

THE EFFECT OF THE ABBASIDS' POLITICAL DISINTEGRATION ON THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROPHET'S MOSQUE

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Abstract

This article discusses the contributions of the Abbasid caliphs to the architectural development of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah. Those contributions began almost as early as the Abbasid caliphal government had officially emerged as the successor to the Umayyads, and ended with a major rebuilding and renovation work in 887 AH/1482 CE, about 35 years before the ultimate dissolution of the Abbasid regime. The last work was executed by the Mamluk rulers as the Abbasid proxies. The paper focuses on discussing the consequences and implications of a political disintegration during the Abbasid era for the architectural development and serviceability of the mosque. The article concludes that the Abbasid contributions to the architectural development of the Mosque were rather inadequate. The blame is to be attributed partly to the Abbasids themselves and partly to the prevalent circumstances in the state that eventually incapacitated the Abbasid government from performing its entrusted duties and responsibilities. However, even for the creation and fostering of the latter, it was again the Abbasids who more than anybody else are to be held accountable.

[Artikel ini membahas peran para khalifah Abbasiyah dalam pengembangan arsitektur Masjid Nabawi di Madinah. Kontribusi mereka dimulai sejak awal pemerintahan Abbasiyah muncul sebagai penerus Umayyah dan berakhir dengan renovasi besar pada 887 H/1482 M, sekitar tiga dasawarsa menjelang berakhirnya pemerintahan Abbasiyah di Mesir. Pekerjaan terakhir

dilakukan oleh penguasa Mamluk sebagai wakil Dinasti Abbasiyah. Fokus makalah ini adalah konsekuensi dan implikasi dari disintegrasi politik selama era Abbasiyah terhadap pengembangan arsitektur dan fungsi Masjid Nabawi. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa kontribusi Dinasti Abbasiyah untuk pengembangan arsitektur Masjid Nabawi kurang memadai, sebagai cerminan ketidakmampuan para khalifah Abbasiyah menjalankan peran, fungsi, dan tanggung jawabnya. Bahkan sebenarnya dalam renovasi yang terakhir pun, orang lain yang bertanggung jawab.]

Keywords: The Abbasids, the Prophet's Mosque, Madinah, political disintegration

A. Introduction

When first built by the Prophet (PBUH), the central mosque in Madinah was incredibly simple. It was just a roofless and unpaved enclosure. However, as the needs and capacities of the first Muslim community in Madinah both intensified and diversified, the Mosque, which was meant to function as a community development centre, responded by considerably altering its architectural morphology to meet the pressing demands of the nascent community and its civilization-building project in Madinah. 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 centre *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.¹ While responding to the challenges posed to it by 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

¹ Spahic Omer, *The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Urbanization of Madinah* (Selangor: IIUM Press, 2013), p. 68.

poorest and homeless in Madinah – 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 *dakkaḥ* 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.²

Before the Abbasids, the Prophet's Mosque was significantly expanded three times, by Caliphs 'Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 24 AH/644 CE), 'Uthman b. 'Affan (d. 36 AH/656 CE), al-Walid b. 'Abd al-Malik (d. 97 AH/ 715 CE). The first two caliphs represented the epoch of the four rightly-guided caliphs (*al-ḥulafā' al-rashīdun*), and the third caliph expressed the Umayyad period which marked a drastic departure from the religious and political character as well as the 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 fibre of a different era and the spiritual as well as socio-political predisposition of its generations. It describes 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-Haram in Makkah 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 centre 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 Abbasids 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

² 'Alī ibn 'Abdillāh al-Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-Wafā' bi-Akbbār Dār al-Muṣṭafā*, vol. II (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1997), pp. 388–98.

was the Abbasid rule that neither consistent nor sustainable approaches, nor tactics, could have been expected from them. The second phase of the Abbasid rule is regarded as a period 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 article 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 Abbasid caliphate. The discussion will revolve around the following three themes: most important aspects of the Abbasid 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, some studies treat the architectural contributions of the Abbasids 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 a 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 Abbasids and the Mosque in a sheer descriptive and historical manner. Little attention was given to a potential analytical and critical dimensions of the subject in question. Thus, this article aims as much at delving into some 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 Muhammad Ibn Jubayr (d. 614 AH/1217 CE), a famous Spanish Muslim traveller who in his travel chronicle "The Travels of Ibn Jubayr". He described the pilgrimage he made to Makkah and Madinah, 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 traveller 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 Abbasids 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 Abbasids 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 many such works were referred to as well in this article wherever appropriate. Indeed, 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 encyclopaedic 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 *Imārah wa-Tawṣī'at al-Masjid al-Nabawī al-Sharīf 'Abr al-Tārikh*" (*The Architecture and Expansions of the Noble Prophet's Mosque throughout History*) by Najī Muhammad al-Ansari, and *Al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah: Taṭawwuruhā al-'Umrānī wa-Turāthuhā al-Mi'mārī* (*Luminous Madinah: Its Urban Growth and Architectural Heritage*) by Mustafa Salih Lam'ī. Though indirectly related to the subject, Doris Behrens-Abouseif's excellent article titled "Qaytbay's Madrasahs in the Holy Cities and the Evolution of Haram Architecture", published in *Mamluk Studies Review* in 1999, No. 3, pp. 129-149, also needs 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 Abbasids 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.

B. Main Aspects of the Abbasid Architectural Contributions to the Prophet's Mosque

The Abbasid caliphate signified the third form of the Muslim rule to succeed Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), after the rightly-guided caliphs (11-40 AH/632-661 CE) and the Umayyad caliphate (41-132 AH/661-750 CE). They came to power in 132 AH/750 CE, having earlier overthrown the Umayyads. They made the region of modern-day Iraq the epicentre of their rule, building the city of Baghdad as their capital where the political and economic centre of power was instantly

transferred from Damascus, Syria, the nucleus of the previous Umayyad regime. The Abbasids clung to power until they were destroyed by the Mongol invasion in 656 AH/1258 CE. Hulagu Khan sacked Baghdad on February 10, 1258 CE (656 AH), causing great loss of life. Al-Musta'sim (d. 656 AH/1258 CE), the last reigning Abbasid caliph in Baghdad was then executed on February 20, 1258 CE. The Abbasids still maintained a feeble show of authority, confined to religious matters in Egypt under the powerful Mamluk dynasty. However their ceremonial and titular caliphate, as it was recognised at that juncture, finally disappeared with al-Mutawakkil III (d. 923 AH/1517 CE), who was carried away as a prisoner to Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I.³ Hence, the end of the Abbasid caliphate spelt the end of the Mamluk state and *vice versa*.

Just as during the Umayyad Caliphate, the city of Madinah, which served as the capital of the nascent Muslim state from the beginning until 36 AH/656 CE, was a distant provincial city during the Abbasid 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, the intellectual hub in the hearts and minds of all Muslims, Madinah 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 centres 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 Madinah was standing for, the Prophet's Mosque always stood at the epicentre of all city's events.

Before the Abbasids and their Muslim leadership, the Prophet's Mosque was significantly expanded three times. When the Abbasids assumed authority over the Muslim state, they knew that they had to subtly deal with the intrinsic character and predilections of Madinah and its towering legacies. They were neither trying to alter or to entirely

³ Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1937), pp. 484–89.

control them, for doing so impossible nor they were leaving them to burgeon and operate alone within the framework of a new political climate and outlook, for doing so at once unproductive and detrimental to the Abbasid 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 Madinah in particular, had to be adopted.

Thus, the Abbasid relationship with Madinah, 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 Abbasid 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 victimised. 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 656 AH/1258 CE is regarded as the "Islamic golden age".⁴

On the whole, the Abbasid general architectural contributions to the Prophet's Mosque, as outlined both by classical and modern historians, such as al-Samahudi,⁵ Ibn Kathir,⁶ al-Ya'qūbī,⁷ al-Ṭabarī,⁸ Ibn al-Najjār,⁹

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 197–316; Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 38.

⁵ Al-Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-Wafā'*, II: 539.

⁶ Abu al-Fida' ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāyah wa 'l-Nihāyah*, vol. X (Beirut: Dār al-Maktab al-'Ilmiyyah, 1985), p. 135.

⁷ Aḥmad ibn Ishaq al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh al-Ya'qūbī*, vol. II (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), p. 277.

⁸ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Tabarī*, vol. II, trans. by John Alden Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 79.

⁹ Muhammad ibn Maḥmūd ibn al-Najjār, *al-Durrah al-Thāminah* (Makkah: Maktabah al-Thaqafah, 1981), pp. 103–05.

al-Qu'aiti,¹⁰ al-Ansari,¹¹ Badr¹² and others, are as follows.

Al-Mahdi (d. 169 AH/785 CE), the third Abbasid caliph, undertook a major extension of the Mosque that lasted from 161 AH/778 CE till 165 AH/781 CE. According to some accounts, his father and second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (d. 159 AH/775 CE), intended to do the same, but was overtaken by death. Hence, his son and successor, al-Mahdi, 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 Abbasid caliph, al-Saffah (d. 137 AH/754 CE), 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.¹³

As was the case with all former major Mosque expansions, for Caliph al-Mahdi'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 Sham region (Syria and Palestine). According to al-Qu'aiti,¹⁴ though several sources have quoted that about 50 meters were added to the structure of Caliph al-Walid – 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

¹⁰ Sultan Ghalib al-Qu'aiti, *The Holy Cities, the Pilgrimage and the World of Islam* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007), pp. 105–10.

¹¹ Najī Muhammad al-Anṣārī, *‘Imārah wa-Tawṣī‘at al-Masjid al-Nabawī al-Sharīf ‘Abr al-Tārīkh* (Madinah: Nadi al-Madinah al-Munawwarah al-‘Adabi, 1996), pp. 111–18.

¹² ‘Abd al-Basīṭ Badr, *al-Tārīkh al-Shamīl li’l-Madinah al-Munawwarah*, vol. II (Madinah, 1993), p. 65.

¹³ Al-Samhūdī, *Wafā‘ al-Wafā‘*, II: 536.

¹⁴ Al-Qu'aiti, *The Holy Cities*, p. 106.

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.¹⁵

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-Mahdi, along with a brief description of the expansion project and its history, was inscribed on the walls of the Mosque.¹⁶ The same building materials as those employed by Caliph al-Walid in the earlier expansion were used for this expansion as well.¹⁷ They were: cut and chiselled 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'qūbī¹⁸, 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.¹⁹

The enclosure of the *maqsūrah* (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 *mihrab* or praying niche area), which was first built by Caliph 'Uthman, was also rebuilt after its floor level had been compacted to be even with the rest of the Mosque's area that surrounded it.²⁰ Ibn Kathir²¹ and al-Tabari²², however, only mention that the *maqsūrah* was demolished and done away with (*aḡalaba*), without referring to its subsequent rebuilding.

Al-Mahdi also wanted to remove six steps to the *minbar* (pulpit), which the Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyah b. Abi Sufyan (d. 61 AH/680 CE), 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 Malik b. Anas (d. 179 AH/795 CE), the leading scholar of Madinah, because the planned

¹⁵ Muḥammad Kamal Ismā'īl and Salmá Samar Damlūji, *The Architecture of the Prophet's Holy Mosque al-Madinah* (London: Hazar, 1998), p. 45.

¹⁶ Al-Najjār, *al-Durrab*, p. 104; al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, II: 277.

¹⁷ Hamad Dawah, *al-Madinah al-Munawwarah fi'l-Fikr al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2006), p. 193.

¹⁸ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, II: 227.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Al-Qu'aīti, *The Holy Cities*, p. 106; al-Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-Wafā'*, II: 539.

²¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah*, X: 135.

²² Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Tabari*, II: 79.

action was bound to cause damage to the logs on which the original *minbar* had been built.²³ According to al-Tabari,²⁴ al-Mahdi was told by Malik b. Anas that “the nails had penetrated both the new wood which Mu’awiyah 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-Mahdi left it alone.”

Following this expansion by al-Mahdi, 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 *Imam* (prayer leader) and the *Amir* to the *maqsūrah*. In its courtyard, the Mosque also had 64 conduits or gutters (*balla’ah*) for regulating rainwater.²⁵ The three square minarets erected during al-Walid’s expansion remained unaltered.²⁶

After Caliph al-Mahdi, the Mosque was not significantly enlarged or expanded until it was destroyed by a second major fire in 886 AH/1481 CE during the reign of the Mamluk sultan Qayit Bey (d. 902 AH/1496 CE), a period of about 720 years. It was only then that a next expansion was undertaken. (During a first major fire in 654 AH/1256 CE, several sections of the Mosque needed to be significantly overhauled, including the Prophet’s tomb or his sacred burial chamber, but to most scholars²⁷ that did not amount to a major expansion.) However, scores of noteworthy repairs and improvements were carried out during the reigns of al-Mahdi’s successors.

For example, Caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 194 AH/809 CE) is reported to have ordered for the ceiling of the Mosque by the Prophet’s tomb to be repaired. Similarly, Caliph al-Ma’mun (d. 218 AH/833 CE) did some general work on the Mosque to which it is sometimes referred as repairs and improvements, and other times as a minor expansion. Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 247 AH/861 CE) had commissioned the tiling of the floor of the Prophet’s tomb in white marble during 246 AH/860 CE. However, according to some scholars, it was the whole floor of the

²³ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah*, X: 135.

²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, II: 79.

²⁵ Al-Najjār, *Al-Durrah*, p. 105.

²⁶ Ismā’il and Damlūji, *The Architecture*, p. 45.

²⁷ Dawah, *al-Madīnah*, p. 194.

Mosque that was tiled in white marble, while its walls were repaired with mosaic inlay. Besides, a marble dado was added running at the height of 175 centimetres. Following this, Caliph al-Mu'tadid (d. 290 AH/902 CE) had the eastern façade overlooking the courtyard of the Mosque repaired in 282 AH/895 CE. Caliph al-Muqtafi (d. 555 AH/1160 CE) had seen in 548 AH/1153 CE to the renewal of the marble on the lower section of the exterior wall around the Prophet's tomb. Caliph al-Mustadi' (d. 575 AH/1180 CE) adorned the walls of the Prophet's tomb with marble. Caliph al-Nasir (d. 622 AH/1225 CE) in 576 AH/1180 CE rebuilt the eastern wall of the north-eastern minaret and constructed a dome in the middle of the courtyard, created a space for storing and kept valuable books and copies of the Quran. The Umayyad *minbar* was also then renovated.²⁸ Several notable Mamluk works on the Mosque prior to 886 AH/1481 CE and afterwards -- a period technically still regarded as part of the Abbasid era -- are not covered in this article because, on account of their volume and complexity, they merit a separate comprehensive study.

Ibn Jubayr, a famous Spanish Muslim traveller who traversed much of the Muslim world from 578 AH/ 1182 CE to 581 AH/ 1185 CE, described the Prophet's Mosque after he had visited Madinah in 580 AH/1184 CE 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-Qu'aiti²⁹ as early as after the expansion of the Mosque by the third Caliph 'Uthman, 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-Ya'qūbī believe and record in his *Tārīkh* that some columns were of marble – as

²⁸ Husayn 'Abdullah Ba Salamah, *Tārīkh 'Imārat al-Masjid al-Ḥarām bimā Iḥṭawā* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyah, 2001), p. 504; Ismā'īl and Damlūji, *The Architecture*, p. 46; al-Qu'aiti, *The Holy Cities*, p. 107.

²⁹ al-Qu'aiti, *The Holy Cities*, p. 75.

mentioned earlier. The southern section of the Mosque that had five rows of porticoes was enfolded by a *maqsūrah* that flanked its length from west to east and in which there was a *mihrab*. 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.³⁰

Since especially the latter periods of the Abbasid 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 Madinah was becoming increasingly isolated from the Abbasid 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 Sunni-Shi'a 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.

C. An Architectural Inadequacy

Notwithstanding the above-said contributions of the Abbasids to the development and architecture of the Prophet's Mosque, it cannot be said about them that they were adequate. On the whole, their legacy concerning the Mosque leaves a lot to be desired. The blame is to be attributed partly to the Abbasids themselves and partly to the general conditions in the state that eventually incapacitated the Abbasid administration from performing its entrusted duties and responsibilities. For the creation and fostering of the latter, however, it was again the Abbasids who more than anybody else are to be held responsible.

³⁰ Muhammad Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. by Roland Broadhurst (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2001), pp. 198–201.

A sign of such an inadequacy is the fact that many historians often vastly disagree as to which Abbasid sovereign did exactly what to the Mosque. Although Caliph al-Mahdi 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 Abbasid contributions to the Mosque were more reflective of and commensurate with, the degree and proportion of the Abbasid 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 Abbasids 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-Mahdi, 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-Ḥaram* in Makkah 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 dinars (gold) which were brought from Iraq, Egypt and Yemen, but most of which had to be spent for the expansion of *al-Masjid al-Ḥaram*. So complex and demanding was the expansion in Makkah that al-Mahdi 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*)."³¹

Both Makkah and Madinah were the places of seasonal as well as unceasing pilgrimages: *hajj*, *ʿumrah* and visits or *ṣiyarah* 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

³¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, II: 78; Ba Salamah, *Tārīkh Imārat al-Masjid*, pp. 45–5.

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, spelt 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-Haram 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 *khadīm al-ḥaramayn* (the servant of the two holy sanctuaries or cities) was later invented to aptly reflect the real meaning and significance of the assumed responsibilities towards Makkah and Madinah and their Holy Mosques.

As a small digression, the first Muslim leader in history known for sure to have used the title *khadīm al-ḥaramayn* was Salahuddin al-Ayyubi (d. 589 AH/1193 CE), both as a means to attain closeness to God when he was fighting the Crusaders and hence, on behalf of the Abbasids, was disposing of the greatest challenge and misfortune the Muslim world has hitherto known, and as a leader under whom the cities of Makkah and Madinah and their holy Mosques were reborn and flourished, to the point that at that juncture pilgrimage to Makkah replaced the caliphate as the central unifying entity in Islam. However, according to some sources of Islamic history, the title *khadīm al-ḥaramayn* as an attribute of the Caliph (Muslim leader) had occasionally been used even before the time of Salahuddin al-Ayyubi. Some of the prominent subsequent leaders who took up the same title were the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf Abu Nasr Barsbay (d. 841 AH/1438 CE) and the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (d. 927 AH/1520 CE).³² At any rate, it seems as though the *khadīm al-ḥaramayn* designation was oscillating from being merely honourable and

³² Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Alan Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 511.

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 Abbasid sovereigns and the city of Madinah was at best average, lukewarm and half-hearted. 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-Mahdi himself. When he was in Madinah, 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 *anṣar* (helpers, the natives of the Madinah city) of Madinah 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 in Baghdad, which was known as the allotment of the *anṣar*."³³

Al-Mahdi was fully aware that not long ago during the caliphate of his father and predecessor, al-Mansur, most of the city of Madinah under the leadership of Muhammad b. 'Abdullah called the Pure Soul (d. 146 AH/763 CE), who represented the Hasanid branch of the 'Alids, had rebelled against the newly formed Abbasid establishment and was at 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 Madinah. Consequently, the relationship between Madinah – especially those citizens who sympathized with and supported the 'Alids and their political cause, because during the Abbasid 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 Abbasids hit the lowest point. Following the failed insurgence and later the death of Caliph al-Mansur, whose reputation had been significantly dented by how he dealt with the former, conciliatory efforts were desperately needed, for Madinah and its citizenry had to be brought onboard at all costs.

Caliph al-Mahdi's expansion of the Prophet's Mosque ought to

³³ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, II: 79.

be seen as one of such conciliatory efforts. Most of the other initiatives and programs of his are to be viewed in that same light as well. For that reason, he was universally recognised 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 Abbasid regime. This includes the 'Alids, too. Hence, even the historians with an outright 'Alid (Shi'ah) penchant, such as al-Ya'qūbī³⁴ and al-Mas'ūdī³⁵, were reasonably supportive and benevolent towards him and his political legacy.

The first Abbasids' lukewarm and largely interest-based relationship with Madinah 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 3rd AH/9th CE century, only about a century and a couple of decades after the establishment of the Abbasid 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. 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 Abbasid rule since its construction in the year 145 AH/762 CE by Caliph al-Mansur.

The first of such independent regional rulers who left his mark on Madinah and its Mosque was Ahmad b. Tulun (d. 271 AH/884 CE), the founder of the Tulunid dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria between 255 AH/868 CE and 293 AH/905 CE. Even though the control of the Tulunid rulers over Madinah 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 Abbasid caliphs. Despite its nominal and titular character, the unprecedented development marked the beginning of an era when Makkah and Madinah were to be almost on a permanent basis

³⁴ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, II: 274–81.

³⁵ Abu al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Mas'ūdī, *Murāj al-Dhahab*, vol. III (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1982), p. 322.

most influenced, and regularly even *de facto* controlled, by whoever ruled over Egypt: Tulunids, Ikhshidids, Shi'ah Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamluks and even Ottomans.³⁶

In passing, targeting the major mosques as a means of gaining political mileage is an old occurrence, almost as old as the earliest political disputes and military contests among Muslims. The Abbasid leaders were more than willing to partake in the trend, and yet to bring it to another level, testifies the following report of Ibn Kathir.³⁷ While Caliph al-Mahdi 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 Abbasids) 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 b. 'Abd al-'Aziz ('Umar II); by God, there will never be anyone like him among us." Other two Abbasid caliphs, al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim (d. 228 AH/842 CE), are also reported to have expressed a similar admiration for the Damascus Mosque when they, too, once visited the city.³⁸

Certainly, al-Mahdi's expansion of the Prophet's Mosque – as well as *al-Masjid al-Haram* – 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 Abbasids to exit from the shadow of the Umayyads and their Muslim civilizational inheritance. The trend continued unabated throughout the long and colourful history of Islam and its cultures and civilisation.

Al-Mahdi'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 Quranic verses, are to be further viewed along the similar lines of gesture politics. Although al-Mahdi was not the first who inscribed Quranic 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

³⁶ Badr, *al-Tārikh al-Shamīl*, II: 127.

³⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah*, X: 158.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

architectural masterpieces chiefly in Syria and Palestine were 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-Mahdi, his father al-Mansur crowned his historic expansion of *al-Masjid al-Ḥaram* by placing an inscription above one of the Mosque's gates. The inscription began with the name of Allah, praises of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and two Quranic verses from chapter Alu 'Imran, verses No. 96 and 97, on the origins and significance of *al-Masjid al-Ḥaram*, and after supplications in favor of al-Mansur, the inscription cited the dates of the initiation and completion of the expansion in mosaic pieces of black and gold. Words were suggesting that al-Mansur expanded the Mosque because he was a caring Caliph concerned about the wellbeing of his subjects, were also highlighted.³⁹ 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 b. Marwan (d. 86 AH/705 CE), was written, which however was later tampered with.⁴⁰

However, Ibn al-Najjār⁴¹ reported that it was 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz ('Umar II) (d. 101 AH/720 CE) who, while reconstructing and enlarging the Prophet's Mosque on behalf of Caliph al-Walid, was the first who made an inscription on the southern courtyard wall of the Mosque. Later, al-Mahdi inscribed his addition right beneath that of 'Umar's. However, all things considered, it appears plausible that the entire inscription belonged in fact only to al-Mahdi. This could be corroborated by the following points.

Firstly, the alleged inscription of 'Umar entailed no specific name; it only referred to *'Abdullah Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (a servant of God, Commander of the faithful) which can be anyone. Moreover, al-Mahdi's full name was Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad b. 'Abdullah. There is no word "Abdullah" in al-Walid's full name. Secondly, 'Umar's inscription did not state a construction date, nor any other relevant detail, whereas al-

³⁹ Al-Qu'aiti, *The Holy Cities*, p. 84.

⁴⁰ James W. Allan and K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), p. 36.

⁴¹ Al-Najjār, *Al-Durrah*, p. 101.

Mahdi'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-Mahdi 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 were historically known as those inclined to produce inscriptions on their buildings, something that was not the case with al-Mahdi and other prominent Abbasid rulers.

D. The Prophet's Mosque as a Victim of a Political Disintegration

Following the disintegration of the Abbasid central government and the breakup of its vast territories into a number of petty autonomous or pseudo-autonomous states and dynasties, the city of Madinah 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 Sunni-Shi'ah 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 were attempted to be particularised, 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 civilisation 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 severely damaged in a fire in 886 AH/1481 during the reign of the Mamluks the epicentre 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-Mahdi's expansion and that of the Mamluks). 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 localised scopes in the shadow of its universal and supernatural distinctiveness and objective. Historical accounts reveal that since Madinah was a relatively small and economically challenged city, all the previous expansions necessitated the use of international and imported workforce, expertise and building materials. Likewise, finances from more than a few Islamic centres 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-Mahdi 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 Madinah came under the control of the Shi'ah Fatimids,⁴² 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 Abbasid sovereigns. (As said earlier, the remarkable Mamluk works on the Mosque are beyond the scope of this article as they deserve an independent inquiry.) Madinah and its Mosque were

⁴² *Ibid.*

important because, as pointed out by Walker,⁴³ both Makkah and Madinah 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 *khutbah* (religious sermons delivered from *minbars*) and its variations “is a vital tool for determining the history of dynasties.”⁴⁴

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, a Spanish Muslim traveller, visited Madinah and its Mosque in 580 AH/1184 CE did the mentioned problematic subject matter come to the fore as part of his detailed description of the Mosque. Ibn Jubayr thus wrote: “The lower half of the south wall is cased with marble, tile on tile, of varying order and colour; a splendid marquetry. The upper half is wholly inlaid with pieces of gold called *fusayfisa* (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 in 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 colours.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Paul E. Walker, *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs: Festival Sermons of the Ismaili Imams* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Jubayr, *The Travels*, p. 202.

Without going into further details, Ibn Jubayr simply concluded that “it would take too long to portray and describe the decorations of this blessed Mosque...”⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

As for the sacred *Rawḍah* (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), Abu Bakr and ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, 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.⁴⁸

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 Madinah and the cities of the entire Hijaz region. For instance, he reported that when he was in Makkah in the month of Ramadan in 579 AH/1184 CE – about 69 years before the establishment of the Mamluk sultanate as yet another state within the ailing Abbasid caliphate -- as a sign of Muslim disunity and disintegration there were five simultaneous *Tarāwīḥ* (the Prayer associated with the holy month of Ramadan) congregations inside *al-Masjid al-Haram*: the Shafi’i, which had precedence over the others, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and even the Zaydi congregation. The last was a Shi’a branch that followed the Zaydi Islamic jurisprudence. Ibn Jubayr refers to the parts of the Mosque that belonged to those congregations, the *mibrabs* (praying niches) and the candles used for lighting and adornment at those specific locations.⁴⁹

Ibn Jubayr thus lamented at one point that “the greater number of the people of these Hijaz and other lands are sectaries and schismatics who have no religion, and who have separated in various doctrines. They

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 198–203.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

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 traveller 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 be 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 6th AH/ 12th CE and 7th AH/ 13th centuries).”⁵⁰ About the Emir of Makkah, Ibn Jubayr 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.”⁵¹

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 nobler and the Prophet’s resting-place more exalted “than all that adorns it”. 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 colours, 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 of the spiritual and cerebral function, meaning and purpose. Accordingly, the Prophet (PBUH) declared that God is beautiful

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 71–3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

and He loves beauty.⁵² One of His beautiful names is *Jamal* (beauty). 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.”⁵³

In view of that, the way the Prophet’s Mosque functioned and some of its sectors architecturally and artistically looked like amid the paralysing 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 654 AH/1256 CE seriously damaged the section of the Mosque containing the Prophet’s tomb, which was excessively embellished and ornamented and with which, mainly due to Shi’a 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.⁵⁴ Al-Samahudi, who in principle agreed with those scholars, wrote that at that time Madinah and its Mosque were under the firm control of the Shi’a, with the city’s magistrate or judge (*qāḍī*) and *khatīb* (the person who delivered sermons in the Mosque) being from them. The situation was such that nobody from the Sunni ranks was able to study the Sunni books openly.⁵⁵

E. Concluding Remarks

As soon as their overthrow of the Umayyads was complete, the Abbasids 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

⁵² Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2005), p. 131.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Al-Samhūdī, *Wafā‘ al-Wafā‘*, II: 600.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Mosque, the holy city of Madinah, 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 Madinah for their freshly unveiled political goals and agendas. Thus, according to some unconvincing accounts, the first Abbasid caliph, al-Saffah, 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-Mansur 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-Mahdi, 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-Mahdi, the Mosque did not undergo any major renovation or expansion works until it was seriously damaged by two major fires, in 654 AH/1256 CE and 886 AH/1481 CE. 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 Mamluk sultan Qayit Bey, that a next large expansion was undertaken. A period of about 720 years separated between Caliph al-Mahdi's expansion and that of Sultan Qayit Bey. In addition, numerous minor repairs and improvements were carried out during the reigns of al-Mahdi's successors up till the first inferno.

All things considered, the contributions of the Abbasids to the development and architecture of the Prophet's Mosque were inadequate. Generally speaking, their legacy concerning the Mosque leaves a lot to be desired. The blame is to be attributed partly to the Abbasids themselves and partly to the general circumstances in the state that ultimately incapacitated the Abbasid administration from performing some of its essential duties and responsibilities. For the creation and fostering of the latter, however, it was again the Abbasids who more than anybody else are to be held responsible.

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 Abbasid 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 Abbasid 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 than all of them and their restricted political agendas. It kept them and their limited and localised 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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