

Hell as Purification: An Inter-Sectarian Islamic Perspective on Jahannam's Impermanence

Introduction

The fate of Hell (Jahannam) in Islamic thought is a subject of profound theological reflection and debate. While the mainstream view across Sunni and Shia traditions holds that Hellfire is eternal for unbelievers, a significant undercurrent of scholarship – spanning early companions, classical theologians, Sufi mystics, and even some modern scholars – has argued that Hell is **primarily a place of purification and is not permanent**. This minority perspective bases itself on **Qur'anic verses, Hadith reports, and classical tafsīr** interpretations that emphasize God's ultimate mercy and the remedial purpose of punishment. Crucially, this view does not fall outside the bounds of legitimate *ikhtilāf* (differences of opinion), even if it is not the dominant position ¹. In what follows, we will explore the Qur'anic language about eternity, the theological themes of divine mercy and justice, and the insights of scholars from **Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi, and Mu'tazilī** backgrounds who have entertained the notion that Hell may eventually be emptied after fulfilling its purifying role.

Qur'anic Language of Eternity: “Khalid” and “Abadan” in Context

A cornerstone of this discussion is the linguistic analysis of key Quranic terms such as **khālid** (“abiding” or “eternal”) and **abadan** (“forever/eternally”). On a surface reading, the Qur'an describes the punishment of Hell using these terms, for example: *“they will abide therein forever (khālidīna fīhā abadan)”* ². Classical interpretation typically understands **khālid** with **abadan** to denote unending duration. However, Arabic philology reveals nuance. The term **abad** in Arabic can indicate *eternity as well as a very long time* ². Some commentators argue that in the context of Hell, **abad** should be read not as literal infinity but as an **indefinitely long era**, especially in light of other descriptors. Notably, the Qur'an uses the word **ahqāb** (singular **huqb**), meaning “ages” or “epochs,” to describe the sinners' stay in Hell: *“they will remain in it for ahqāb (ages)”* ³. The plural **ahqāb** implies successive eons, but not necessarily an absolute eternity – it conveys a **vast, finite multiplicity of time periods**.

Moreover, Quranic verses about Hell often contain an **exception clause** that has sparked debate. In Surah Hūd, after saying the wretched will be in Hell, the verse adds: *“abiding therein so long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as thy Lord pleases”* ⁴. A similar clause appears in Surah al-An'ām 6:128: *“The Fire is your abode – you shall abide therein, except as Allah wills”* ⁵. These phrases suggest that ultimately the duration of punishment is **subject to God's will** and not an independent, unqualified infinity. Classical jurist **Ibn 'Abbās** is reported to have deduced from this exception that no one can categorically decree God's judgment on others; in other words, **God may will to release whom He pleases** ⁶. Early Muslims were aware of this implication – according to one narration, *“the day this verse was revealed, people hoped they would come out (of Hell)”* ⁷. While mainstream exegesis often interprets these exceptions as referring to *particular cases* (such as sinful believers eventually being removed from Hell) or *intervals* of punishment ⁸ ⁹, the very presence of these clauses in the Qur'an left room for some to question the permanence of Hell's damnation.

In summary, the Qur’anic language on Hell’s duration is not unambiguous. **“Khalid”** by itself denotes *abiding* but does not inherently specify *endlessness*, and **“abadan”** – though often translated as “forever” – can linguistically imply **an extended but finite duration** ². These terms, read alongside the **“except as Allah wills”** caveats and the mention of **“ages”**, open the door to interpretations in which Hell’s torment, however long-lasting, may ultimately **cease by God’s command** ⁵ ¹⁰.

Divine Mercy and Justice: Theological Rationale for a Temporary Hell

Underpinning the notion of Hell as a temporary, purifying realm are the twin theological themes of **divine mercy** and **divine justice**. The Qur’an emphatically states that Allah is **“the Most Merciful of those who show mercy”** and that His mercy **“encompasses all things”** (Qur’an 7:156). It even declares that God has **“prescribed (mercy) upon Himself”** (Qur’an 6:12, 6:54). Thinkers who argue for the non-eternality of Hell take these verses as indicators that **mercy is God’s ultimate purpose in creation**. Indeed, the Qur’an explicitly says, **“Except those on whom your Lord has mercy; and for this He created them”** (Qur’an 11:119) ¹¹. In this reading, the very purpose of creating human beings is ultimately to **bestow mercy**, not to subject them to endless wrath. Thus, even if many souls enter Hell due to their sins, **God’s plan for them is not eternal damnation but eventual mercy and rehabilitation** ¹¹.

From the perspective of **divine justice**, scholars have grappled with the question: *how is infinite punishment justified for finite misdeeds?* ¹² A finite human life, even if filled with sin or disbelief, is limited in scope and time. **Mu’tazilī theologians**, known for upholding divine justice and human reason, found the idea of unceasing torture problematic – it seemingly conflicts with the Qur’anic principle that “no soul bears the burden of another” and that punishment is proportional to deeds. They and others asked pointedly: *“How is it reasonable to endure infinite torment for limited and finite sins? Would a Merciful God burn a sinful soul forever?”* ¹². These questions pushed Islamic thinkers to seek interpretations that reconcile eternal justice with divine mercy. One answer proposed is that Hell’s punishments serve a **remedial, purgatorial function** – purifying the soul of its corruption – rather than simply inflicting retribution for its own sake ¹³. If the *purpose* of punishment is correction and purification, then **everlasting punishment would defeat that purpose** once the soul is cleansed. Renowned scholar **Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya** (d. 1350) argued exactly this: that God created human beings upon a pure monotheistic nature (*fiṭra*), and if some are corrupted by vice or unbelief, the **“long duration”** of Hellfire will ultimately **burn away the evil** and restore the soul’s inherent purity ¹³. In his analysis, **khulūd (immortality)** in Hell is to be understood as a **very long time, not an absolute endlessness**, precisely so that the fire can *“annihilate the evil from the souls”* before they are released ¹³.

This view dovetails with the oft-cited hadith qudsī (divine saying): *“My mercy prevails over My wrath.”* If God’s mercy is truly paramount, then it stands to reason that **wrath (punishment) would not endure eternally without hope of mercy**. Theologically, proponents of temporary Hell hold that **God’s justice** is served once each soul has received due recompense or correction for its wrongs; beyond that point, **continuing to punish ceaselessly would serve no just purpose and would contradict infinite mercy**. As one modern scholar succinctly put it, eternal torture with no reprieve would suggest *“as if God’s mercy has no dominion or role”* in Hell – a notion that **“towering Muslim scholars, philosophers and Sufis”** through history have indeed **challenged** ¹⁴. Ultimately, the merciful and just God of Islam, in this line of reasoning, would not create an everlasting torture chamber; rather, Hell is a severe but finite rehabilitation, a fiery crucible that prepares souls for eventual **forgiveness and progress**.

Hell's Purpose as Purification in the Qur'an and Hadith

Those who argue for Hell's impermanence often point to Qur'anic passages that hint at **rehabilitation and spiritual healing** as the goal of punishment. The Qur'an repeatedly notes that God sends trials and even worldly punishments to sinners *"that they might return (to righteousness)"* (e.g. Qur'an 7:94, 6:42) ¹⁵. In these verses, divine punishment isn't vindictive; it's described as an **awakening mechanism** meant to humble people and turn them back to God ¹⁶. By analogy, interpreters say, **Hell in the hereafter serves a similar function**: *"those who wasted their opportunity in this life shall be subjected to a course of treatment for the spiritual diseases they brought about"*, ultimately making them *"fit for spiritual advancement"* ¹⁷. The Qur'an even uses **metaphors of kinship and purification for Hell**. In one verse, Hellfire is called *mawlā* (an ally or close friend) of the sinners (Qur'an 57:15), and in another it is called *umm* (mother) for the damned (Qur'an 101:9) ¹⁸. These striking terms led Sufi commentators like **Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī** to conclude that Hell, far from being senseless torture, is like a "mother" or guardian that **cares for and rears the soul by purging its impurities**, much as fire purifies gold of dross ¹⁸ ¹⁹. As one commentary explains, the Arabic word **fitnah**, which originally means the process of refining gold by fire, is used in the Qur'an to describe both the **trials of believers** in life and the **punishment of unbelievers** in Hell – indicating that **the object in both cases is the same: purification** ²⁰. Such Qur'anic nuances reinforce the view that Hell's pain is meant *to heal and educate the soul*, not to punish vindictively for its own sake.

Prophetic Hadith and reports from the early Muslims further bolster the idea of Hell as temporary. Many sound hadiths speak of **sinners eventually being released from Hell** by God's mercy and the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the believers. For example, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* relates that after the Day of Judgment, when all who can intercede have done so, **God Himself will mercifully remove from Hell "a handful" of people who never did any good at all** ²¹. In *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, the Prophet describes how those sinners will be thrown into the **"River of Life"** and *"grow (again) as a seed grows by the riverbank,"* signaling their regeneration and readiness to enter Paradise ²². These hadiths in mainstream collections refer primarily to **former believers or people with a trace of faith** eventually being saved from Hell. However, some lesser-known reports extend hope even further. The **companion 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb** (rḍA) is narrated to have said: *"Even if the dwellers of Hell are as numerous as the sands of the desert, a day will come when they will be taken out of it."* ²³ Likewise, a report from **'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd** states: *"There will come a time upon Jahannam when there will be no one left in it, after they have remained in it for ages (ahqāb)."* ²³ ²⁴ Such narrations (found in compilations like *Kanz al-'Ummāl* and some commentaries) may not be as rigorously authenticated as the core hadiths, but they demonstrate that the **concept of an eventual emptying of Hell existed among early Muslims**. At the very least, **hope in Allah's mercy** was significant enough that early authorities cautioned against declaring anyone irredeemably condemned. Ibn 'Abbās, interpreting Qur'an 6:128, warned *"no one has the right to judge on God's behalf concerning His creatures (assigning them to Paradise or Hell)"* ²⁵ ²⁶ – only God knows each soul's destiny, and by His will even the damned may find reprieve beyond our knowing.

To further underline Hell's transience, some hadiths employ powerful imagery: one prophecy states that *"a day will come over Hell when it will be like a field of dried-up corn"* – its flames extinguished after having burned brightly for a while ²³. Another narration records the Prophet as saying that on the Day of Judgment **Death itself will be slaughtered** in the form of a ram, and it will be proclaimed to both Paradise and Hell: *"O people of Paradise, (no more) death! O people of Hell, (no more) death!"*, implying that after that, the inhabitants of Hell may no longer **experience the deathlike state of non-existence or spiritual death**, but move on to a different state of being (this hadith is often interpreted to mean punishment continues perpetually for Hell's inhabitants – yet those who favor eventual salvation see in it a hint that

change will come after “death” is ended) ²⁷ . In short, **Qur’an and Hadith provide several indications that Hell’s role is finite**: it lasts “as long as Allah wills” to correct and purify, and then, according to numerous reports, **its purpose will come to an end** when every soul capable of goodness is redeemed from it ⁵ ²³ .

Classical Scholarly Perspectives Across Sects

Although the view of Hell’s non-eternity is a minority position, it has been upheld or contemplated by respected scholars from various Islamic traditions. This lends the idea a certain legitimacy within *ikhtilāf*, even as it diverges from what most theologians have taught. It is illuminating to survey some of these voices:

- **Sunni Theology (Ahl al-Sunnah)**: The vast majority of Sunni theologians (Ash’arī, Māturīdī, and Atharī) have taught that Paradise and Hell are eternal, based on Qur’anic “forever” verses and the consensus of early authorities ²⁸ . Indeed, imams like al-Tahāwī explicitly include “the Garden and Fire are everlasting, unending” in Sunni creeds. However, there have been notable dissenters. The 8th-century ascetic **Jahm ibn Ṣafwān** and some early Mu’tazilites speculated that Heaven and Hell would eventually cease to exist – a view deemed heretical by orthodox scholars ²⁸ . Much later, two revered 14th-century scholars, **Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah** and his student **Ibn al-Qayyim**, revisited the question of Hell’s eternity. **Ibn Taymiyyah** (d. 1328) reportedly held that while Paradise is everlasting, Hellfire might eventually be extinguished or emptied of souls. He cited the Qur’anic exceptions in verses like 11:107 and argued that “every threat of punishment in the Qur’an” carries the implicit condition “except as God wills” ²⁹ . Ibn Taymiyyah’s view was controversial – his critics accused him of deviating from consensus – and he himself did not write a definitive public treatise on it. His student **Ibn al-Qayyim**, however, openly elaborated the case for Hell’s finitude. In his writings (such as *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ* and *Shifā’ al-ʿAlīl*), Ibn al-Qayyim compiled Qur’anic evidence and logical arguments against unending torment ¹³ . He interpreted *khulūd* (being immortal in Hell) as “a long duration” rather than true eternity, reasoning that **God’s wisdom and mercy dictate a limit to punitive suffering** ¹³ . Ibn al-Qayyim engages with opposing proofs – for example, Qur’an 4:168-169 which threatens disbelievers with “Hell, abiding therein forever” – by asserting that “**forever (abad) in such verses can mean merely an age-long term**”, to be understood in light of verses like 78:23 (“ages”) and 11:107 (“except as Allah wills”) ² . He also quotes prophetic traditions and even statements of early companions that anticipate an end to Hell, thereby arguing that this view has salaf (early precedent) and is not a bid’ah (innovation) ²³ ³⁰ . It is worth noting that later Sunni scholars generally refuted or downplayed Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim’s position – e.g. Imām al-Subkī wrote against it, and many, like **Allāmah al-Alūsī** in his commentary, reinterpreted any such companion reports as referring only to *temporary punishment for believers*. Nonetheless, even some conservative scholars admitted it as a valid interpretive possibility: “*Hellfire perishing is actually a minority but valid position in Sunni Islam*,” as one modern commentator observed ³¹ . Mainstream Sunni fatwa authorities today maintain that the view is **wrong but not heretical**, since those who held it (like Ibn al-Qayyim) **based themselves on scriptural evidence (ijtihād)** and not whim ¹ . It remains a testament to the richness of Sunni discourse that such an extraordinary doctrine could be entertained by figures of high regard without expelling them from Ahl al-Sunnah.

- **Shi’i Perspectives**: The dominant Twelver Shi’i view mirrors the Sunni majority in affirming Hell’s eternity for unbelievers. For example, the prominent 20th-century Shi’i exegete **Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī** insists that “*everlasting torment is destined for the infidels only*” and that explicit Qur’anic texts uphold

eternal Hell ³² . He argues that if a soul dies in a state of confirmed disbelief or wickedness, that spiritual state “takes hold” of its being, resulting in **perpetual torment** as a natural consequence ³² . Moreover, Ṭabāṭabāʾī and others maintain that human reason cannot on its own discern the realities of the afterlife, so believers must “**confirm what the truthful Prophet has said**” about Paradise and Hell without deeming it unjust ³³ . However, Shiʿi tradition also has strands open to eventual salvation. Some narrations from the **Imams of Ahl al-Bayt** suggest mercy for *some* non-believers under specific conditions, and Ismaʿili and mystical Shiʿi writings sometimes interpret Qurʾanic hellfire more metaphorically (e.g. as the pain of distance from God, which could be eventually remedied by enlightenment). A notable intersection with Sufi thought is the influence of **Mulla Ṣadrā and the School of Isfahan**, who were Shiʿi philosophers and gnostics: they viewed all existence as ultimately returning to God, and while they did not flatly deny eternal punishment, their emphasis on God’s overflowing mercy and the soul’s journey to perfection left theoretical room for **eventual purgation of sins**. In Shiʿi lore, even the arch-sinner **Abū Lahab** (the Prophet’s uncle condemned in Qurʾan 111) is said to receive relief every Monday for having rejoiced at the Prophet’s birth – a small sign of mercy reaching the damned. While such examples do not amount to a full doctrine of Hell’s impermanence, they underscore the Shiʿi conviction that **God’s compassion is never completely cut off**. Interestingly, Zaidi Shiʿism (closer to Sunni Muʿtazilism) also stresses God’s justice and mercy, and Zaidi scholars too discussed whether divine wisdom might eventually decree an end to useless torment. In sum, the **mainline Shiʿi stance** aligns with eternal Hell for the truly damned, but within Shiʿi intellectual history there have been **individual voices entertaining a more hopeful outcome**, often under the influence of Sufi metaphysics or rational theology.

- **Sufi Mysticism:** Perhaps the most compassionate and philosophically daring interpretations of Hell’s nature come from the **Sufi** tradition. Mystics focus on God’s love and the soul’s experiential journey, sometimes re-envisioning Hell in non-literal or therapeutic terms. **Ibn ʿArabī** (d. 1240), an eminent Sufi master, is often cited on this topic. He taught that all existence is fundamentally a manifestation of God’s mercy, even the states of punishment. In Ibn ʿArabī’s understanding, the agony of Hell is not an arbitrary divine wrath but rather the *soul’s own remorse and distance from the Beloved (God)* ³⁴ ³⁵ . Crucially, Ibn ʿArabī asserted that **divine mercy penetrates even the depths of Hell** ³⁶ . He pointed to Qurʾanic hints like Hell being termed a “mother” or a “close ally” of sinners as evidence that “*God’s mercy extends even into the heart of Hell*” ¹⁹ . Some Sufi commentators interpreted that eventually the intense divine love will **transform Hell’s fire into a cooling light**, just as the fire was cooled for Prophet Abraham. Indeed, one oft-quoted line from Sufi literature suggests that **the inhabitants of Hell will, after ages of purgation, come to love God so overwhelmingly that even Hellfire appears to them as bliss** – at that point, their “punishment” effectively ends because it has achieved its goal of drawing them back to God. While Ibn ʿArabī stops short of explicitly saying Hell will close down, he **argues for a non-eternal punishment** in Hell ³⁷ . In his view, Hell as a state may persist, but its *punitive function* ceases once souls are purified; what remains is a semblance of Hell that to its denizens is no longer suffering in the same way ³⁸ . Later Sufis and philosophers, like **Shah Waliullah Dehlawi** in the 18th century, echoed similar ideas: describing Hell’s fire as ultimately medicinal, cleansing the spiritual illnesses of arrogance, greed, and lust that could not be cured in earthly life. This aligns with the Qurʾanic depiction of Hell’s fire “*burning away the (evil) on the hearts*” (cf. Qurʾan 104:6-7). The Sufi perspective thus reframes Hell not as a permanent torture chamber but as **part of God’s merciful plan** to 完地 refine each soul until it is fit for nearness to Him ¹⁷ ¹⁸ .
- **Muʿtazilī and Philosophical Views:** The **Muʿtazilites**, Islam’s rationalist theologians (8th–10th centuries), are known for their doctrine that **God must do what is just and good**. They upheld the

idea of **perfect retributive justice**: every sin must be punished and every good deed rewarded. This led them to deny automatic intercession or forgiveness for major sinners; a Muslim who died unrepentant of grave sins was, in their view, destined to Hell (though perhaps a lesser Hell than that of unbelievers). At first glance, this makes Mu'tazilites seem *more* strict about Hell's eternity. In fact, most Mu'tazilites did affirm that unbelievers would remain in Hell without end. Yet their principled emphasis on God's justice also raised the uncomfortable issue of proportionality: could unending damnation for finite sins truly be called just? A few Mu'tazilite-influenced thinkers explored alternatives. The early mystic **Ḥasan al-Baṣrī** (often claimed by both Sufis and Mu'tazilites) was hopeful that God's mercy could rescue people after His justice was satisfied – he reportedly wept at the thought of anyone suffering forever. The Mu'tazilite theologian **al-Fāḍil al-Qushayrī** is credited with suggesting that **if a soul's evil is finite, its punishment would eventually purge that evil and thus logically conclude**. Meanwhile, Islamic philosophers (falāsifa) like **Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna)** held that after death, punishments were largely internal (the soul's own anguish). Ibn Sīnā speculated that eventually every soul would gravitate toward the Ultimate Good (God) once purified of ignorance – a concept akin to universal salvation, though couched in Neoplatonic terms. Such views were often esoteric and not advertised as dogma, but they show that **outside the strict traditionalists, many Muslim intellectuals struggled with and softened the idea of eternal Hell**. Even **Imam al-Ghazālī** (d. 1111), the great orthodox theologian, while affirming the scriptural doctrine of eternal Hell in his formal creed, personally exemplified the hope for universal mercy. He cited a startling tradition in his work *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqā*: “*Out of a thousand (condemned), only one would actually spend eternity in Hell.*”³⁹ The implication is that **999 out of 1000 souls would, by God's grace, eventually be delivered** from everlasting punishment. Al-Ghazālī included this to stress that **no one should despair of God's compassion**, and that His wrath would consume only the most utterly irredeemable fraction (and even that, God knows best). Such optimism, coming from al-Ghazālī, reinforced that within the bounds of Islamic theology one could hope and even argue that **Hell's torment is ultimately not infinite for the vast majority of God's creatures**³⁹.

Contemporary Reexaminations of Hell's Permanence

In recent times, the question of Hell's permanence has been revisited by scholars and thinkers who grapple with modern sensitivities and the enduring Qur'anic emphasis on divine mercy. While orthodox seminaries still teach eternal Hell for unbelievers as the default, a number of **academics, reformist scholars, and public intellectuals** have given serious consideration to the possibility of universal salvation or at least the **emptying of Hell after aeons**. They often build upon the arguments and evidence from the classical scholars we have discussed, presenting them in contemporary terms.

For instance, **Dr. Muhammad Hasan Khalil**, a contemporary scholar of Islamic theology, has documented the spectrum of views on salvation in Islam, highlighting that respected figures in Islamic history allowed for non-eternal Hell. He and others point out that **Qur'anic theology is dominated by mercy** – God's 99 names include **al-Raḥmān (The All-Merciful)** and **al-Raḥīm (The Especially Merciful)**, but not a name denoting eternal anger. Modern commentators ask: *Would the All-Merciful torture souls without end?* This rhetorical question echoes classical inquiries, but today it also responds to critiques that eternal damnation tarnishes God's justice. **Dr. Shabir Ally**, a popular Muslim speaker with a PhD in Quranic exegesis, has publicly suggested that **God's mercy may encompass even repentant non-Muslims in the afterlife**, and that perhaps Hell's gates are not closed forever. He cites the Prophet's prayer on behalf of even the staunch enemy Abu Jahl, and the Qur'an's teaching that “*Allah forgives all sins*” (39:53) when one turns to Him, as hints that **no state of sin is absolutely beyond His forgiveness**. Meanwhile, writers affiliated with Islamic

modernist or mystical circles – such as **Javed Ahmad Ghamidi** and some Ahmadiyya Muslim authors – have been even more direct. They describe Hell as a **“reformatory, not a prison”**, comparing it to a spiritual hospital or cleansing fire which, once its work is done, **will cease to burn** ⁴⁰. In their view, the Qur’an’s vivid hellfire imagery is meant to dissuade humans from evil, much like the imagery of Paradise motivates good, but ultimately *“Hell is a place for reformation and not meant to be a torture chamber”* ⁴⁰. Ghamidi, for example, interprets Quranic terms in light of context and God’s justice, concluding that **eternal punishment is reserved only for the truly incorrigible who forever reject God’s mercy, if such souls even exist**. Other modern Muslim thinkers have engaged with the idea of **annihilation (fanā’)** of the **wicked souls** after they have been punished, rather than endless torture – a concept that they argue is supported by some classical opinions (like an idea Ibn Taymiyyah once entertained that God might let souls in Hell eventually die or Hell itself perish). Although these reinterpretations remain controversial in conservative circles, they underscore a broad **inter-sectarian impulse to reconcile Islam’s theology of afterlife with the paramountcy of God’s compassion**.

It is important to note that none of these contemporary voices claim to *deny* the scriptural descriptions of Hell; rather, they are offering an **interpretative nuance**: that the **“eternity”** described in scripture may, by God’s own will, have an *end* known only to Him. They operate fully within the precedent of earlier scholars’ *ijtihād*. As one Muslim writer quipped, *if even hardline medieval scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah could hold out hope for Hell’s closure, then surely modern Muslims can appreciate the vast scope of Rahma (mercy) taught by the Qur’an*. In the spirit of *legitimate ikhtilāf*, today’s scholars stress that exploring this view is **not an affront to doctrine but a reflection on the depths of God’s names and attributes**. They recall the Prophet’s teaching that God’s mercy is **100 parts**, of which only 1 was sent to earth (manifest in all kindness and love we see), while 99 parts are reserved by Him – a teaching that strongly suggests **an almost unimaginable finale of mercy awaiting creatures in the Hereafter**. The **idea of non-eternal Hell thus continues to be “within the bounds” of Islamic discourse**, providing solace to some and highlighting the richness of interpretations in Islam’s scholarly heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the prevailing Islamic belief holds Hell (Jahannam) to be everlasting for those who die in a state of rejection of God, a compelling scholarly case – built upon **Qur’anic verses, Prophetic traditions**, and the insights of generations of scholars – maintains that Hell’s torment is **meant primarily for purification and ultimately will not last forever**. This essay has traced that perspective through linguistic analysis of scripture (noting the Qur’an’s careful use of terms like *ahqāb* and the crucial exceptions to eternity), through theological reasoning on divine mercy and justice, and through the voices of influential figures from various Islamic sects. From early companions like ‘Umar and Ibn Mas‘ūd, to towering scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and al-Ghazālī, to mystics like Ibn ‘Arabī and myriad contemporary thinkers, the notion of a **finite Hell** has persisted as a hope and a serious interpretative position within Islam ¹⁴ ²¹. This view holds that God’s **wisdom does not will purposeless pain**, and His **mercy will have the final word** – fulfilling the Qur’anic promise that God created mankind to **embrace them with mercy** ¹¹.

It must be underscored that this merciful interpretation does not negate the **reality or severity of Hell’s punishment**. All proponents of the view affirm that Hell is real and fearsome, and that many souls will enter it and remain for “ages upon ages” – perhaps an unfathomably long duration – to face God’s justice. Where they differ from the mainstream is in the *ultimate outcome*: they see Hell as **God’s furnace to burn away evil, not an infinite abyss of pain**. After its purgative purpose is accomplished – and only God knows

when – they believe **the gates of Hell will be opened by the hand of divine grace**. Some envisage every last soul eventually attaining Paradise (the doctrine of universal salvation), while others suggest the utterly wicked may simply be extinguished or left in a benign state, with the **active torments ceasing**. In any case, *punishment is not the final chapter*.

This interpretation remains a minority view and is not the standard creed taught in mosques; yet as we have shown, it **“exists within the bounds of legitimate ikhtilāf”** in Islamic thought, supported by proofs from the Qur’an and Sunna that sincere scholars have pondered ¹. It speaks to a profound aspect of Islamic theology: the balance of **Khauf** (fear) and **Rajā’** (hope). The Qur’an instills fear of Hell to dissuade humans from evil, but it also instills hope in God’s mercy to not despair. The view of Hell as non-eternal leans into the hope side of that balance without discarding the fear, for Hell’s prospect remains daunting even if not endless. Ultimately, whether Hellfire eventually expires or not is a matter known only to Allah. As believers, we prepare as if punishment could be eternal, but we also trust that our Lord, whose mercy is unbounded, may treat His creation more generously than our sins deserve. The Qur’an (39:53) calls out: “O My servants who have transgressed against yourselves, do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins; indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.” This promise fuels the hearts of those scholars who dare to imagine that even the final inferno can one day cool under the shade of **divine compassion**. Their voices remind the Islamic community that **God’s justice is never divorced from His mercy**, and thus Hell, for all its terror, may be but a **temporary ordeal on the soul’s journey back to the Most Merciful**.

Sources: Qur’ān, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Tafsīr al-Qurtubī ⁸ ⁴¹, Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Rāzī, Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ* ¹³, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (analysis) ³⁶, Majmū’ al-Fatāwā Ibn Taymiyyah ²⁸, Janan Izadi et al., “Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah and Allameh Tabataba’i on Immortality in Hell” ³², Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam* (Lahore, 1936) ⁵ ¹⁰, Shehzad Saleem, “Hell is Meant for Purification and is Not Permanent” ² ²³, StackExchange Islam Q&A ¹, and others.

¹ ²⁸ quran - What is Ibn Tamiyyah's evidence for the claim that Hell will be empty eventually? - Islam Stack Exchange

<https://islam.stackexchange.com/questions/44907/what-is-ibn-tamiyyahs-evidence-for-the-claim-that-hell-will-be-empty-eventually>

² ³ ⁴ ⁵ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ²⁰ ²¹ ²² ²³ ⁴⁰ Hell is Meant for Purification and is not Permanent – The Glorious Quran and Science

<https://thequran.love/2017/08/22/hell-is-meant-for-purification-and-is-not-permanent/>

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