

# THE ‘ABBĀSIDS AND THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROPHET’S MOSQUE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF A POLITICAL DISINTEGRATION

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## Abstract

This article discusses the contributions of the ‘Abbāsid caliphs to the architectural development of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. Since the protracted ‘Abbāsid rule went through several precarious phases, it was frequently marred by acute religious and socio-political disorders and turbulences, so much so that its mere existence was occasionally threatened. The history and architectural development of the Prophet’s Mosque was not immune to such conditions. Its architectural integrity and predisposition, and overall functioning as a community development center, were now and then at risk. Thus, this article focuses on discussing the consequences and implications of a political disintegration during the ‘Abbāsid era for the architectural development and serviceability of the Mosque. The paper concludes that the ‘Abbāsid contributions to the architectural development of the Mosque were reasonable; however, there was a big room for improvement. The reasons for certain conceptual as well as functional inadequacies were not as much attributable to the ‘Abbāsids as to the prevalent circumstances in the state that eventually incapacitated the ‘Abbāsid government from performing its entrusted duties and responsibilities.

*Key Words:* The ‘Abbāsids, the Prophet’s Mosque, Medina, political disintegration

## Introduction

When first built by the Prophet (pbuh), the principal Mosque in Medina was extremely simple. It was just a roofless and unpaved enclosure. However, as the needs and capacities of the first Muslim community in Medina both intensified and diversified, the Mosque, which was meant to function as a community development center, responded by considerably altering its architectural morphology in order to meet the pressing demands of the nascent community and its civilization-building project in Medina. So dynamic were the processes to which the form and function of the Mosque had been subjected that eventually, the Mosque needed to be significantly enlarged a couple of years before the Prophet's death.

The Prophet's Mosque was a community center *par excellence*, performing numerous religious and social roles and functions. The Mosque thus was a centre for religious activities, a learning centre, the seat of the Prophet's government, a welfare and charity centre, a detention and rehabilitation centre, a place for medical treatment and nursing, a place for some leisure activities (Omer 2013, 68). While responding to the challenges posed to it on the religious, socio-political, and educational fronts, the design and structural configuration of the Mosque in the end contained on the *qiblah* (direction of prayer) side three porticoes with each portico having six pillars made of palm trunks, a shelter on the rear side for the poorest and homeless in Medina for both male and female, a ceiling on the front and rear sides made of palm leaves and stalks, a *minbar* (pulpit), a ground strewn with pebbles, a pavement outside one of the entrances, a *dakkab* or *dukkān* (seat, bench) for communication purposes, lamps as a means for lighting up the Mosque, several compartments and facilities that facilitated the various functions of the Mosque, and a person, or persons, whose job was to keep the Mosque clean (al-Samhūdī 1997, 2: 388-398).

Prior to the 'Abbāsids, the Prophet's Mosque was significantly expanded three times, by Caliphs 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. AH 24/644 AD), 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (d. AH 36/656 AD), al-Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik (d. 97 AH/715 AD). The first two caliphs represented the epoch of the four rightly-guided caliphs (*al-kbulafā' al-rāshidūn*), and the third caliph represented the Umayyad period which marked a drastic departure from the religious and political character as well as spirit of

the former.

In each of the three instances, the realm of the Prophet's Mosque was imbued and imprinted with the spirit and moral fiber of a different era and the spiritual as well as socio-political predisposition of its generations, so much so that studying the major historical expansions of the Mosque, which signified the milestones in its architectural evolution, corresponds to studying the major phases of the civilizational development of the Muslim community (*ummah*) at large. This is so because, since its inception, the fate of the Prophet's Mosque, in its capacity as the second most consequential mosque on earth after al-Masjid al-ḥarām in Mecca to which pilgrimage has been strongly recommended, stood for the microcosm of the religious and civilizational fates of the entire Muslim community. This was so, furthermore, because the Mosque exemplified a center of gravity of almost all the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional aspirations, goals, and purposes of all Muslims, both at the individual and collective, or institutional, levels.

Similar to the legacies of most of their political predecessors, no sooner had the 'Abbāsids assumed the leadership authority than they busied themselves with improving the architectural condition and performance of the Prophet's Mosque. The architectural output varied from one sovereign to another. However, so long, erratic and challenging was the 'Abbāsīd rule that neither consistent nor sustainable approaches, nor tactics, could have been expected from them. The second phase of the 'Abbāsīd rule is regarded as a phase of a Muslim political disintegration, after which the Muslim world never recovered. The first phase, though held in high esteem by many, represented in many ways a transition and the paving of the way for the former.

This paper discusses several aspects of the state of the architectural development of the Prophet's Mosque against the background of the prevalent social, political, and religious conditions during the 'Abbāsīd caliphate. The discussion will revolve around the following three themes: main aspects of the 'Abbāsīd architectural contributions to the Prophet's Mosque, an architectural inadequacy, and the Prophet's Mosque as a victim of a political disintegration.

As regards the earlier studies on the subject, they could be divided into two categories. First, there are studies that treat the architectural contributions of the 'Abbāsīds to the Prophet's Mosque, but only as

part of their general exposition of the history of the Mosque and its notable expansions. Most of such works are regarded as classic, and in that capacity, they have been regularly referred to in this article. However, most of such works approached the case of the architectural relationship between the ‘Abbāsids and the Mosque in a sheer descriptive and historical manner. Little attention was given to the potential analytical and critical dimensions of the subject in question. Thus, this article aims as much at delving into a number of the theme’s several pivotal aspects as at arousing the interest of the readers concerning the latter’s religious, historical, and overall civilizational import. An exception to this occurrence was Muḥammad ibn Jubayr (d. AH 614/1217 AD), a famous Spanish Muslim traveler who in his travel chronicle *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* described the pilgrimage he made to Mecca and Medina, critically assessing the worrying socio-religious situation in the latter and focusing on the role and architectural appearance and significance of the Mosque. The author perhaps did so because he was an insightful traveler and outsider whose religious and scholarly purpose and objectives were vastly different from most subsequent historians.

The second type of the studies on the architectural contributions of the ‘Abbāsids to the Prophet’s Mosque are those contemporary books and articles that in essence reproduced most of the substance of the scholarly works from the first category. The theme of the ‘Abbāsids and the architecture of the Prophet’s Mosque was just one of numerous topics that the authors of such books and articles dealt with. Quite a number of such works were referred to as well in this article wherever appropriate. Certainly, the modern Saudi mega-expansions of the Prophet’s Mosque renewed interest in studying the general history of the architecture of the Prophet’s Mosque, locally and abroad.

Some of such works are the encyclopedic books titled “The Architecture of the Prophet’s Holy Mosque” and “Story of the Great Expansion” produced by groups of Saudi and foreign scholars and experts. Worth mentioning are also the books on the history of the architecture of the Prophet’s Mosque and its expansions titled *‘Imārat wa-tawsī‘ al-Masjid al-Nabawī al-sbarīf ‘abr al-tārīkh* (“The Architecture and Expansions of the Noble Prophet’s Mosque throughout History”) by Nāḥī Muḥammad al-Anṣārī, and *al-Madīnah al-munawwarah: Taṭawwurubā al-‘umrānī wa-turāthubā al-mi‘mārī* (“Luminous Medina: Its Urban Growth and Architectural

Heritage”) by Muṣṭafá Šāliḥ Lamī. Though indirectly related to the subject, Doris Behrens-Abouseif's excellent article titled “Qāyṭbāy's *Madrasabs* in the Holy Cities and the Evolution of Ḥaram Architecture,” published in *Mamlūk Studies Review* (no. 3 [1999], 129-149), needs also to be mentioned. It goes without saying that the scarcity of scholarly works that focus exclusively on the socio-religious dimensions of the relationship between the ‘Abbāsids and the architecture of the Prophet's Mosque motivated the author of this article to undertake this study and thereby fill to some extent a glaring academic gap.

### **Main Aspects of the ‘Abbāsīd Architectural Contributions to the Prophet's Mosque**

The ‘Abbāsīd caliphate signified the third form of the Muslim rule to succeed Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), after the rightly-guided caliphs (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn*) (AH 11-40/632-661 AD) and the Umayyad caliphate (AH 41-132/661-750 AD). They came to power in AH 132/750 AD, having earlier overthrown the Umayyads. They made the region of modern-day Iraq the epicenter of their rule, building the city of Baghdad as their capital whereto the political and economic center of power was instantly transferred from Damascus, Syria, the nucleus of the previous Umayyad regime. The ‘Abbāsīds clung to power until they were destroyed by the Mongol invasion in AH 656/1258 AD. Hulāgū Khān sacked Baghdad on February 10, 1258 AD (AH 656), causing great loss of life. Al-Musta‘ṣim (d. AH 656/1258 AD), the last reigning ‘Abbāsīd caliph in Baghdad was then executed on February 20, 1258 AD. The ‘Abbāsīds still maintained a feeble show of authority, confined to religious matters, in Egypt under the powerful Mamlūk dynasty, but their ceremonial and titular caliphate, as it was recognised at that juncture, finally disappeared with al-Mutawakkil III (d. AH 923/1517 AD), who was carried away as a prisoner to Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (Hitti 1996, 484-489). Hence, the end of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate spelled the end of the Mamlūk state, and *vice versa*.

Just as during the Umayyad caliphate, the city of Medina, which served as the capital of the nascent Muslim state from the beginning until AH 36/656 AD, was a distant provincial city during the ‘Abbāsīd regime as well. However, due to its remarkable and rich historical legacy, its reputation as a pilgrimage city and its perpetual standing as a Muslim spiritual and, to an extent, intellectual hub in the hearts and minds of all Muslims, Medina was never neglected. For obvious

reasons, it was a target and focus of every sincere, faithful, and knowledge-seeking Muslim. For equally obvious reasons, it was a target and focus of every ambitious – legitimate or otherwise – political activist or group. The city's everlasting capacity and lure, coupled with its geographical remoteness from the existing political centers of gravity, were impossible to ignore or underestimate. It functioned throughout as a melting pot, so to speak, of especially political ideas, initiatives, and actual movements. Naturally, both as the conceptual and physical embodiment of virtually everything the city of Medina was standing for, the Prophet's Mosque always stood at the epicenter of all city's events.

Prior to the 'Abbāsids and their Muslim leadership, the Prophet's Mosque was significantly expanded three times. When the 'Abbāsids assumed authority over the Muslim state, they knew that they had to subtly deal with the intrinsic character and predilections of Medina and its towering legacies, neither trying to alter or fully control them, for doing so was impossible, nor leaving them to burgeon and operate alone within the framework of a new political climate and outlook, for doing so was at once unproductive and detrimental to the 'Abbāsīd political survival. A middle path that nonetheless would now and then swing between the two extremities, subject to the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions in the whole state in general, and in Medina in particular, had to be adopted.

Thus, the 'Abbāsīd relationship with Medina, by and large, was one of opacity, uncertainty, and unpredictability. It wavered between provisional and expedient peace and accord, turbulent physical conflicts and clashes, and periods of psychological pressure, tensions, and feuds. The same tendencies and conditions, by extension, tinted the 'Abbāsīd relationship with the Prophet's Mosque and its architectural developments, so much so that its potentials and performances, every so often, were not only debilitated, but also discriminated against and victimized. Obviously, for the city of the Prophet (pbuh) and his Mosque it should be expected more from a regime that is regularly described as "remarkable," "a savior," "a deliverer," and one whose historical chapter up to the Mongol conquest and devastation of Baghdad in AH 656/1258 AD is regarded as the "Islamic golden age" (Hitti 1996, 297-316).

On the whole, the 'Abbāsīd general architectural contributions to the Prophet's Mosque, as outlined both by classical and modern

historians, such as al-Samhūdī (1997, 2: 535-540), Ibn Kathīr (1985, 10: 135), al-Ya‘qūbī (2002, 2: 277), al-Ṭabarī (1989, 2:79), Ibn al-Najjār (1981, 103-105), al-Quāitī [al-Qu‘ayṭī] (2007, 105-110), al-Anṣārī (1996, 111-118), Badr (1993, 2: 65), and others, are as follows.

Al-Mahdī (d. AH 169/785 AD), the third ‘Abbāsīd caliph, undertook a major extension of the Mosque that lasted from AH 161/778 AD till AH 165/781 AD. According to some accounts, his father and second ‘Abbāsīd caliph, al-Manṣūr (d. AH 159/775 AD), intended to do the same, but was overtaken by death. Hence, his son and successor, al-Mahdī, embarked on the expansion merely two years after his enthronement. Some planning and preparation works might have started even earlier. Moreover, some less reliable accounts even suggest that the first ‘Abbāsīd caliph, al-Saffāḥ (d. AH 137/754 AD), did somewhat expand the Mosque, albeit without providing details as to the nature and scope of the assignment, thereby significantly adding to the dubiousness and unreliability of the said accounts (al-Samhūdī 1997, 2: 536).

As was the case with all former major Mosque expansions, for Caliph al-Mahdī’s expansion, too, land to be incorporated into the Mosque had to be acquired and property demolished. The extension on this particular occasion had only affected the northern sector facing the Shām region (Syria and Palestine). According to al-Quāitī (2007, 106), though several sources have quoted that about 50 meters were added to the structure of Caliph al-Walīd – that is, the Mosque as it was after its latest expansion – a closer examination reveals the figure to have been exaggerated by about 22.5 meters, for it was the whole area affected by the demolition and reconstruction that came to about 50 meters, and not the expansion itself. The Mosque had nevertheless still continued to maintain its rectangular shape.

Many, however, maintained that about 50 meters were added to the Mosque’s northern sector, rather than 22.5 meters. The western, eastern, and southern *qiblah* (prayer direction towards south) sides were not involved in the expansion. That was detailed by the ten additional columns from the direction of the courtyard of the Mosque to the women’s *saqā’if* (covering roofs) area, and five new *saqā’if* for the women in the same northern section (Ismā‘īl 1998, 45).

The reconstruction was tastefully embellished with mosaic inlay. Gold, too, was used mainly for the purpose of decoration, most probably on the ceiling which was made of teakwood. The name of

Caliph al-Mahdī, along with a brief description of the expansion project and its history, was inscribed on the walls of the Mosque (Ibn al-Najjār 1981, 104; al-Ya‘qūbī 2002, 2:277). The same building materials as those employed by Caliph al-Walīd in the earlier expansion were used for this expansion as well (Dawāḥ 2006, 193). They were: cut and chiseled stone dressed in plaster, marble, mosaics, teakwood meant primarily for roofing, and stone columns reinforced with lead and iron to add to their strength and durability. Al-Ya‘qūbī (2002, 2:277), nevertheless, refers to the use of marble columns, which in some measure might be true. Marble was also used for overlaying the exterior of the Prophet’s tomb.

The enclosure of the *maqṣūrah* (literally, a cabinet or a compartment, and technically, a raised platform with protective screens adjacent to the *qiblah* wall with direct private access to, or right in front of, the *miḥrāb* or praying niche area), which was first built by Caliph ‘Uthmān, was also rebuilt after its floor level had been compacted to be even with the rest of the Mosque’s area that surrounded it (al-Quāitī 2007, 106; al-Samhūdī 1997, 2:539). Ibn Kathīr (1985, 10:135), and al-Ṭabarī (1989, 2:79), however, only mention that the *maqṣūrah* was demolished and done away with (*azāla*), without referring to its subsequent rebuilding.

Al-Mahdī also wanted to remove six steps to the *minbar* (pulpit), which the Umayyad caliph, Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (d. AH 61/680 AD), had added to the original state of the Prophet’s *minbar* which had only three steps, but gave up the idea at the advice of Mālik ibn Anas (d. AH 179/795 AD), the leading scholar of Medina, because the planned action was bound to cause damage to the logs on which the original *minbar* had been built (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 10:135). According to al-Ṭabarī (1989, 2:79), al-Mahdī was told by Mālik ibn Anas that “the nails had penetrated both the new wood which Mu‘āwiyah had added and the original wood, which was ancient. It was to be feared that if the nails were drawn out from it and it was strained, it would break, so al-Mahdī left it alone.”

Following this expansion by al-Mahdī, the Mosque had four doors in the wall facing the *qiblah* and as many in the northern one opposite to it. The east and the west both had a total of sixteen entrances, eight on either wall and an additional four doors for the convenience of the dignitaries, and in order to provide easy access to the *imām* (prayer leader) and the *amīr* to the *maqṣūrah* (al-Quāitī

2007, 107). In its courtyard, the Mosque also had 64 conduits or gutters (*ballā'ab*) for regulating rainwater (Ibn al-Najjār 1981, 105). The three square minarets erected during al-Walīd's expansion remained unaltered (Ismā'īl 1998, 45).

After Caliph al-Mahdī, the Mosque was not significantly enlarged or expanded until it was destroyed by a second major fire in AH 886/1481 AD during the reign of the Mamlūk Sultan Qāytbāy (d. AH 902/1496 AD), a period of about 720 years. It was only then that a next expansion was undertaken. (During a first major fire in AH 654/1256 AD, several sections of the Mosque needed to be significantly overhauled, including the Prophet's tomb or his sacred burial chamber, but to most scholars (Dawāḥ 2006, 194) that did not amount to a major expansion.) However, scores of noteworthy repairs and improvements were carried out during the reigns of al-Mahdī's successors.

For example, Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. AH 194/809 AD) is reported to have ordered for the ceiling of the Mosque by the Prophet's tomb to be repaired. Similarly, Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. AH 218/833 AD) did some unspecified work on the Mosque to which it is sometimes referred as repairs and improvements, and other times as a minor expansion (al-Samhūdī 1997, 2:540). Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. AH 247/861 AD) had commissioned the tiling of the floor of the Prophet's tomb in white marble during AH 246/860 AD. However, according to some scholars, it was the whole floor of the Mosque that was tiled in white marble, while its walls were repaired with mosaic inlay. In addition, a marble dado was added running at a height of 175 centimeters. Following this, Caliph al-Mu'taḍid (d. AH 290/902 AD) had the eastern façade overlooking the courtyard of the Mosque repaired in AH 282/895 AD, Caliph al-Muqtafi (d. AH 555/1160 AD) had seen in AH 548/1153 AD to the renewal of the marble on the lower section of the exterior wall around the Prophet's tomb, Caliph al-Mustaḍī (d. AH 575/1180 AD) adorned the walls of the Prophet's tomb with marble, and Caliph al-Nāṣir (d. AH 622/1225 AD) in AH 576/1180 AD rebuilt the eastern wall of the north-eastern minaret and constructed a dome in the middle of the courtyard, creating a space for storing and keeping valuable books and copies of the Qur'ān. The Umayyad *minbar* was also then renovated. (Ismā'īl 1998, 46; al-Quāitū 2007, 107). Several notable Mamlūk works on the Mosque prior to AH 886/1481 AD and afterwards – a period technically still regarded as part of the 'Abbāsīd era – are not covered in this article

because on account of their volume and complexity, they merit a separate comprehensive study.

Ibn Jubayr (d. AH 614/1217 AD), who traversed much of the Muslim world from AH 578/1182 AD to AH 581/1185 AD, described the Prophet's Mosque after he had visited Medina in AH 580/1184 AD as oblong in shape. It had two hundred and ninety columns that were like straight props, for they reached the ceiling and had no arches bending over them. (It is interesting to note that on the word of al-Quāitī [2007, 57], as early as after the expansion of the Mosque by the third Caliph ʿUthmān, the columns were crowned in pairs by arches. It is thus unclear what Ibn Jubayr had exactly in mind when he said this, and whether he specifically meant certain types of arches and their spandrels, and how they seemed and functioned with reference to the columns and ceiling.) They were composed of stone hewn into a number of round, bored blocks, mortised together and with melted lead poured between each pair so that they formed a straight column. They were then covered with a coat of plaster, and rubbed and polished zealously until they appeared as white marble. This, perhaps, made al-Yaʿqūbī believe and record in his *Tārīkh* that some columns were of marble – as mentioned earlier. The southern section of the Mosque that had five rows of porticoes was enfolded by a *maqṣūrah* that flanked its length from west to east and in which there was a *miḥrāb*. The Mosque had a central courtyard which was covered with sand and gravel. It was surrounded on all four sides by porticoes. The southern side had five rows of porticoes running from west to east, or parallel to the *qiblah*, and the northern side also had five rows of porticoes in the same style. The eastern side had three porticoes and the west four (Ibn Jubayr 2001, 198-201).

Since especially the latter periods of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate were fraught with the rapid weakening and ultimate disintegration of the state and its centralized government in Baghdad, following which many petty dynasties of Arab, Turkish or Persian origin, were parceling out the domains of the Caliph both in the east and the west, the city of Medina was becoming increasingly isolated from the ʿAbbāsīd political centers in Iraq. As such, it was becoming more and more vulnerable to the political and religious ambitions and advances of the emerging small dynasties. The city was often caught in the crossfire in the fast-growing ideological Sunnī-Shīʿī conflicts and disputes as well. Understandably, during the upheavals in question, the religious purity and inviolability of the Prophet's city and his

Mosque were constantly targeted as a source of political and even religious leverage. As a corollary of that, the architectural morphology and function of the Prophet's Mosque were greatly affected in the process.

### **An Architectural Inadequacy**

Notwithstanding the above-said contributions of the 'Abbāsids to the development and architecture of the Prophet's Mosque, it cannot be said about them that they were outstanding. On the whole, their legacy in relation to the Mosque leaves a lot to be desired. The blame, however, is not to be attributed as much to the 'Abbāsids themselves as to the general conditions in the state that eventually incapacitated the 'Abbāsīd administration from performing its entrusted duties and responsibilities.

A sign of such an apparent shortcoming is the fact that many historians often vastly disagree as to which 'Abbāsīd sovereign did exactly what to the Mosque. Although Caliph al-Mahdī carried out a major expansion, yet most historians provide only brief and cursory, often inconsistent, accounts about the subject matter. But if the expansion and other 'Abbāsīd contributions to the Mosque were more reflective of, and commensurate with, the degree and proportion of the 'Abbāsīd in particular initial power, ambitions, and glory, as well as the overall size of their territories and the longevity of their empire, the situation would certainly be different, for the primary job of classical historians was to record and preserve the legacies of history-makers and their history-making decisions, initiatives, actions, and communications. If an event or a decision was perceived as less important and less consequential, then less attention was accorded to it and less space in historical files and records was allocated to it. Simply put, if the imprints left by the 'Abbāsīds on the history and development of the Mosque were amply outstanding and historic, they would go neither unnoticed nor scarcely discerned and documented.

To be fair to Caliph al-Mahdī, nonetheless, he did what he could and what perhaps was needed to be done to the Prophet's Mosque at that time. By no means was he in a position to do more. That was so because he did not only expand the Prophet's Mosque, but also *al-Masjid al-ḥarām* in Mecca which, admittedly, was in need of more urgent attention and a larger and more challenging expansion. What he spent for both expansions amounted to millions of *dirhams*

(silver) and hundreds of thousands of *dīnārs* (gold) which were brought from Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen, but most of which had to be spent for the expansion of *al-Masjid al-ḥarām*. So complex and demanding was the expansion in Mecca that al-Mahdī at one point vowed: “I have to accomplish this expansion even if I had to spend all the money available in the government’s treasuries (*buyūt al-amwāl*)” (al-Ṭabarī 1989, 2:78-79; al-Quāitū 2007, 85-89; Bāsālāmah 2001, 45-55).

Both Mecca and Medina were the places of seasonal as well as unceasing pilgrimages: *ḥajj*, *‘umrah*, and visits (*ziyārah*) to the Prophet’s Mosque which have been sanctioned and highly recommended. Thus, the two holy cities and their holy Mosques with their various facilities were in need of constant protection, upkeep, upgrading, and whenever necessary, generous enlargement and expansion policies and programs. The endless expansion of the Islamic state connoted an endless increase in Muslim population. That, in turn, spelled out an increased demand for visiting the two cities and their Mosques, which further necessitated the incessant improvements and additions of the indispensable facilities along the routes to the pilgrimage sites and inside the two cities themselves. On top of what was needed to be rendered and kept in the best architectural and serviceable condition, it goes without saying, were *al-Masjid al-ḥarām* and the Prophet’s Mosque as the ends of each and every Muslim’s spiritual cravings.

Whoever was in charge of the holy cities, therefore, had an additional set of pressing responsibilities to be dutifully discharged. Such was an obligation and burden, rather than a privilege. Hence, a title of *kbādim al-Ḥaramayn* (the servant of the two holy sanctuaries or cities) was later invented in order to aptly reflect the real meaning and significance of the assumed responsibilities towards Mecca and Medina and their holy Mosques.

As a small digression, the first Muslim leader in history known for sure to have used the title *kbādim al-Ḥaramayn* was Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. AH 589/1193 AD), both as a means to attain closeness to God when he was fighting the Crusaders and hence, on behalf of the ‘Abbāsids, was disposing of the greatest challenge and misfortune the Muslim world has hitherto known (Fakkar 2015), and as a leader under whom the cities of Mecca and Medina and their holy Mosques were reborn and flourished, to the point that at that juncture,

according to Richard Bulliet (2015), pilgrimage to Mecca replaced the caliphate as the central unifying entity in Islam. However, according to some sources of Islamic history, the title *kbādim al-Ḥaramayn* as an attribute of the caliph (Muslim leader) had occasionally been used even prior to the time of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. Some of the prominent subsequent leaders who took up the same title were the Mamlūk sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf Abū l-Naṣr Barsbāy (d. AH 841/1438 AD) and the Ottoman sultan Selim I (d. AH 927/1520 AD). At any rate, it seems as though the *kbādim al-Ḥaramayn* designation was oscillating from being merely honorable and hereditary to being expressive and indicative of tributes for outstanding services rendered to the two holy cities and their holy Mosques, and by extension, to Islam and Muslims at large.

Apart from a few individuals and their rather isolated schemes, the relationship between the ‘Abbāsīd sovereigns and the city of Medina was at best average, lukewarm, and halfhearted. It could be described as interest-oriented, rather than genuine correlation and reciprocal involvement-oriented. An example of this propensity is the following act of Caliph al-Mahdī himself. When he was in Medina, during the pilgrimage and visit when he commissioned the expansion of the Prophet's Mosque,

He ordered that five hundred men descended from the Prophet's *anṣār* of Medina (helpers, the natives of the Medina city) be chosen as a special guard and helpers for him in Iraq. He assigned them salaries apart from their state allowances, and granted them an allotment of land when they arrived with him at Baghdad, which was known as the allotment of the *anṣār* (al-Ṭabarī 1989, 2:79).

Al-Mahdī was fully aware that not long ago during the caliphate of his father and predecessor, al-Manṣūr, most of the city of Medina under the leadership of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh called the Pure Soul (d. AH 146/763 AD), who represented the Ḥasanid branch of the ‘Alids, had rebelled against the newly formed ‘Abbāsīd establishment and was in war with the latter. So unfortunate was the conflict, and far-reaching its consequences, that it involved some of the most prominent members of the religious and intellectual leaderships in the state, many of whom were based in Medina. Consequently, the relationship between Medina – especially those citizens who sympathized with and supported the ‘Alids and their political cause, because during the ‘Abbāsīd propaganda to topple the Umayyads they had been courted by the former, and then in the aftermath of the

craved victory, were deceived and forsaken – and the ‘Abbāsids hit the lowest point. Following the failed insurgece and later the death of Caliph al-Manṣūr, whose reputation had been significantly dented by how he dealt with the former, conciliatory efforts were desperately needed, for Medina and its citizenry had to be brought on-board at all costs.

Caliph al-Mahdī’s expansion of the Prophet’s Mosque ought to be seen as one of such conciliatory efforts. Most of the other initiatives and programs of him are to be viewed in that same light as well. For that reason was he universally recognized and accepted as a generous, kind, and esteemed ruler, both in the private and public circles, and by both the friends and foes of the ‘Abbāsīd regime. This includes the ‘Alids, too. Hence, even the historians with an outright ‘Alid (Shī‘ī) penchant, such as al-Ya‘qūbī (2002, 2:274-281) and al-Mas‘ūdī (1982, 3:322), were reasonably supportive and benevolent towards him and his political legacy.

The first ‘Abbāsīds’ lukewarm and largely interest-based relationship with Medina and its Mosque was further exacerbated when the state commenced to disintegrate and the actual power fell into the hands of powerful regional leaders and sultans. This phenomenon started to occur most emphatically from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> AH/9<sup>th</sup> AD century, only about a century and a couple of decades after the establishment of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire. Moreover, that was a time when the first actual or quasi-independent states or sultanates began to emerge on the ruins of the dwindling caliphate. Those states broke off entirely from the central government or remained only nominally dependent upon the Caliph in Baghdad (Hitti 1996, 455). The matter reached something of an apogee when some of those states and sultanates later became so large and powerful that they made the caliphs in Baghdad enjoy but nominal command even over the capital, the symbol, and nucleus of the ‘Abbāsīd rule since its construction in the year AH 145/762 AD by Caliph al-Manṣūr.

The first of such independent regional rulers who left his mark on Medina and its Mosque was Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn (d. AH 271/884 AD), the founder of the Ṭūlūnid dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria between AH 255/868 AD and AH 293/905 AD. Even though the control of the Ṭūlūnid rulers over Medina was nominal and they had no actual army in the whole region, their names yet were mentioned

ritualistically and ceremonially on the pulpit of the Prophet's Mosque alongside the names of the reigning 'Abbāsid caliphs. Despite its nominal and titular character, the unprecedented development marked the beginning of an era when Mecca and Medina were to be almost on a permanent basis most influenced, and regularly even *de facto* controlled, by whoever ruled over Egypt: Ṭūlūnīs, Ikhshīdīs, Shī'ī Fāṭimīs, Ayyūbīs, Mamlūks and even Ottomans (Badr 1993, 2:127).

In passing, targeting the major mosques as a means for gaining political mileage is an old occurrence, almost as old as the earliest political disputes and military contests among Muslims. That the 'Abbāsid leaders were more than willing to partake in the trend, and yet to bring it to another level, testifies the following report of Ibn Kathīr (1985, 9:158). While Caliph al-Mahdī was once paying a visit to the great Mosque of Damascus which was regarded as a wonder of the world, he lamented: "The Umayyads outshone us (the 'Abbāsids) due to three things: this Mosque of theirs for which I know no equal on earth; due to the nobility of their adherents; and due to the personality of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz ('Umar II); by God, there will never be anyone like him among us." Other two 'Abbāsid caliphs, al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim (d. AH 228/842 AD), are also reported to have expressed a similar admiration for the Damascus Mosque when they, too, once visited the city (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 9:158).

Certainly, al-Mahdī's expansion of the Prophet's Mosque – as well as *al-Masjid al-ḥarām* – should be seen, apart from the established perspective of sincerely discharging his caliphal duties towards Islam and Muslims, as gesture politics as well, done for political reasons and intended to attract public attention in desperate attempt by the 'Abbāsids to exit from the shadow of the Umayyads and their Muslim civilizational inheritance. The trend continued unabated throughout the long and colorful history of Islam and its cultures and civilization.

Al-Mahdī's decision to inscribe on the southern courtyard wall of the Prophet's Mosque his name as the benefactor, a concise history of his expansion undertaking, and elaborate words of eulogy in the main for his own personality and rank which contained some Qur'ānic verses, are to be further viewed along the similar lines of gesture politics. Although al-Mahdī was not the first who inscribed Qur'ānic verses on the walls of the Mosque – and mosques in general – (such a highly controversial subject preceded him by approximately 70-85 years when the first Umayyad architectural masterpieces chiefly

in Syria and Palestine where built), he nonetheless was among those known to have contributed significantly to the permanent emergence of such a novel practice in Muslim architecture as recording patrons' names, lavish supplications for them, as well as recording buildings' histories on newly-erected buildings.

Before al-Mahdī, his father al-Manṣūr crowned his historic expansion of *al-Masjid al-ḥarām* by placing an inscription above one of the Mosque's gates. The inscription began with the name of Allah, praises of Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) and two Qur'ānic verses from chapter Āl 'Imrān, verses no. 96 and 97, on the origins and significance of *al-Masjid al-ḥarām*, and after supplications in favor of al-Manṣūr, the inscription cited the dates of the initiation and completion of the expansion in mosaic pieces of black and gold. Words suggesting that al-Manṣūr expanded the Mosque because he was a caring Caliph concerned about the wellbeing of his subjects, were also highlighted (al-Quāitī 2007, 84). Perhaps, the earliest building undertaking where the name of a patron was inscribed was the construction of the Dome of the Rock. On it, most probably, the name of the Umayyad caliph, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (d. AH 86/705 AD), was written, which however was later tampered with (Creswell 1989, 36).

However, Ibn al-Najjār (1981, 101) reported that it was 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (d. AH 101/720 AD) who, while reconstructing and enlarging the Prophet's Mosque on behalf of Caliph al-Walīd, was the first who made an inscription on the southern courtyard wall of the Mosque. Later, al-Mahdī inscribed his own addition right beneath that of 'Umar's. However, all things considered, it appears plausible that the entire inscription belonged in fact only to al-Mahdī. This could be corroborated by the following points.

Firstly, the alleged inscription of 'Umar entailed no specific name; it only referred to *'Abd Allāh Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (a servant of God, Commander of the faithfuls) which can be anyone. Moreover, al-Mahdī's full name was Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh. There is no word "'Abd Allāh" in al-Walīd's full name. Secondly, 'Umar's inscription did not state a construction date, nor any other relevant detail, whereas al-Mahdī's explicitly did, which suggests that the former was just a preface to the latter. Thirdly, no well-known historian, apart from Ibn al-Najjār, refers to 'Umar's inscription, whereas most of them plainly agree that al-Mahdī did inscribe his

name and other supplementary statements on the Mosque. Fourthly, the compositions and styles of the two inscriptions were such that they reasonably indicate that they were written as one piece, the first part (allegedly 'Umar's) being an introduction to the second one (al-Mahdi's) wherein the name of Caliph al-Mahdi was explicitly mentioned. That is why, in addition, they were positioned one beneath the other. Fifthly, neither 'Umar nor al-Walid was historically known as those inclined to producing inscriptions on their buildings, something that was not the case with al-Mahdi and other prominent 'Abbāsid rulers.

### **The Prophet's Mosque as a Victim of a Political Disintegration**

Following the disintegration of the 'Abbāsid central government and the breakup of its vast territories into a number of petty autonomous or pseudo-autonomous states and dynasties, the city of Medina and its Mosque, most of the time, were targeted as a source as well as means of support for the religious and political causes of a majority of those states and dynasties. Since around that time the Sunnī-Shī'ī conflicts were at their peak, assuming formal and institutional dimensions that spread across all levels of state power and governance, the Prophet's Mosque, too, especially in terms of its decoration strategies and contents, facilities provision, and overall religious and social performances, was affected by their increasing intensity and broadening range.

In other words, the Prophet's Mosque, which intrinsically since its inception possessed and radiated a universal at once physical and metaphysical meaning, purpose, and appeal, all of a sudden was attempted to be particularized, regionalized, and conceptually as well as functionally downgraded. Accordingly, it started to degenerate. It was significantly maltreated. From being an end and objective, it was attempted to become a mere means and outlet. From being an engine of change and a catalyst for civilizational awareness and progress, it was attempted to become an obstacle and impediment to the same. And finally, from being a symbol of the dynamism and innovation in the eclectic culture and civilization of Islam and its peoples, it was attempted to become a facilitator and sign of their inconsequentiality, lethargy, and stagnation.

Ultimately, the Mosque was subjected only to some erratic maintenance activities. No major expansion or overhaul of its built

form was undertaken until it was badly damaged in a fire in AH 886/1481 AD during the reign of the Mamlūks the epicenter of whose government (sultanate) was in Egypt. This by no means implies that the Mosque was never in need either of a considerable expansion or a renovation program during an entire period of 720 years (that was a period that separated Caliph al-Mahdī's expansion and that of the Mamlūks). However, it stands to reason that no regional ruler was in a position to actually rise to the challenge of effectively sustaining and upgrading the Mosque, to make it keep pace with the vibrant demands of the laws of history and civilization-making. The Mosque and its innate identity and mission were larger than all of them and their restricted political agendas. It kept them and their limited and localized scopes in the shadow of its universal and supernatural distinctiveness and objective. Historical accounts reveal that since Medina was a relatively small and economically challenged city, all the earlier expansions necessitated the use of international and imported workforce, expertise, and building materials. Likewise, finances from more than a few Islamic centers were needed for the purpose. However, virtually no subsequent ruler had what it takes, plus their apparent reluctance and prolonged political instability, to embark on a comprehensive Mosque sustainability and maintenance, and if necessary physical expansion, program.

Thus, from the era of al-Mahdī onwards, one can hear only about a prolonged architectural indifference, the various acts of misuse, and ill-treatment of the Mosque and its prestige, especially when it and the city of Medina came under the control of the Shī'ī Fāṭimīs (al-Quāitī 2007, 111-113), and some intermittent repair and maintenance works, such as repairing some interior walls as well as certain sections of the ceiling and the floor, which were affected by different 'Abbāsid sovereigns. (As said earlier, the remarkable Mamlūk works on the Mosque are beyond the scope of this article as they deserve an independent inquiry.) Medina and its Mosque were important because, as pointed out by Walker (2009, 8), both Mecca and Medina as the two sacred cities in Islam possessed huge symbolic significance. Any ruler could claim ultimate supremacy only if he controlled them, if his name as the ruling sovereign was mentioned on the *minbars* (pulpits) of the two holiest Mosques in Islam by imploring God to bestow His blessings on Him. This aspect of the *khuṭbah* (religious sermons delivered from *minbars*) and its

variations “is a vital tool for determining the history of dynasties” (Walker 2009, 8).

Having thus been unable, indisposed, incompetent or outright dishonest towards the true meaning of the Prophet's Mosque, most of the Muslim rulers ended up leaving their imprints by simply adding to the compound beautification and ornamentation of the Mosque by means of inscriptions, designs, decorative and serviceable objects, and structural substances. They did so because such was an affordable and at the same time meaningful and expedient, albeit superficial, course of action, for different intended ideas and messages could thereby be easily conveyed to the beholders, both explicitly and implicitly. However, so insignificant in the grand scheme of things were the feats in question that hardly any historian mentioned them in detail. It might yet have become a serious handicap for the Mosque and its proper functioning, which however most people failed to comprehend. Only when Ibn Jubayr visited Medina and its Mosque in AH 580/1184 AD did the mentioned problematic subject matter come to the fore as part of his detailed description of the Mosque. Ibn Jubayr (2001, 202) thus wrote:

The lower half of the south wall is cased with marble, tile on tile, of varying order and color; a splendid marquetry. The upper half is wholly inlaid with pieces of gold called *fusayfisā'* (mosaics) in which the artist has displayed amazing skill, producing shapes of trees in diverse forms, their branches laden with fruits. The whole Mosque is of this style, but the work in the south wall is more embellished. The wall looking on the court from the south side is of this manner, as also is that which does so from the north side. The west and east walls that overlook the court are wholly white and carved, and adorned with a band that contains various kinds of colors.

Without going into further details, Ibn Jubayr (2001, 202) simply concluded that “it would take too long to portray and describe the decorations of this blessed Mosque ...” Some potential folktales and even superstitious beliefs, with regard to some decorative and functional aspects of the Mosque, are likewise referred to. “God best knows the truth of all this,” was Ibn Jubayr's inference (Ibn Jubayr 2001, 200-203).

As for the sacred *rawdāb* (the area in the Mosque extending from the Prophet's house, wherein he was later buried, to his *minbar* or pulpit) which is described by the Prophet (pbuh) as one of the

gardens of Paradise, and the sacred chamber, originally one of the Prophet's houses, that enclosed the graves of the Prophet (pbuh), Abū Bakr and ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, Ibn Jubayr also described them as featuring numerous silver and fewer golden lamps. Their built forms were so wondrous, and decorative designs and patterns so captivating, that they were hard to portray or describe (Ibn Jubayr 2001, 198-203).

At the same time, however, Ibn Jubayr was able to discern that the said architectural and artistic state of the Mosque was rather a symptom, or an indication, of alarmingly serious spiritual disorders that were plaguing the city of Medina and the cities of the entire al-Ḥijāz region. For instance, he reported that when he was in Mecca in the month of Ramaḍān in AH 579/1184 AD – about 69 years before the establishment of the Mamlūk sultanate as yet another state within the ailing ʿAbbāsīd caliphate – as a sign of Muslim disunity and disintegration there were five simultaneous *tarāwīḥ* (the Prayer associated with the holy month of Ramaḍān) congregations inside *al-Masjid al-ḥarām*: the Shāfiʿī, which had precedence over the others, Ḥanafī, Ḥanbalī, Mālikī, and even the Zaydī congregation. The last was a Shīʿī branch that followed the Zaydī Islamic jurisprudence. Ibn Jubayr refers to the parts of the Mosque that belonged to those congregations, the *mīḥrābs* (praying niches) and the candles used for lighting and adornment at those specific locations (Ibn Jubayr 2001, 97).

Ibn Jubayr (2001, 71) thus lamented at one point that:

The greater number of the people of these al-Ḥijāz and other lands are sectaries and schismatics who have no religion, and who have separated in various doctrines. They treat the pilgrims in a manner in which they do not treat the Christians and Jews under tribute, seizing most of the provisions they have collected, robbing them and finding cause to divest them of all they have.

Also:

The traveler by this way faces danger and oppression. Far otherwise has God decreed the sharing in that place of his indulgence. How can it be that the House of God should now be in the hands of people who use it as an unlawful source of livelihood, making it a means of illicitly claiming and seizing property, and detaining the pilgrims on its account, thus bringing them to humbleness and abject poverty.

May God soon correct and purify this place by relieving the Muslims of these destructive schismatics with the swords of the Almohades (a puritanical Muslim dynasty ruling in Spain and northern Africa during the 6<sup>th</sup> AH/12<sup>th</sup> AD and 7<sup>th</sup> AH/13<sup>th</sup> AD centuries) (Ibn Jubayr 2001, 73).

About the *amīr* of Mecca, Ibn Jubayr (2001, 72) also wrote: "Such was his speech, as if God's Haram were an heirloom in his hand and lawfully his to let to the pilgrims." Consequently, Ibn Jubayr inferred that "there is no Islam save in the Maghrib [Muslim West where the Almohades ruled] lands."

In the same vein, as a final point, Ibn Jubayr presented a remarkable lesson in the character of true Muslim architecture when he said about the Prophet's Mosque, and especially the Prophet's tomb inside it, that its charge was more noble and the Prophet's resting-place more exalted "than all that adorns it" (Ibn Jubayr 2001, 202). The tacit message of Ibn Jubayr thus was that the architecture of the Mosque – and indeed the whole realm of Muslim architecture, both as a theory and sensory reality – ought to submit to the authority of the transcendent Islamic message and its Prophet (pbuh) only, rising above the stifling confines of deadening symbolism, overindulgence and theoretical as well as practical dryness and formalism. In Islam, it follows, ultimate beauty is not in colors, tones, sounds, and shapes. Rather, it is in piety, righteousness, and virtue. Its repositories are not walls, ceilings, floors, vessels, or any other material objects – including human and animal bodies – but rather hearts, souls, and minds. In Islam and its art and architecture, therefore, the matter is to be subservient to the soul, the physical form to the spiritual and cerebral function, meaning, and purpose. Accordingly, the Prophet (pbuh) declared that God is beautiful and He loves beauty (Muslim, "al-Īmān," 147). One of His beautiful names is *Jamīl* (Beautiful). Hence, man is told thus that beauty and the beautiful on earth are only those things, objects, ideas, representations, experiences, and milieus as are in full conformity with the highest metaphysical standards and criteria of beauty. On the same note, the Prophet (pbuh) unsurprisingly proclaimed to the effect that if devoid of a required spiritual dimension, generally outward appearances count for nothing in the spiritual kingdom. He said: "Verily, Allah does not look into your appearances or your wealth, but He looks into your hearts and your deeds" (Muslim, "al-Birr wa-l-ṣīlah," 33).

In view of that, the way the Prophet's Mosque functioned and some of its sectors architecturally and artistically looked like amid the paralyzing degeneration and division of the Muslim community, was rather offensive to the Islamic worldview and the body of its teachings and values. Similarly, it was offensive to the presence of the Prophet's grave inside it. So, therefore, when a first major fire in AH 654/1256 AD seriously damaged the section of the Mosque containing the Prophet's tomb, which was excessively embellished and ornamented and with which, mainly due to Shī'ī elements, some inappropriate activities were associated, a great many people, including scholars, interpreted the unfortunate event as an act of God aimed to purify the tomb as well as the Mosque of those inappropriate elements and activities (al-Samhūdī 1997, 2:600). Al-Samhūdī (1997, 2:600), who in principle agreed with those scholars, wrote that at that time Medina and its Mosque were under the firm control of the Shī'ah, with the city's magistrate or judge (*qāḍī*) and *khaṭīb* (the person who delivered sermons in the Mosque) being from them. The situation was such that nobody from the Sunnī ranks was able to openly study the Sunnī books.

### **Conclusion**

As soon as their overthrow of the Umayyads was complete, the 'Abbāsids seem to have busied themselves with improving the architectural condition of the Prophet's Mosque. They did so, partly, on account of them seeing the matter as part of their responsibilities towards the Mosque, the holy city of Medina, and the whole Muslim community (*ummah*), and, partly, on account of them seeing it expedient to draw on the extraordinary at once spiritual and civilizational legacy of the Mosque and the city of Medina for their freshly unveiled political goals and agendas. Thus, according to some unconvincing accounts, the first 'Abbāsīd caliph, al-Saffāḥ, did somewhat expand the Mosque. However, regardless of the authenticity, or otherwise, of the accounts, they are reticent about the nature and scope of the assignment. The second caliph al-Manṣūr is also reported to have intended to expand the Mosque, but was prevented from doing so by his passing away. It is highly probable that it was due to this that his son and successor, al-Mahdī, embarked on a major expansion of the Mosque merely two years after his enthronement. Some planning and preparation works might have started even earlier.

After Caliph al-Mahdī, the Mosque did not undergo any major renovation or expansion works until it was seriously damaged by two major fires, in AH 654/1256 AD and in AH 886/1481 AD. Following the first fire, the Mosque, including the Prophet's tomb or his sacred burial chamber, needed to be extensively overhauled. To many scholars, nonetheless, that did not amount to a major expansion. It was only after the second fire, during the reign of the Mamlūk sultan Qāyrbāy, that a next large expansion was undertaken. A period of about 720 years separated between Caliph al-Mahdī's expansion and that of Sultan Qāyrbāy. In addition, numerous minor repairs and improvements were carried out during the reigns of al-Mahdī's successors up till the first inferno.

All things considered, the contributions of the 'Abbāsids to the development and architecture of the Prophet's Mosque were not as outstanding as one might expect. Generally speaking, their legacy in relation to the Mosque leaves a lot to be desired. The blame, however, is not to be attributed as much to the 'Abbāsids themselves as to the general circumstances in the state that ultimately incapacitated the 'Abbāsīd administration from performing some of its essential duties and responsibilities. For the creation and fostering of the latter, many responsible parties were to share culpability. The 'Abbāsids were only one of them.

During a long period of political instability and disintegration – especially during the latter periods which were fraught with the rapid weakening and ultimate disintegration of the 'Abbāsīd state and its centralized government in Baghdad, following which many petty dynasties of Arab, Turkish or Persian origin were parceling out the domains of the Caliph both in the east and the west – neither the 'Abbāsīd sovereigns nor any of the regional rulers were in a position to fully rise to the challenge of effectively sustaining and upgrading the Mosque, to make it keep pace with the vibrant demands of the laws of history and civilization-making. The Mosque and its innate identity and mission were larger and more commanding than all of them and their restricted political agendas. It kept them and their limited and localized scopes in the shadow of its universal and supernatural predisposition, meaning and purpose. In addition, it was not uncommon that the Mosque was attempted to be manipulated and clearly mistreated and misused by some malevolent religious and political protagonists for the sake of their bigoted and myopic religious and socio-political ends.

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