glorification, and supplication that contain elements of servitude (*ta'abbud*) (Alfadhilah dkk., 2025). This is where *istighāthah* becomes a sensitive issue, because a small difference in intention and belief can shift a supplication from the realm of permissibility to *shirk*.

The concept of *istighāthah* is explicitly mentioned in the words of Allah *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala* in Al-Anfal : 9 said: "(Remember) when you sought help from your Lord, and He answered your prayer". Ibn Kathir interpreted this verse as proof that valid istighatsah is directed to Allah. This verse was revealed regarding the *istighāthah* of the Prophet Muhammad *Shallalahu 'Alaihi Wa Sallam* and his companions during the Battle of Badr, when the number of Muslims was only 313 and they faced a Quraish army of around 1,000 people. They sought help from Allah and Allah answered their prayers by sending reinforcements only to Allah (Ibn Kathir, 1999). This demonstrates that *istighāthah* is an obligatory act of worship directed solely to Allah, not to anyone or anything else.

Scholars have formulated the distinction between permissible (valid) and prohibited *istighāthah* through two main criteria, namely ability (*Qudrah*) and presence (hudur). First: permissible *istighāthah* (*mubahah*) is a request for help from living beings who are alive, present, and asked for help in matters that can be done naturally or sensually (Misbahuzzulam, 2014). For example, asking for help lifting goods or asking for financial assistance. In this case, the object being asked for help is seen as a cause endowed with ability by Allah *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala*. Second: Prohibited *istighāthah* (*syirkiyyah*) is a request for help from an object that is deceased (*ghaib*) or a request for help in matters that are beyond the capabilities of creatures (Samsurizal dkk., 2023b), such as asking for rain, asking for absolute healing, or asking for salvation from hell.

In the development of modern Islamic thought, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab rejected all forms of *istighāthah* to anyone other than Allah because it was considered a form of glorification that could lead to major *shirk*. In the Book of *Tawhid*, he stated: "Seeking help from anyone other than Allah in matters that only Allah can do is major *shirk*."(Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, 1984, hlm. 48).

Shirk is equating anything other than Allah with Allah *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala* in *rububiyyah* and *uluhiyyah* as well as His names and attributes (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, 2011, hlm. 198). *Shirk* is considered the greatest sin and injustice, because it equates creatures and the creator in matters that are specific to Allah *Ta'ala* ('Abdillah al-Fauzan, 1995).

Prayer in Islam is an integral part of true worship (Soleh, 2017). Therefore, directing prayers to anyone other than Allah *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala*, whether living or dead, is considered a violation of the principle of *Tawhid uluhiyyah*. In addition, journals discussing *Tawhid rububiyyah* and *uluhiyyah* indicate that the belief in Allah as the sole Creator, Controller, and Giver of benefits or harm requires that worship, including prayer, be directed only to Him, in accordance with His words that humans were created only to worship Him (Alfadhilah dkk., 2025).

One of the important contributions of classical and contemporary literature in understanding *istighāthah* is the assertion that belief in the heart is the main determinant of a request, not just the wording or outward form. If someone believes that creatures are

only ordinary means, the action is considered permissible or at least does not automatically lead to *shirk* (Faisal Muhammad Nur, 2011). Conversely, if the belief shifts to the idea that creatures possess supernatural powers or the independent ability to bring benefits or ward off harm without Allah's permission, then many contemporary scholars and researchers conclude that this constitutes *shirk*, because it transfers the rights of *uluhiyyah* and *rububiyyah*, which belong solely to Allah, to other than Him (Samsurizal dkk., 2023b).

The discussion of the limits of *istighāthah* is highly relevant in the modern context, especially given the emergence of various controversial collective religious practices in society. In many Muslim regions, practices such as seeking help through specific rituals like collective *istighāthah*, visiting graves, or invoking the names of deceased saints often spark disagreements among contemporary scholars. The principles established by scholars can be used as a tool to assess these practices: whether the rituals divert requests for help to other than Allah through supernatural beliefs, or are merely legitimate prayers and *tawassul*.

The relevance of tawassul in the discussion of *istighāthah* is very important because *tawassul* is a method prescribed by Sharia to prevent a person from falling into *shirk* when asking for help from Allah. Scholars explain that *tawassul* that is permitted in sharia includes three forms: (1) *tawassul* with the names and attributes of Allah, (2) *tawassul* with righteous deeds, and (3) *tawassul* with the prayers of righteous people who are still alive. These forms serve as spiritual media, not as providers of real help (Lutfiya Nurmayanti & Muhammad Arwani Rofi'i, 2025). Thus, classical scholars made *tawassul* a theological safeguard that keeps people from believing that anyone other than Allah has absolute power.

Classical creed literature presents a number of fundamental principles that form the basis for determining the boundary between monotheism and polytheism. Scholars agree that the essence of *shirk* lies in likening creatures to Allah in aspects of divinity that are His exclusive right, such as absolute power, the ability to control the universe, knowledge of the unseen, and the power to independently grant benefits and harm. Therefore, any attribution of divine attributes to even the smallest creature is considered a form of transferring *rububiyyah* and *uluhiyyah*, thus falling under the category of major *shirk*. Another principle that is strongly emphasized is that the status of an act as *shirk* or not is determined by *i'tiqād* (belief of the heart), not merely by the outward form of the action (Chasan & Zamhari, 2021). Two people may perform the same apparent action, but the legal outcome is different; for example, *istighāthah* in matters of the unseen must be directed exclusively to Allah. If any form of *mahdah* worship is transferred to a creature, it automatically falls within the realm of *shirk*, even if the perpetrator considers himself to be merely "honoring" that creature. Contemporary research reveals that *tawassul* or *tabarruk*, which transfers the right of supernatural supplication to creatures—such as the dead or saints believed to have supernatural abilities—has the potential to violate this rule because it incorporates the belief that creatures have independent power in matters that are absolutely within Allah's power (Samsurizal dkk., 2023a).

In addition, classical scholars explain that *shirk* also occurs when someone believes in the existence of intermediaries who possess supernatural powers, because this means attributing divine attributes to other than Allah. *Tawassul* to creatures becomes a point of *shirk* if it is accompanied by the belief that these intermediaries are able to provide benefits or ward off harm without Allah's permission, or have the ability to hear prayers from a distance absolutely. In the context of love, scholars emphasize that *shirk* arises when *mahabbah ta'zhīmiyyah*—love mixed with worship-level adoration—is transferred to creatures, as happened to previous nations who elevated pious people to objects of

worship. Another principle that is strongly emphasized is that all supernatural matters, such as metaphysical protection, supernatural removal of hardship, or the granting of benefits beyond natural capabilities, are the exclusive domain of Allah and should not be attributed to creatures. Therefore, anyone who seeks supernatural protection, supernatural help, or metaphysical blessings from creatures—whether angels, prophets, saints, or spirits—has entered the realm of *shirk*, because this indicates the surrender of aspects of divinity to other than Allah (Yamani & Nurdin, 2023a).

The debate regarding *istighāthah* and the limits of *shirk* formulated by classical scholars remains relevant in the contemporary context because both provide a theological and methodological framework for analyzing issues that appear uniform on the surface but are intrinsically different. Classical principles serve as analytical tools that help academics, preachers, and fatwa makers filter local practices that are prone to *shirk* from those that are still within the realm of religious propriety. This framework is not merely normative; it is also practical because it allows for case distinctions: whether an action is a common social assistance, an expression of cultural respect, or an action that theologically fosters adoration to the point of approaching servitude. These principles equip contemporary scholars with the terminology to describe the phenomena of "permissible *tawassul*" versus "problematic *tawassul*" and are therefore useful in intra community dialogue (Fatonah, 2021).

However, the relevance of classical rules must be read contextually; modern social, historical, and linguistic nuances require hermeneutic adaptation so that traditional rules do not become tools for misguided cultural condemnation. Contemporary ethnographic studies have found that practices such as *ziyarah* (grave pilgrimage), recitation of *tahlil*, or requests for blessings often contain dimensions of spiritual education, community solidarity, and expressions of grief, not merely the intention to worship beings. In many communities, practitioners interpret these practices as requests for the living to pray for them to Allah, or as reminders of death that motivate self improvement, so that direct categorization as "*shirk*" without consideration of intent and context can lead to social tension and religious discrimination. Field studies such as research on *tawassul* practices in Palu show how differences in interpretation (between groups) and local context influence whether a practice is considered legitimate or problematic (Yamani & Nurdin, 2023b).

However, the application of classical principles faces several real challenges. First, information disruption, social media and digital preaching, accelerates the spread of mystical claims or "instant fortune" attributed to certain tombs or figures, so that the potential for shirk can spread and target the general public without theological guidance. Second, social shifts such as urbanization and religious plurality have given rise to new practices that are not directly covered by classical texts; for example, hybrid rituals that combine local, psychological, and commercial elements. Therefore, contemporary scholars suggest two steps: strengthening doctrinal education that instills an understanding of *rubūbiyyah–ulūhiyyah*, and developing practical guidance literature (contextual fatwas) that bridges classical texts with modern conditions. This effort is important so that fatwas are not only normative but also communicative and capable of reducing social friction (Caswito dkk., 2025).

From all these rules, it is clear that classical scholars constructed the concept of shirk through three main indicators: first, belief (*i'tiqād*) that positions creatures as having divine power; second, the diversion of *mahdah* worship that should be purely for Allah; and third, the attribution of supernatural abilities to other than Allah. These principles form a methodological foundation that helps distinguish between permissible *istighāthah* and that which falls under the category of *shirk*, while also

clarifying the theological boundaries that must be maintained in the practice of spiritual dependence for a Muslim.

Overall, this study found that seeking help from Allah is permissible, while seeking help from creatures is only permissible for matters within the capabilities of those creatures. Seeking help from other than Allah in matters of the unseen that only Allah controls is considered major *shirk*. The differences in the approaches of classical scholars emphasize the importance of understanding intentions and beliefs when performing *istighāthah*, so that legitimate practices are not mixed with *shirk*. These results answer the research objective, which is to examine the contribution of classical scholars in understanding the concept of *istighāthah* and emphasizing its boundaries with regard to *shirk*, while also providing insight into how this principle can be applied wisely in a modern context.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the concept of *istighāthah* in classical Islamic literature has a clear framework regarding the limits of shirk. Requests for help are only valid if they are directed to Allah, while requests for help from creatures are only permitted for matters that are within their capabilities, and not for matters of the unseen that only Allah is capable of doing. The differences in opinion among scholars emphasize that the interpretation of *istighāthah* is highly dependent on theological approaches and understanding of *Tawhid*, where intention is an important factor in distinguishing between valid worship and acts that constitute *shirk*. As long as a Muslim does not believe in the independent power of creatures to bring benefits or ward off harm, then forms of assistance that are ordinary causes or intercession through prayer are still permissible. This study affirms the contribution of classical scholars in providing balanced guidelines between maintaining the purity of *Tawhid* and allowing the practice of *tawassul* or reverence for saints and the Prophet ﷺ within the framework of sharia.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that research on *istighāthah* continue to be developed through a multidisciplinary approach that combines theology, the history of Islamic thought, and social studies to enrich the understanding of religious practices in society. Preachers, educators, and religious leaders should prioritize a gentle and proportional educational approach in conveying the boundaries of *shirk* to the community, emphasizing that differences in levels of i'tiqād play a major role in determining the law. Muslim communities are expected to improve their doctrinal literacy by accessing authoritative sources and not easily falling prey to reductive religious claims. Islamic education curricula also need to provide more systematic space for discussing the issues of *istighāthah*, tawassul, and the limits of *shirk*, so that students are able to understand these issues comprehensively without resorting to extremism. For further research, empirical studies on the practice of *istighāthah* in various Muslim communities are needed to see how local culture influences theological interpretations, so that the results can enrich academic discourse and broaden a more moderate, inclusive, and in-depth understanding.

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