

The Miqat Mosque in Madinah

The *miqat* mosque marks the station for *hajj* and *'umrah* pilgrims from the city of Madinah and the pilgrims passing through it. At that point, male pilgrims must wear the two pieces of white cloth called *ihram* – female pilgrims can wear any appropriate dress. There, also, both male and female pilgrims must make *niyyah*, or intention for pilgrimage, and enter the state of *ihram*, which is a spiritual and consecrated state, following which certain activities become forbidden until pilgrimage is completed. Linguistically, *miqat* means “a confirmed or stated place”. The mosque has several other names, such as the mosque of *abyar 'Ali*, the mosque of *al-shajarah* and *dhul-hulayfah* mosque.

The mosque is stationed within the hallowed valley of *al-'Aqiq*. It is approximately fourteen kilometres from the Prophet's Mosque. The first version of the mosque was built by 'Umar II when he was Umayyad governor of Madinah. It was subsequently renovated, rebuilt and expanded on several occasions during the eras of the Abbasids and Ottomans. Historically, the mosque was small and modestly built. However, as part of his development drives for the city of Madinah, in particular with regard to its numerous religious institutions and buildings, King Fahd embarked on a historic enterprise of rebuilding and expanding the mosque.

The initiative was necessitated by the continuous rapid rise of pilgrims all year round, and by the many pressing issues entailed therein. King Fahd decided to make the mosque generously large, delightful, comfortable and accommodative to all the physical, mental and spiritual needs of pilgrims. The place signifies the beginning of the journey of their lifetime, thus, it had to furnish pilgrims with everything they may need at that particular juncture. Doing so was an honour, responsibility and an act of gratification and fulfilment.

When the mosque was completed, its size increased to 6,000 square meters. It could accommodate more than 5,000 worshippers. It is a hypostyle mosque constructed around a courtyard, with one covered hall on each of the four sides, the largest being on the side of the *qiblah* facing Makkah. It is about 25 meters high. Its top edges, comprising those around the courtyard, are crenelated. The plan and design of the mosque are clear, albeit downscaled, imitations of some of the earliest and most distinguished hypostyle mosques in Islamic civilization, such as the mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun in Cairo, the great mosque of Qayrawan in Tunisia, the great mosque of Samarra in Iraq, and al-Hakim bi-Amrillah mosque in Cairo. However, the mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun and its breakthrough architectural vocabulary are drawn upon most. The architect was Abdul-Wahid al-Wakil from Egypt.

The mosque's prayer areas consist of a series of arches which support barrel or tunnel-vaults, like in the mosque of the two *qiblahs* (*masjid al-qiblatayn*). On the southern and northern sides from the courtyard, those vaults run parallel to the *qiblah* wall, while those on the eastern and western sides are perpendicular to the *qiblah*. In the main prayer area near the *qiblah*, there are five rows of vaults, while the remaining three sides have two rows each.

In the main prayer area, there are five rows of massive piers on which arches supporting the barrel-vaults rest. Each row has ten piers, except the first row adjoining the *qiblah*, which has eight. That is so because the spaces at both ends of the *qiblah* arcade have been taken by two inaccessible chambers. That means that there are five arcades in the main southern prayer hall. Each arcade can accommodate four lines (*sufuf*) of worshippers, with about 150 persons in one

line (*saff*). The entire area has capacity for 20 lines, which translates itself into approximately 3,000 worshippers in the southern *qiblah* hall alone.

The barrel or tunnel-vaults dominate the roof of the mosque. However, the *qiblah* bay is topped by a high drum dome. At its circular base, the dome has eight clerestory windows which allow some light to filter into the interior directly above the *mihrab*. The square drum has also twelve such windows, three on each side. Transition from the square drum to the circular dome is executed by means of a simple muqarnas at the four corners.

Moreover, the vestibules between the eastern and western entrances to the mosque and the abutting prayer areas are also covered by domes. The domes are relatively small and shallow and have neither drums nor clerestory windows. One dome covers one bay next to an entrance. On both eastern and western sides there are five entrances, next to each other, which means that there are five domes on each side; ten in total. There are additional three entrances on the northern side, whose vestibules, however, are not covered by domes. That increases the total number of mosque entrances to thirteen. There are two more similar domes at the north-eastern and north-western corners. Thus, the total number of domes, including the one above the *mihrab* bay, is thirteen, corresponding to the number of entrances.

The piers are massive, perhaps unnecessarily. Each pier is about 3.5 metres wide and about 1.5 meter long. The space between two piers is about the width and a half of a pier, which is the width of the arches above that support the vaults. The ends of the piers are curved in such a way as to partially resemble smooth cylindrical columns. That is done without much tampering with the piers' rectangular tops and bottoms, making them, in turn, seem like columns' capitals and bases respectively.

The front and back sides of the piers include small and shallow arched recesses, two recesses per pier. The recesses, or niches, are slightly more than one meter above the ground. In them, copies of the Holy Qur'an are kept. Each recess can hold between 30 and 40 copies.

The piers are whitewashed. But the arches and vaults above are reddish, suggesting the inherent colour of the bricks from which they are constructed. More than two thirds of the mosque's volume are in that colour. The strategy works, whereby one can easily generate inside a feeling of naturalness, ease and spontaneity. The lack of ubiquitous sumptuous decoration, together with the constant penetration of natural light through the repetitive perforations in the vaulted ceiling, as well as the great many natural effects of the courtyard, further boost the mosque's atmosphere. The outside of the mosque is fully whitewashed though.

The *mihrab* is deep and square. It seems as though two-tiered. Firstly, there is an archway topped by a round arch and supported by two fluted columns, whose grooves run horizontally around the shafts in a zigzag pattern. Then, at the end, there is a small and plain hood which externally develops into a slightly pointed arch. The arch is supported by two columns whose attributes are like those of the first two columns. The space between the arched doorway and the hooded end, about two meters long and wide, is covered by a flat ceiling.

From inside the *mihrab* there are two wooden doors, leading to the right and left. The one on the left leads to an unidentifiable space – perhaps the *imam*'s tiny chamber – and the one on the right leads to the *minbar*. The *minbar* is a small platform and merely one or two steps high. It only marginally protrudes from the *qiblah* wall. It looks like a small archway partly enclosed with a wooden balustrade. For the sake of symmetry in the central *mihrab* area, on the *mihrab*'s

left side, recessed is a shallow arched niche, about 20 centimetres deep, fully duplicating the contour of the *minbar* on the right side.

Why the *minbar* is disproportionately small in such an impressive and historically relevant mosque, is difficult to say. Nonetheless, the scenario might have something to do with the fact that the *minbar*, as an idea and physical actuality, is a symbol of mosques functioning as community development centres. They imply authority, accountability, transparency and communication insofar as fulfilling that challenging function of mosques is concerned. They thus further imply stability and constancy. However, the *miqat* mosque is fundamentally different. It is predominantly a transit mosque, so to speak. Most of its visitors and users are pilgrims and travellers, suggesting thereby anything but permanence, stability and effective communication. The *minbar* therefore was aimed to acknowledge and symbolize that reality.

The mosque is unpretentiously decorated. Different types and degrees of decoration can be found only on the main wall and the wall surrounding the courtyard. The piers, the arches and the vaults are left devoid of any distinguishable decorative strategies. What stand out are the central *mihrab* area, which contains elaborate and rather extravagant stucco-work, including combinations of calligraphy, geometry and floral patterns; the intermittent arched sections of stucco-work that run around the main wall, featuring simple interlaced geometric patterns; carved wood latticework that fills the arches of the entire wall around the courtyard, highlighting more complex infinitely interwoven geometric patterns; and a number of discs – about one meter in diameter - on the upper part of the main wall and the wall surrounding the courtyard, which are filled with either steel or concrete jaalis and coloured glass, containing simple geometric designs.

The women's prayer area occupies the two arcades in the northern segment of the mosque, plus a further section of the courtyard and equivalent parts of the right and left prayer areas, which correspond to an extra arcade. This area is painstakingly surrounded and shielded by a wooden screen, which is about 2.5 meters high and contains a dense latticework.

The mosque is surrounded by what could be called a *ziyada* (addition or supplement). The *ziyada* is that extra or empty space between a mosque and its surrounding buffer walls, colonnades and facilities. The latter are also regarded as part of the *ziyada*. The *ziyada* of the *miqat* mosque is a mixture of a series of external yards, comprising lovely symmetrical gardens and abundant water elements, and the bordering perimeters with their built environment components. The *ziyada* is a planning and design manoeuvre found so far only in the mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun. It is called as such only in its own context, the reasons for whose existence are yet to be conclusively given. The boundaries and walls of the *ziyada* are significantly lower than the walls of the mosque.

However, unlike in the case of the mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun, the *miqat* mosque is not properly aligned with the buffer walls and facilities. The reason for that could be as follows. The topography of the site, and some other natural or urban subtleties, were not fully conducive. Its constraints might have posed a challenge to adequately positioning the mosque and accommodating all the intended internal as well as external facilities and services. Therefore, the *ziyada* perfectly aligned itself with the site's perimeters, allowing thereby the mosque inside it to angle and align itself with the prerequisites of facing the *qiblah*, combined with the implications of providing sundry facilities and services for pilgrims and visitors. In point of fact, this type of design tactic was nothing new. The Mamluks were renowned for centuries for aligning with the street the main entrance facades of many of their religious complexes in Cairo, while angling their interiors to achieve the proper *qiblah* orientation.

The minaret of the mosque is a massive 62 meters high spiral structure. Its base and main body are equilaterally triangular, while the uppermost tier turns cylindrical. The minaret is an unmistakable imitation of the spiral minaret of the mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun and, to a lesser extent, of that of the great mosque in Samarra. The minaret stands outside the mosque, to the left side of the *qiblah* wall. Its base and main body are triangular perhaps in order to forge a degree of symmetrical relationship with the mosque and the neighbouring boundary of the *ziyada*. The minaret is positioned in such a way that one of its sides is perfectly aligned with the southern *qiblah* wall of the mosque, and the other with the south-eastern edge of the *ziyada*. In this manner, the minaret promoted and also contributed to the maximum utilization of the *ziyada*'s limited spaces.

The courtyard has a high drum dome. It crowns a square edifice, resembling a pavilion, which houses a fountain or *sabil*. The dome looks much like the one above the *mihrab* bay. It rests on squinches and its drum has eight clerestory windows. The dome's exterior is whitewashed, whereas its interior is maintained red, evoking the natural and soothing colour of its bricks as building material.

This building is unnecessarily huge. It is a replication of the fountain with a high drum dome in the central courtyard of the mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun, which at the end of the thirteenth century was constructed by Mamluk Sultan Lajin (d. 1299). The building is rather disproportionate to the size and dimensions of the *miqat* mosque.

The building (pavilion) has four arched entrances. The paths through them lead to and converge at the point of the fountain. The intradoses and extradoses of the arches above the four entrances leading to the fountain are neatly decorated in stucco-work that includes geometric and floral patterns and shapes similar to those elsewhere in the mosque.

The building is in the middle of the courtyard. It is surrounded by a garden that contains trees and plants. The garden is a miniature charbagh garden with a quadrilateral layout. It is divided by walkways into four smaller parts. The four main walkways lead to the building (pavilion), which then through its four entryways lead to the fountain as the core, and its water as the focus of everything (and the origin of life).

The mosque was meant to welcome pilgrims and offer them everything they need to start the journey of their lives. The mosque thus is a self-sufficient nucleus, yet a small seasonal township. The concept of *ziyada* was introduced to the morphology of the mosque possibly in order to aid and facilitate that projected role of the mosque. Consequently, on the south-western and north-eastern *ziyada* ends, a succession of clean and well-maintained toilets, shower-rooms, along with sundry administrative, maintenance and security facilities, are located. They are vaulted in the same way as the mosque itself.

The south-eastern end of the *ziyada* is marked by a blank colonnade, which is roofed by 27 small domes. The north-western end is marked by a similar colonnade. The extradoses of the two colonnades' arches, facing the mosque, are decorated with geometric and floral designs. The north-western colonnade is abutted by a colonnaded street that runs parallel to it. The street is covered by a series of vaults perpendicular to its direction. The vaults are supported by pointed arches. These vaults are higher and rounder than those above the mosque and the two mentioned *ziyada* perimeters. Their different shape and height are utilized for some additional decoration, lighting and aeration purposes. The street is then connected to yet another colonnade, similar to the two blank ones of the *ziyada*. This colonnade is lined with a series of

shops, restaurants and offices, which cater to the material needs of pilgrims. From inside, the area conjures up memories of traditional markets, or bazaars, in Syria, Iraq and Iran.

The columns of the colonnades are octagonal and whitewashed. Whitewashed are also the exteriors of the domes and vaults. However, like in the rest of the mosque, the interiors of the domes and vaults retain the natural reddish colour of the bricks from which they have been constructed.

The southern and northern ends of the vaulted street and its flanking colonnades indicate the two main entry points into the *miqat* mosque complex. The points are marked by two identical elaborate gates which are topped by two short minarets each. The bases of the minarets are square and their main bodies cylindrical. The edges of the gates and those of the minarets' square bases are crenelated. The minarets, though smaller, look a lot like the minarets of the mosque of al-Hakim bi-Amrillah, a Fatimid caliph, in Cairo.

As a matter of fact, one gets a feeling that these two ceremonial gates might fare better if they were used somewhere else as city-gates. Nevertheless, they are used as part of the complex of the *miqat* mosque to suggest its underlying character: that it is an autonomous hub, yet a small intermittent township. Its presence induces a strong symbolism. That is why the two gates are called "southern and eastern *qasbah* entrances". *Qasbah* means "old city", "citadel" and "central part of a town".

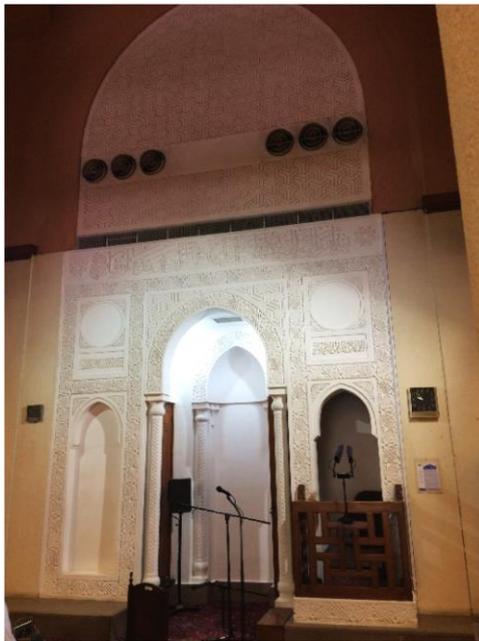
For pilgrims to be welcomed by the imposing gates and to pass through them, and then to walk through the *ziyada* stretch and finally enter the mosque where several *ihram* rites are performed, signify pilgrims' gradual physical, psychological and spiritual progression and preparation for that which they came for all the way and which they, perhaps, dreamed about their entire lives. The whole setup and utility of the mosque complex are intended not only to facilitate the occasion, but also help pilgrims savour and experience it to the fullest.



The miqat mosque – aerial view (source: www.albidaayah.com)



The interior of the mosque



The mihrab area comprising the simple minbar as well



The courtyard with its domed fountain (pavilion)



One of the two main entry points into the mosque complex



The ziyada and the spiral minaret



The mosque seen from outside, from the south-western side

(The article is an excerpt from the author's forthcoming book titled "Appreciating the Architecture of Madinah")