

The Quba' Mosque in Madinah

The Quba' mosque is the first mosque built by the Prophet (pbuh). The Prophet (pbuh) did so when he migrated from Makkah to Madinah. On the way to Madinah, he stopped and rested in a Quba' settlement for about two weeks. Even though short, the time was sufficient for the Prophet (pbuh) to found and build a simple mosque called the Quba' mosque. The Quba' settlement was about five kilometres south of Madinah proper. Today, it is one of its suburbs.

The Quba' mosque was the first mosque associated with Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his prophet-hood mission. He personally participated in its construction. He was the first to place a stone on the *qiblah* side, followed by Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and 'Umar b. al-Khattab, after which the people started building. It was angel *Jibril* (Gabriel) who showed the Prophet (pbuh) the exact *qiblah* direction, which was then towards *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* in Jerusalem.

Since its inception, the Quba' mosque was always special in the Islamic tradition. Its virtues are numerous and extraordinary. They are recorded even in the Qur'an (*al-Tawbah*, 107-110). The Prophet (pbuh) himself used to go to Quba' to pray in its mosque, walking or riding. According to some accounts, when he could, the Prophet (pbuh) did it every Saturday (Sahih al-Bukhari). He is reported to have said that a prayer in the Quba' mosque is equivalent to 'umrah (lesser or minor pilgrimage to Makkah) (Jami' al-Tirmidhi). Once he said: "Whoever purifies himself at his home and goes out to this mosque, i.e., the mosque of Quba', and prays therein two *rak'ats*, will have (a reward) like that of 'umrah" (Sunan al-Nasa'i).

Consequently, Muslims paid special attention to the Quba' mosque throughout history. The caliphs and rulers regularly renovated and expanded it, keeping pace with the rapid urban growth of Madinah. Among the first ones who did so were 'Uthman b. 'Affan, the third rightly guided caliph (*al-khulafa' al-rashidun*) and 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz ('Umar II).

The last time the mosque was rebuilt and expanded was in 1986 during the rule of King Fahd. Today's version of the mosque, thus, is relatively new. It is a clever hybrid of Mamluk, Ottoman (in Madinah), Fatimid and Seljuq architectural elements. The architect was Abdul-Wahid al-Wakil from Egypt.

The mosque is of a hypostyle type with a rectangular main prayer hall. It has four soaring minarets that mark its four corners. There are seven main entrances: three on the northern side and two each on the eastern and western sides. There are also ten supplementary doors: five each on the eastern and western sides.

The mosque has a central courtyard. It occupies about a quarter of the building's footprint, enhancing its performance and adding to its perfect symmetry. It is surrounded by arcades on all sides, an arrangement called peristyle. However, as part of the arcade on the *qiblah* side, the arch that directly faces the *mihrab* bay is significantly magnified so as to form an arched opening, or even a portico, that, to a degree, resembles a *pishtaq* (a formal gateway that serves to emphasize the importance of a building, or an aspect thereof). The floor of the courtyard is made of marble. It is decorated with woven *geometric* patterns and shapes.

The *mihrab* is a semi-circular niche in the *qiblah* wall that indicates the direction of prayer. It is made of white marble. It is shaped like a doorway and its hood ornamented with muqarnas. It is flanked by two indented columns on which the arched top is resting. The columns are

slender and slightly fluted, except the middle sections which feature small lines that appear as though running around the columns. The columns are of the simplified Corinthian order. However, their capitals, instead of being ornately decorated with acanthus leaves and scrolls, are decorated with simple forms of muqarnas.

The *minbar*, or pulpit, standing next to the *mihrab*, is a classical Mamluk and Ottoman example. It is made of white marble. It includes a small staircase leading to the top platform, which is covered by a tiny dome. The platform rests on four simple pillars. At the bottom of the staircase, there is a wooden and richly decorated doorway. The doorway is flanked by two octagonal columns whose capitals are similar to those of the two columns in the *mihrab*. The edges of both the platform and doorway are crenelated.

There are six large domes above the main southern prayer area and 56 smaller domes above the eastern, western and northern sections arranged around the courtyard. The roof above the mosque's main entrances is vaulted, rather than domed. The six domes of the main prayer hall rest on massive clustered columns, and elsewhere, where small domes are, on single columns.

Of those 56 small domes, six are also placed at both right and left ends of the main prayer area, three domes arranged perpendicular to the *qiblah* at each end, flanking in this manner the six large domes. The six small domes are there to increase the size of the mosque and generate an extra sense of symmetry, as they establish the front segments of the furthestmost right and left arcades that extend from one end of the mosque to the other.

The main southern prayer hall has two wide arcades that extend parallel to the *qiblah* side. The northern opposite section has four smaller arcades, also parallel to the *qiblah*. The northern and southern sections are equal in size, the former's two arcades being equivalent to one in the main southern prayer section. The eastern and western sides that fringe the courtyard, have two arcades each. They are of equal size as those in the northern section and run perpendicular to the *qiblah*.

The mosque has 28 windows: eleven each on the eastern and western sides, and six on the northern side. The *qiblah* wall is windowless. The windows are filled with jaalis and feature geometric designs and coloured glass. They are more for decorative purposes than for those relating to ventilation and lighting. The huge central courtyard that dominates the configuration of the mosque is sufficient for the latter.

The mosque has multiple facilities. The size of the prayer area alone is now 5,035 square meters, and the total area occupied by the mosque with all its facilities is 13,500 square meters. The mosque has 64 toilets for men and 32 toilets for women, and 42 units for ablution. The complex also includes houses for the imam and muezzin, a place for guards, a library and a market.

For its construction, the mosque used significantly the local basalt stone. The mosque's lower part, both internally and externally, proudly displays the stone and its dark colour. The upper part, with the minarets and domes, is whitewashed. The top edges of the mosque's outline, including the edges of the arcades that surround the courtyard, are crenelated.

The mosque is on a mild slope. Consequently, to the northern side, where the ground level is lower, the prayer hall is raised one-storey above it. To the south, however, where the ground level is higher, the prayer hall rests directly on it. Since the access to the mosque is mainly from the north, it is by means of elaborate stairs. Though every precautionary measure has been

duly taken care of, there is still a degree of inconvenience for the elderly and disabled to enter the mosque.

The mosque's four minarets were patterned after the Mamluk and Ottoman minarets in Madinah, two of which have been retained on the south-eastern (Mamluk) and south-western (Ottoman) corners of the Prophet's Mosque. In addition, they resemble very much the minaret of the earlier version of the Quba' mosque where the Mamluk and Ottoman influences prevailed. The minaret, though built by the Ottomans, was a combination of the Mamluk and Ottoman styles. All four minarets have two balconies supported by elaborate muqarnas. The minarets rest on square bases, have octagonal shafts up to the second balcony, which then take on a circular shape up to the top.

The multi-domed profile of the mosque evokes the character of the Ottoman section of the Prophet's Mosque. Around the base of the green interior of each and every dome runs a band with calligraphic inscriptions. The inscriptions feature Qur'anic verses and entire shorter Qur'anic chapters (*surahs*), along with the beautiful names of Almighty Allah. That is almost exactly like the interiors of the Ottoman domes in the Prophet's Mosque. Besides, the core sections of the domes' interiors are adorned with elaborate arabesques showcasing intricate interplays of geometric and floral patterns.

The six large domes over the main prayer hall are a virtual replica of the six domes over the Ghamamah mosque. Here they are also ribbed and whitewashed. From outside, therefore, the main prayer hall of the Quba' mosque perfectly corresponds to the form of the Ghamamah mosque. The dome above the *mihrab* bay is significantly bigger and higher than the rest of the domes in the main prayer area. All domes have circular drums. The three domes adjacent to the *qiblah* are larger than their counterparts in the second row. Their drums are pierced each with ten clerestory windows. The windows are filled with jaalis and coloured glass. The drums of the domes in the second row of the prayer hall are smaller and comprise no windows. From inside, all six domes rest on squinches and pendentives. The dome above the *mihrab* bay rests on squinches with some large alcoves, which calls to mind some early, basic and unrefined versions of muqarnas.

The 56 small domes are rather shallow and do not have clerestory windows either. They rest on pendentives. The four pendentives of each dome feature the names of Almighty Allah, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and two companions of the Prophet (pbuh) who migrated to Madinah. That translates itself into 56 times the name of Allah, 56 times the name of Muhammad, and 112 names of the migrants to Madinah. The names are inscribed inside green medallions in the angular Kufic style in golden colour.

In passing, that is exactly the way 49 medallions are inscribed on the spandrels around the two open courtyards of the Prophet's Mosque that date back to the Ottoman times. The following are the contents of the Ottoman medallions in the Prophet's Mosque set in golden colour against a green background: "*masha'Allah*" ("whatever Allah wills") inside one medallion; "Allah" and "Muhammad" inside one medallion each; the names of 30 leading *sahabah* (companions) of the Prophet (pbuh) inside 30 medallions, one medallion one name; the names of the four Imams of the four major Sunni schools of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) inside four medallions; and the names of 12 Shi'i Imams inside 12 medallions, one medallion one Imam's name – in that they are respected and well-regarded by Sunnis as well.

It stands to reason that the presence of 112 names of the migrant companions of the Prophet (pbuh) inside the Quba' mosque not only commemorates the spectacle of the *hijrah* (migration)

and its central characters, but also denotes a continuation of the promotion of the excellence and merit of the companions (*sahabah*), seeing that as a fundamental principle of Sunnism and Sunni ideology. There are several other decorative inscriptions from the Qur'an on the mosque's wall panels that highlight the merits of the Prophet's companions and all Muslims in general, especially the first generation.

The Prophet (pbuh) migrated to Madinah to embark, unhindered, on creating virtuous elements of culture and civilization. Such, however, could only be achieved with the "creation" and "moulding" of individuals. Indeed, central to any civilizational consciousness and development is a holistic human development. The Quba' mosque symbolizes as much the migration from Makkah to Madinah as every other form of migration from old bad ways to new righteous ones. It also epitomises self-sacrifice, cooperation, hope, true success and an optimistic future. It stands for those persons who with the sacrifices and contributions of their own paved the way for all subsequent forms of true victory, goodness and joy. The mosque affirms that they ought to be adequately and perennially honoured too.

The Prophet's arrival in Quba' and his building of the mosque connoted a new beginning. It signified a bright future not only for Islam and Muslims, but also for human culture and civilization at large. It signified a victory for the absolute truth. That is why for attaining such noble goals, the principles and values of unity, brotherhood, justice, equality, upholding human dignity and comprehensive excellence, will always be essential. It was on account of this that some verses from the Qur'anic chapter *al-Fath* (Victory or Triumph) are used for decorative ends in the mosque. In them, the ultimate victory has been promised to the Prophet (pbuh) and all those who follow in his footsteps. The entire enterprise is summed up in the following words which are framed by one of the mosque's wall panels on the *qiblah* wall "And those who are (truly) with him (Muhammad) are firm and unyielding towards all deniers of the truth, (yet) full of mercy towards one another" (*al-Fath*, 29).

Above the *mihrab*, there are two decorative panels that draw attention to the immediate importance of the mosque. On the lower and smaller panel are the words of the Prophet (pbuh): "Whoever purifies himself at his home and goes out to the mosque of Quba' and prays therein, will have a reward like that of 'umrah". On the upper and bigger panel are the following Qur'anic words from the *al-Tawbah* chapter: "Certainly the mosque (the Quba' mosque) founded on piety from the very first day is more deserving that you should stand to offer prayer in it; for in it there are men who love to be purified; and Allah loves those who purify themselves" (*al-Tawbah*, 108).

The women's prayer area is on the northern side of the mosque – the opposite of the *qiblah*. In order to optimize its use, the area is made into two levels. On the first level, it occupies two arcades of the existing four. On the second level, though, it extends one more arcade *qiblah*-ward over the men's area below. In total there are five arcades for women: two on the first level and three on the second. The ceiling of the first level - especially the segments called suspended, dropped or false ceilings, and a network of strips linking the columns - is covered with stucco-work in complex geometric and floral designs that make up extravagant arabesques. The total women's area is surrounded by an elegant and ornate wooden screen that includes latticework.

It seems as though the form of the Quba' mosque entails a story of muqarnas (a three-dimensional decorative device employed for vaulting and generally for transitions from one space to another, such as *transitions* from square plans to circular perimeters). Muqarnas originated from plain pendentives and squinches, producing in-between an array of

intermediary stages of inartistically placing niches or alveoles next to, and above, each other. The most critical stages of the muqarnas development process and their respective outputs are available in this mosque's rich hybrid vocabulary. They can be seen as plain pendentives under the domes, as squinches under the dome above the *mihrab* bay and inside the hoods of the arched entrances, and as both simple and sophisticated forms of muqarnas inside the hood of the *mihrab*, inside the hoods of the arched entrances, and on the topmost members of the columns mediating between the *columns* and the load thrusting down upon them.

Six of the mosque's seven entrances are unassuming. They are simple doorways recessed in the main walls, without significantly altering the integrity of the walls. They are topped by hoods that include partly muqarnas and partly radiating flutes. The arched entrances with their hoods do not reach the top of the wall.

However, the seventh entrance at the centre of the northern wall is different. It is an *iwan* (a three-sided hall or space, the fourth side of which is replaced by an open archway). Its dimensions extend considerably - horizontally and vertically - from the mosque's contour. It is vaulted by a combination of muqarnas, radiating flutes, niches, pendentives and semi or half-domes. The *iwan* brings to mind the nature of some Seljuq and Safavid iwans as part of their four-*iwan* mosque forms.

This central *iwan* from one (northern) end, the *pishtaq* in the middle abutting the courtyard, and the *mihrab* at the other (southern) end, constitute an axis. The axis is as much physical as ontological. It exudes a sense of direction, purpose, dynamism and progress, all affiliated, directly or indirectly, with the concept of Islam's *hijrah* (migration) which the mosque of Quba' embodies and immortalises.

On the lower levels of all three sides of the main southern prayer area there are wooden shelves that contain copies of the Holy Qur'an. They look like cupboards and are recessed in the walls. Their top edges have small ornamental crenellations. Some spaces inside and between the central clustered columns are also fitted with wooden cupboards for the same purpose.



The Quba' mosque – aerial view (Source: www.islamiclandmarks.com)



The interior of the mosque



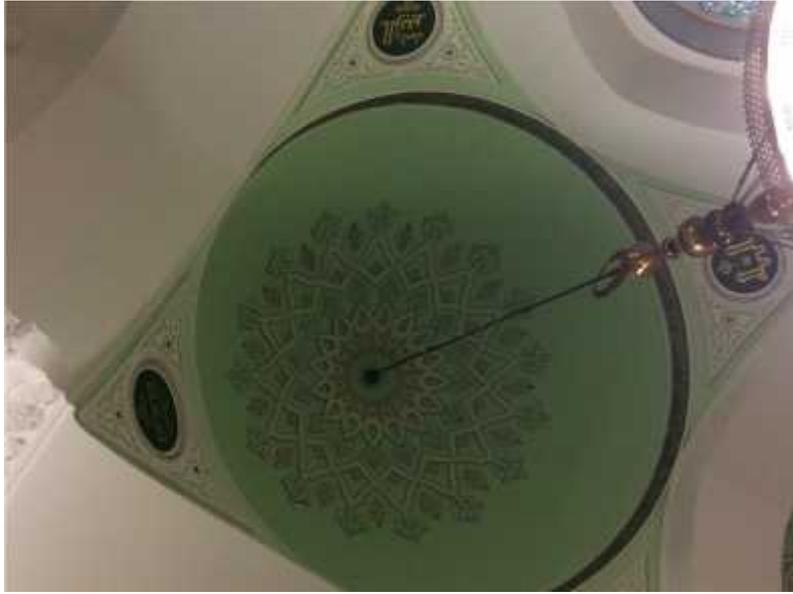
The courtyard with the pishtaq and qiblah wall in the background



The mihrab



The iwan



The interior of one of 56 small domes



The mosque seen from outside, from the western side

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