

The New Khandaq Mosque in Madinah

This mosque lies at the foot or base of the *Sal'* hill, on its western side. It signifies the scene of the Battle of Trench, or *Khandaq*, which is about three kilometres from the Prophet's Mosque. The latter lies on the opposite side of the hill. In the immediate vicinity of this mosque, the historical "Seven Mosques" are located. The mosque was established in 2007. Just a few years ago, it became fully operational.

Due to the topography of the site, the mosque is somewhat awkwardly situated. Its entire eastern and, to some extent, northern and southern sides border the fringes of the *Sal'* hill. The *qiblah* is towards south. Thus nearly enfolded, the mosque is poorly accessible. Its western side is only rendered completely "free" and unobstructed. As a result, the most frequently used main entrances are positioned right there; so are its two minarets which stand at the south-western and north-western corners.

It is obvious that the mosque was not built entirely for the conventional reasons mosques are normally built for. The reasons for its construction were tripartite.

Firstly, it was built in order to overshadow, as it were, the questionable physical presence of the Seven Mosques, and to counterbalance and, if possible, completely nullify yet more problematic and controversial recurring beliefs and practices associated with them.

Secondly, the mosque exists with the aim of fulfilling the needs of multitudes of pilgrims and visitors. Even though the place is not on the list of the sites recommended by the Prophet (pbuh) to be visited, the authorities finally succumbed to the exigencies

entailed in people's thronging to the place. It was the pressure of a public practice (culture) and its numerous demands. The mosque, therefore, is a means for achieving a noble goal, that is, for spreading the truth and promoting as well as facilitating the right beliefs and practices. That perhaps explains the mosque's tardy conception and construction.

And thirdly, the mosque was built partially to cater to the needs of the inhabitants of its neighbourhoods.

The mosque is of a hypostyle type with an open courtyard. The main prayer area has three rows of huge square columns. Each row has four such columns. That makes up four parallel and five perpendicular arcades. The spaces between two columns are about fifteen meters. The relative reduction of columns, albeit not at the expense of the mosque's breadth, renders the mosque appear bigger, more welcoming and more graceful. It appears more spacious than it in reality is.

There are twenty bays. The bay in the second arcade from the *qiblah* wall, between the second and third columns of the first and second rows of columns, is topped by a dome. Four horizontal triangular-like wedges placed in the four corners of the bay were applied in order to help providing support for the spherical dome.

The dome has twenty clerestory windows at its base. There are two types of such windows. One features jaalis with geometric patterns, but its windows are shut and dark, allowing no light to go through. Their role might be merely to meet some ornamental ends. The other type is unobstructed and clear. Its windows feature jaalis and colourful glass also with geometric designs. They allow light to go through and thus contribute to a lovely vibe inside the mosque. The two types of the windows alternate all the way through the dome's base. In addition, the base and centre of the dome are decorated with simple intertwined geometric

designs. From the dome's centre, an extravagant chandelier descends. It is the only chandelier in the mosque.

Notwithstanding the presence of the dome near the central area, the mosque is still of a true hypostyle type. This is because the dome did not alter the configuration of the columns and arcades. Their functions and relationships with the rest of the mosque's components remained intact. The dome tampered with the flat roof of only one of the twenty bays.

The ceiling is supported by the columns with the intermediary of massive reinforced concrete beams. The horizontal beams are about fifteen meters long and about two meters high. Their ends converge above the columns, forming thus clusters. For additional support, the four sides of each column feature huge two-tiered corbels.

On all of their four sides, the columns of the first two rows have long and thin recesses. The niche-like openings contain copies of the Holy Qur'an. However, the columns in the last third row have the same openings only on the side facing the *qiblah*.

The mosque utilises a central air-conditioning system. The ducts are supplied through, and registers placed on, the reinforced concrete beams. The coolness and freshness are equally distributed right through the building. Due to the high position of the beams, nobody can be directly exposed to the source and currents of cold air, and so, expose himself to the potential harm that such can cause.

The mosque has two levels. The second level is women's prayer section. It occupies just one arcade on the opposite side of the *qiblah*, which is a quarter of the footprint of the main prayer hall. It rests on the northern main wall and the third row of columns. The front side of the section, overlooking the rest of the main

prayer area, is screened with an elaborate wooden screen that displays various geometric designs all the way through. Its higher level has small sporadic apertures as well as latticework.

Except the domed part, the rest of the ceiling above each bay is flat and recessed, one recess per bay. Moreover, most lights are hidden within the ceiling's configuration, which adds an extra dimension to the mosque's at once pleasing and stirring atmosphere.

The whole *qiblah* side of the *qiblah* bay is covered in marble. It includes endless geometric shapes and designs and their mutual relationships. The area is thus converted into an intricate arabesque. The arabesque can be best grasped and appreciated as such only from a distance when an aggregate of its motifs, shapes, horizontal and vertical lines and panels are juxtaposed and compared with the rest of the *qiblah* wall, in particular, and the mosque, in general. The place unmistakably calls to mind the decorative schemes of the *mihrab* sections in some of the greatest Mamluk mosque and madrasah masterpieces.

In the centre of this *qiblah* section is a semi-circular *mihrab* niche topped by a semi-dome. The niche is richly decorated with eight vertical bands containing inlaid geometric patterns. The hood is decorated with a different style which is dominated by eight differently executed decorative stretches. The stretches originate nearly where the niche's eight bands end. They then travel through the hood and converge in its centre.

This decorative character of the *mihrab* is accentuated by a narrow black strip that runs continuously around the external edge of the entire *mihrab* niche, essentially framing it. On top of this black frame is a loop, representing the pinnacle of both the *mihrab* and its semi-dome.

The *mihrab* is further surrounded by a pair of engaged marble columns that belong to the Tuscan and Doric orders. Above the columns is a depiction of a tall semi-circular and slightly pointed arch, which is ostensibly supported by the columns. The arch is made of alternating and interlocked black and white marble pieces.

To the right side of the *mihrab* is a wooden *minbar* which is a small arched platform only partially protruding from the wall. It is slightly less than a meter raised off the ground. The platform is enclosed by wooden panels with three intervals, or angles, giving the platform three sides and making it look like a part of a larger octagonal whole. As if the rest of that whole extends beyond the *qiblah* wall and provides a supplementary function to the *minbar* and possibly some other adjoining spaces. The imam comes to the *minbar* from behind through a small wooden door.

The entire *minbar* area is fully adorned with interplays of sundry geometric patterns. Its arched top is covered with coloured glass that highlights its own decorative forms. As a segment thereof, there is a partial depiction of the sun in yellow, spreading its light towards each direction by means of six red rays, or spokes.

On the left side of the *mihrab*, there is an arched wooden door that leads most probably to the imam's room behind this *qiblah* section. The door is designed and decorated in such a way that it resembles both in size and appearance the *minbar*. This was done with the intention of enhancing the symmetry and overall appearance of the *mihrab* section.

Decoration is not excessive. The main decorative means and channels are geometry and clever manipulations of colours and natural as well as artificial light. The following components are used most for the purpose: the entire *mihrab* and *minbar* area, reinforced concrete beams, the dome's interior, doorways,

minarets, the floor of the courtyard, the screen curtaining women's prayer area, and numerous arched and spherical windows that spread around the walls of the mosque's main prayer hall.

The mosque is predominantly whitewashed. White is the colour that dominates the total physique of the mosque, including the mentioned decorative strategies. That is evocative of simplicity-yet-complexity in form and function, clarity of direction and purpose, purity and organic relationship with the natural surroundings. As such, the mosque as much contrasts as blends with the imposing presence of the rocky *Sal'* hill that almost enfolds it. Just like in the case of *Jami' Sayyid al-Shuhada'* at Uhud, the best adornment of this mosque, too, is its physical and spiritual equipoise, tranquillity, freshness, grace, coherent organization and perfect functioning of spaces, and purity of meaning and purpose. Such decoration is not only sensual, but also mental, intellectual and spiritual, involving the entire being.

There are two minarets with two balconies each. Their bases are square, shafts octagonal, and tops circular. The lower balconies are supported by a simplest form of muqarnas. The support could also be interpreted as cornices engraved with impressions of muqarnas. The higher balconies, on the other hand, rest on short chhatris (pillared and domed pavilions most commonly found in India and Pakistan, in Mughal architecture). Immediately above these balconies there are another chhatris. These are topped by small domes which, in turn, represent the summits of the minarets. However, since the chhatris are generally domed, the chhatris beneath the second balconies could be seen as the lower parts, and the chhatris immediately above the balconies, as the upper parts of two chhatris, as the genuine and complete architectural units.

The size of the open courtyard in front of the main prayer hall is about half of the latter. It is surrounded by a covered walkway all the way around it, including the southern *qiblah* side. This arrangement is called peristyle. The walkway is supported by rows of rectangular columns that support pointed arches. The centre of the floor of the courtyard has an elaborate decorative element that features interlocked geometric patterns in black, grey, red and white marble, reflecting the colours and materials of the opulently decorated *mihrab* area.

The courtyard has three entrances: on the eastern, western and northern sides. However, due to the mosque's unusual natural position, only the western and, to some extent, northern entrances are used. The eastern entrance, which faces the *Sal'* hill, is rarely used. Its presence is rather symbolic and it is there just to add to the courtyard's - the mosque's - symmetry and proportion. Besides, another western entrance that opens directly into the main prayer hall, is also extensively used.

The elevation of the courtyard is lower by about two meters than that of the main prayer hall. Nonetheless, its western and northern entrances are made into portals that are similar to iwans. The two iwans are then raised to the height of the main prayer hall, generating thereby a sense of visual balance and equilibrium. However, this is not the case with the eastern entrance. Its height remained like that of the courtyard, which only supports the belief that its existence is rather auxiliary and symbolic.

The main prayer hall is introvert (inward-looking) and autonomous. The doors and windows that connect it to the courtyard - and the outside world - are small, partly in glass, stained and with jaalis, and are constantly shut. Hence, one gets

a feeling that the two realms forge a heterogeneous, rather than homogenous, bond.

Certainly, this has something to do with the planned lighting, cooling and ventilation systems in the building. Furthermore, the courtyard which is rarely used for any religious ceremonies and occasions is also there to promote the diversity and profundity of the mosque's purpose and functions.

We have seen that the mosque was more than a mosque in the conventional sense of the term. It has a noble and arduous mission. Therefore, the presence of a wide, comfortable and inviting courtyard is meant to attract pilgrims and visitors to its fold, offer them everything they need, and so, deflect their attention and interest from anything inappropriate which could be associated with the place and its abundant historical connotations, and which some of pilgrims and visitors, perhaps, might be bent on committing.

Moreover, the introvert and autonomous character of the main prayer hall further suggests that once inside, pilgrims and visitors are to feel warmly embraced, accepted and at home. They are to feel transported "somewhere else", completely detached, aloof and even safe from all the potential spiritual snares and pitfalls that await outside in relation to the questionable physical presence of the Seven Mosques. Those feelings are to later morph into comprehensive behavioural patterns that will guide the people not only at the *Khandaq* site, but also elsewhere.

Finally, the mosque is built on a slope. Owing to that, on the eastern side where the ground is higher, the prayer area commences immediately from the ground level. To the west, however, where the ground level is lower, the prayer area is raised one storey above the ground. This has been utilized in such a way that a vast network of toilets and ablution areas was placed

on the ground floor, under the prayer area. The ground level is marked by being overlaid with red granite tiles and slabs. This is in stark contrast to the whiteness of the prayer level above. Thus, the visual distinction between the two levels is unmistakable.

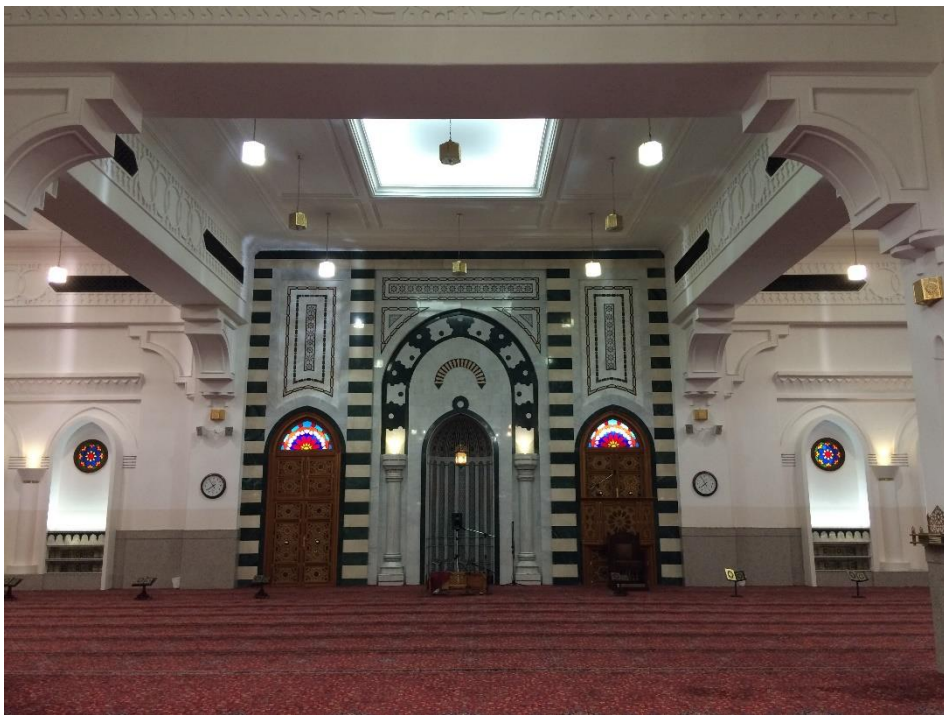
Since one must come to the mosque from the western side, the prayer hall always appears as though completely on a higher floor. Hence, even though all the necessary steps have been duly taken care of - such as provision of railings and ramps - there is still a measure of inconvenience for the elderly and disabled to enter the mosque.



The new Khandaq mosque
(<http://umrahtrg.blogspot.com/2011/12/seven-mosques-madinah.html>)



The mosque seen from the western side



The *mihrab* area



The interior of the mosque



The courtyard and one of the two minarets