

**RECONCILING THE VIEWS OF
'UMAR B. 'ABD AL-'AZIZ (R.A.)
(D. 101 A.H./720 C.E.) ON
MOSQUE DECORATION**

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This paper discusses the views of the 8th Umayyad Caliph, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz ('Umar II [R.A.]), on mosque decoration. It resolves an ostensible inconsistency between what he as the governor did to the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, and what he intended to do to the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus after becoming the Caliph. The paper concludes that there was no inconsistency whatsoever in 'Umar II's (R.A.) actions. This becomes evident when the matter is thoroughly explored against the backdrop of the extraordinary personality of 'Umar II (R.A.), as well as the prevailing socio-political, cultural and religious developments in the Muslim Umayyad society. 'Umar II (R.A.) only acted along the lines of the general laws that governed the birth and evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture, at the center of which stood mosque decoration. Thus, after presenting at the beginning of the paper 'Umar II's (R.A.) views in question, discussion about those laws follows. The discussion is tripartite, focusing on the consistency of 'Umar II (R.A.)' overall personality and character, the evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture, and the emergence of the first Muslim architectural deviations.

Keywords: 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (R.A.), the Prophet's Mosque, the Umayyad mosque, Mosque decoration, Muslim architecture.

Introduction

'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz ('Umar II [R.A.]) was the most revered Muslim ruler after the first four rightly-guided caliphs (*al-khulafa'*

al-rāshidūn). So much so that he is regarded as the fifth rightly-guided caliph, though a period of about sixty years separates between him and ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (R.A.) (d. 41 A.H./661 C.E.), the forth rightly-guided caliph. As the 8th Umayyad Caliph, he is also held as the first and arguably one of the greatest revivers of the Islamic faith, culture and civilization.¹

When the historians and biographers dwell on the contributions of ‘Umar II (R.A.) as caliph, they normally focus on the political, economic and religious aspects of his rule.² However, rarely was there a scholar, before or now, who tried to analyze and eventually reconcile between the ostensibly conflicting views of ‘Umar II (R.A.) concerning mosque decoration, one of the emerging and pressing issues of the day. This is surprising because the latter is no less significant than the former in that it constituted the substance of the fast evolving phenomenon of the Muslim artistic and architectural identity which functioned as the physical locus of the Muslim cultural and civilizational consciousness and yield, facilitating and further spurring them. Hence, understanding the points of view of ‘Umar II (R.A.) as regards mosque decoration, and by extension Muslim architecture, greatly helps in understanding many other directly and indirectly related aspects of his personality and rule.

At the core of the spiritual as well as cultural life of ‘Umar II (R.A.), firstly as the governor of Madinah (87-93 A.H./706-712 C.E.) then as the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus (99-101 A.H./718-720 C.E.), stood Prophet Muḥammad’s (ﷺ) Mosque and the great Umayyad Mosque in Madinah and Damascus respectively. At the behest of the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 96 A.H./715 C.E.) in Damascus, ‘Umar II, as the governor of Madinah, significantly enlarged and refurbished the Prophet’s Mosque, using mosaics, marble and even gold as decorative media. The job lasted from 88 A.H./707 C.E. to approximately 91 A.H./710 C.E.

Almost concurrently, from 87 A.H./706 C.E. to 96 A.H./715 C.E., Caliph al-Walīd was building the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus which was regarded as a wonder of the world on account of its unparalleled magnificence and beauty, using also mosaics, marble and gold – albeit to an unprecedented degree – for decorative purposes. Later, when he himself became the Caliph and had to move to Damascus, ‘Umar II (R.A.) was so struck by the Umayyad Mosque and the extent of its decoration

especially, that he articulated some of the most astonishing and unfavorable views expressed with regard to the then-fast-growing marvels of Muslim art and architecture. He is reported to have wanted to strip the Mosque off its expensive and ostentatious decoration, covering it with white draperies instead.³ Those views seem to have been at odds with what he had done slightly more than a decade ago in Madinah with the Prophet's Mosque. To Alami,⁴ such was the case of 'Umar II's (R.A.) total transformation from being a typical Umayyad, or just a mundane ruler and prince who enjoyed listening to music, eating good food and wearing fine clothing, to an exemplary zealous Sufi or an ascetic.

Nonetheless, the views of 'Umar II (R.A.) on mosque decoration were rather consistent. They just need to be carefully examined against the backdrop of the overall personality of 'Umar II (R.A.), as well as the prevailing socio-political, cultural and religious developments in the Umayyad state. The overarching character of the identity of authentic Muslim art and architecture, which was slowly emerging, warding off a great many potential deviations and excesses, both at the conceptual and practical planes, played also a prominent role. This paper intends to do exactly that. It aims to reconcile between the seemingly contradictory views of 'Umar II (R.A.) on mosque decoration taking the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus as case studies.

In the first part of the paper, different aspects of 'Umar II's (R.A.) attitude towards mosque decoration will be presented. Then, free from elements of the Umayyad socio-political and religious bias and fervor, as well as from the sentimental and overstated Umayyad criticism by some of their opponents, the position of 'Umar II (R.A.) will be thoroughly discussed. The discussion will be three-pronged concentrating on (1) the consistency of the personality of 'Umar II (R.A.), (2) the evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture, and (3) the emergence and impact of the first Muslim architectural deviations.

Two Different Positions of 'Umar II (R.A.) on Mosque Decoration

In 88 A.H./707 C.E., one year after he had been appointed as governor of the Prophet's city of Madinah, 'Umar II (R.A.) was instructed from Damascus by Caliph al-Walīd to reconstruct and enlarge the

Prophet's Mosque. 'Umar II (R.A.) applied himself to the task with vigour, completing it three years later in 91 A.H./710 C.E. The project involved the pulling down of the existing form of the Mosque together with those apartments (*hujurāt*) of the wives of the Prophet (ﷺ) as abutted the Mosque on its eastern side, incorporating them into the Mosque proper. The land and other houses that stood near the Mosque and were also meant to be incorporated by the unprecedented Mosque expansion were purchased from their owners in a way that satisfied all the parties involved. Some people naturally hesitated at first and raised some objections, but in the end had no choice but to agree as the development plans had to proceed and neither they nor the government could maneuver for different solutions. When completed, the Mosque measured about one hundred meters by one hundred meters, that is, ten thousand square meters.⁵ According to some accounts, however, the width of the Mosque was eighty four meters and its length nearly one hundred meters, in which case its total area was about 8,400 square meters. The extension thus was about 2,768 square meters.⁶

There were three categories of workforce, owing to the size and complexity of the construction project. There were firstly local architects, engineers, artisans and general workers who partook in the demolition task as well as in the implementation of the initial and basic planning and building phases. They did their job in advance of the arrival of the more skilled personnel that al-Walīd had undertaken to send from Damascus, then the cosmopolitan Muslim cultural and civilizational hub.⁷ It is narrated that the Caliph even sought the assistance of the Byzantine Emperor in this regard. The latter responded by sending him additional craftsmen and building as well as decoration materials such as fine tiles, mosaic pieces, chains for lamps and gold for ornamentation. Al-Ṭabari reported that the Byzantine Emperor sent "one hundred thousand *mithqāls* (a unit of mass equal to 4.25 grams) of gold, one hundred workers and forty loads of mosaic ... Al-Walīd sent all that on to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz".⁸

'Umar II's (R.A.) keenness in executing the assigned job was well-documented by historians. Though it entailed more than a few glitches, the assignment, nonetheless, was executed admirably. All the misunderstandings – actual or potential – 'Umar II (R.A.) managed to overcome by means of his remarkable piety, humbleness, pragmatism,

open-mindedness and penchant for consultation with the people of knowledge, wisdom and piety. When it was finished, the Prophet's Mosque was a sight to behold. Its new walls were built on a solid foundation of stone on rock, with the structure above the surface constructed with cut and chiseled stone dressed in plaster. This was later on to be covered with marble, or decorated with mosaics. The thickness of the new western wall was less than one meter, while the eastern wall was thicker at one meter and four fingers (*asabi'*). The latter was strengthened due to its proximity to a stream which caused its collapse, along with the wall of the *ḥujrah* (the Prophet's wife 'Ā'ishah's house that contained the graves of the Prophet (ﷺ), Abu Bakr and 'Umar [R.A.]).⁹ That connoted one of a few sustainability measures that rendered the Mosque a reasonably environment conscious building.

The columns, too, were of stone and reinforced with lead and iron to add to their strength and durability. They formed arcades that run parallel to the *qiblah* (direction of prayer) wall. The ceiling was of teakwood, decorated with gold. Minarets were added to the Mosque's morphology for the first time; one minaret was provided for each of the four corners of the hypostyle Mosque.¹⁰ One of them on the western side was taken down during the reign of Caliph Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik (d. 99 A.H./717 C.E.) because it overlooked the house of Marwān b. al-Ḥakam (d. 66 A.H./685 C.E.) which was also the residence of the Umayyad caliphs when they came to Madinah. The two minarets that stood at the two corners of the eastern wall were about 27.2 meters high. The third one at the north-west corner of the western wall was one meter shorter. The dimensions of each minaret were 4 × 4 meters, making them square.¹¹ This was the first time that the hypostyle Mosque was built in such a way that colonnades or cloisters of stone columns on all four sides enclosed a vast inner courtyard.

The roof of the Mosque was double – a decorated ceiling below, of gilded teak, and a lead-covered roof above. That was in order to protect the Mosque from the rain. The lower ceiling's height was nearly 12.5 meters. The first who made the *miḥrāb* (a praying niche for imam or the prayer leader) in the form of a niche, as an important architectural innovation, was 'Umar II (R.A.) who did so in the Prophet's Mosque, regardless of whether he introduced it on his own or at the behest of al-Walīd. Similarly, there was in the Mosque the first instance of a

domical vault in front of the *miḥrāb*, which was to become such a familiar aspect of Muslim architecture.¹²

The *miḥrāb* stood where Caliph ‘Uthman’s (R.A.) *maqṣūrah* was earlier erected, perpendicularly in front of the place where the Prophet (ﷺ) used to lead his Companions in prayers. This was so because both ‘Umar and ‘Uthman (R.A.) enlarged the Mosque towards the southern or *qiblah* direction. After the two expansions, the Prophet’s praying place (*muṣalla*), next to the Perfumed Column (*al-ustuwan al-mukhallaqah*), remained clearly indicated and preserved. However, there was no any *miḥrāb* there yet, unlike what some scholars have contended.¹³ In passing, no other subsequent expansion took place towards the southern direction, and that is why the main *miḥrāb* even today stands where ‘Uthman’s (R.A.) *maqṣūrah* and afterwards the first al-Walīd’s *miḥrāb* had stood. It is called ‘Uthman’s *miḥrāb* (*al-miḥrāb al-‘Uthmani*) with Caliph ‘Uthman (R.A.) being its eponym.

The foreign workers from Byzantium were employed mainly for decoration purposes using gold and mosaics. Half of them were Romans and half Copts from Egypt. The former’s tasks focused on the roof and the rear of the Mosque, while the former worked at the Mosque’s front, including the *qiblah* wall. It was a general perception that the Copts were more skilled and their work output more superb. Some of the workers that handled mosaic decoration are reported to have said that their decorative themes revolved around the concepts of trees (vegetation) and palaces as articulated in relation to Paradise (*jannah*). So concerned and excited was ‘Umar II (R.A.) about the matter that whenever a worker excelled in depicting with mosaics a large and beautiful tree, as a decorative motif in the Mosque, he would reward him with an extra bonus of thirty dirhams.¹⁴ The Mosque expansion did not prove to be a cheap undertaking, despite the prudent nature of ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) personality. For example, only for building and decorating the *qiblah* wall and sections of the double roof, he is said to have spent forty or forty five thousand *dinārs*.¹⁵

In addition, ‘Umar II (R.A.) also had all the mosques in Madinah and its vicinity where Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) had offered prayers, rebuilt as well in carved stone. He likewise passionately busied himself with the general repair and improvement of the roads and other city amenities. He also dug the wells and built water channels for agricultural

and civic use, amidst a host of other schemes for the improvement of local government, administration, justice and all aspects of social, communal and religious life.¹⁶

When he rebuilt and expanded the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, 'Umar II (R.A.) did so in his capacity as the governor of the city at the request of Caliph al-Walid who, in turn, was very pleased with the job when it was done. Around the same time as the construction of the Madinah Mosque, the Caliph himself was building the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on a matchless scale. The latter building exercise lasted nine to ten years, three times the duration of the Prophet's Mosque's construction.

When it was finished, the Umayyad Mosque was reputed as a mosque – perhaps, generally, a religious institution – of no equal in the whole world in terms of fine proportion, size and scale, construction excellence, durability and, above all, the brilliance of its decorative schemes and styles generously executed in gold, mosaics and marble with diverse colors. The Mosque's decoration depicted calligraphic inscriptions, geometric patterns, stylized interwoven floral motifs, and such stylized and denaturalized components as buildings, bridges, fountains, palaces, gardens and trees. To many people since the inception of the Mosque's existence, the scenes depicted represented a vision of Paradise.¹⁷ Titus Burckhardt wrote about the decoration of the Umayyad Mosque: "The walls of the mosque were adorned with mosaics, of which only fragments survive; they represent fantastic towns and palaces, surrounded by flowers and bordered by rivers, all composed with great mastery of design and color, which bears witness to the survival of a school of Byzantine art in the Syria of the Umayyads."¹⁸

For the Umayyad Mosque, too, Byzantine skilled workers, two hundred of them, were employed. Some sources even suggest that al-Walid threatened the Emperor that if he did not send his workers as requested, his lands would have been invaded and the Byzantine religious and cultural heritage under Muslims destroyed.¹⁹ The Mosque thus was a source of religious and national pride to the people of Damascus in particular, and Muslims in general. It symbolized the cultural and civilizational strength of Muslims in a land dotted with elements evocative of the centuries-old cultural and religious dominance of the Byzantine Empire and its Christian orientation and character. It was an act of a

Muslim civilizational self-assertion, so to speak. As a result, many exaggerated accounts and legends in relation to the status of the Umayyad Mosque have been concocted and articulated. Some were even associated with Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ).²⁰

Nonetheless, when he became the Caliph, ‘Umar II (R.A.) developed an aversion to the decoration of the Umayyad Mosque, intending to take from it the gold, marble, mosaics and expensive chains used for lamps and deposit everything in the state or royal treasury (*bayt al-māl*, literally *house of money* or *wealth*). ‘Umar II (R.A.) contested that such was a sign of profligacy and wastefulness, as well as that people were distracted in their prayers by looking at those luxurious elements. He said that he wanted to substitute them by mud, ropes, white draperies and other natural and crude materials.²¹

However, when he was told that therein was a trap for the enemy, ‘Umar II (R.A.) relinquished his initial radical plans, much to the delight of especially the Muslims of Damascus and the whole of Syria.²² That means that the Umayyad Mosque was built, primarily, in order to rival in splendour and magnificence the finest churches of Syria so splendidly built that a great many Muslims ended up holding them in high regard. Hence, building the Mosque enchantingly fair was meant to overshadow the Christian churches and put thereby an end to such an unfavourable and increasingly disturbing custom. According to other reports, additionally, ‘Umar II (R.A.) was convinced by the people that most of the money used for the Mosque’s lavish and so, controversial decoration was not from *bayt al-māl*. Rather, the support came from the people either in the form of their personal contributions, or in the form of their war spoils. At any rate, the structure and decoration of the Umayyad Mosque was left intact.²³ Parenthetically – as a final point – nothing to the similar effect, which could be ascribed to ‘Umar II (R.A.), has ever been reported as regards the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah and its own decorative style and content. ‘Umar II (R.A.) never regretted them.

The Consistency of ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) Personality

The first point to be highlighted in the context of reconciling ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) views about mosque decoration is the striking consistency of his personality. As a person, governor and finally Caliph,

‘Umar II (R.A.) never substantially changed. There was never such a thing as adrastric volte-face or an evolution in his spiritual disposition and moral qualities from an ordinary Umayyad prince engrossed in worldly pleasures, to an ardent Sufi or an ascetic, as suggested by Alami.²⁴

In passing – as a small digression – the term Sufi (*ṣūfī*) was first coined, most probably, around the second half of the 2nd A.H./9th C.E. century so as to refer to some ascetics and hermits who wore wool as opposed to other ascetics and devout men who wore linen and cotton. The idioms *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) and *ṣūfī* (Sufi) did not gain wide currency until the first half of the 3rd A.H./9th C.E. century.²⁵ What is certain is that during ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) era, Sufism existed neither as a scientific discipline nor an established and discernable religious tradition.

‘Umar II (R.A.) was born in Madinah. As a young man, prior to his appointment as the governor, ‘Umar II (R.A.) lived only in the city of the Prophet (ﷺ), surrounded by some of the best scholars of the day from the first and second generation of Islam. During his childhood, though he enjoyed a life of ease and relative prosperity, he committed the whole Qur’ān to memory (*ḥāfīz al-Qur’ān*) and studied Arabic grammar and poetry. He studied *ḥadīth* (the Prophet’s tradition) from different religious masters. From his association with those authorities, ‘Umar II (R.A.) acquired a degree of scholarship which was acknowledged even by the greatest authorities in the fields of various disciplines. He is thus often described as a great jurist, *muḥaddīth* (expert in the Prophet’s tradition), *mujtahid* (an authoritative interpreter of the Islamic law) and reliable *ḥāfīz* of the Qur’ān. He was reputed as one of the most knowledgeable persons in Madinah, the seat of the Islamic learning and the Prophet’s tradition, to whom people often resorted from near and far for answering difficult religious questions.²⁶

When he became the governor of Madinah, ‘Umar II (R.A.) saw the appointment as an opportunity to put his gained knowledge and inherent genius to test by applying them at some of the highest and most demanding personal and social levels of life, adding thus an invaluable practical dimension to what he already had and was ready to offer to others. Hence, he at first was reluctant to take up the governorship job to the point that Caliph al-Walīd was greatly puzzled. When asked why he hesitated to accept and go out to his new job, ‘Umar II (R.A.) replied that he was willing to do so only under certain conditions, the most

important one of which related to his outright rejection to follow the oppressive and iniquitous standards and practices of his predecessors. Caliph al-Walīd's response was: "You are free to do in accordance with what is right and just, even if you would not be able to send us a single *dirham* of revenue".²⁷

As soon as he became the governor, 'Umar II (R.A.) formed a council with which he run and managed the territories under his administration. The council consisted of the leading jurists (*fuqaha'*) and scholars of Madinah. When he assembled them for the first time, he told them that he did not want to take any decisions without consulting them. If they found anyone, especially his officers, committing any acts of oppression or injustice, they must, he commanded them in God's name, report the matter to him. He told them that such was a thing that would earn them heavenly rewards and a good name as supporters of the truth.²⁸ The jurists and scholars, consequently, never stopped regarding him rather as one of them. They regularly prayed for God's blessings on him and his righteous policies.

In terms of his education, wisdom and eloquence, 'Umar II (R.A.) was called "the best of men" and "the master of masters" in front of whom scholars and scientists felt as though they were just like pupils.²⁹ In agreement with his personality, he seriously encouraged and facilitated knowledge-seeking, offering remunerations to teachers and educators. As a sign of things to come, many other small-scale reforms he also started off.

Within this spiritual and intellectual climate, reconstructing and enlarging the Prophet's Mosque was undertaken. While doing his job, 'Umar II (R.A.) must have been further motivated by the verity that the Prophet's Mosque is the second most important mosque on earth – the first being *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* in Makkah – which via its status, overall function and glorious history served as a beacon and guidepost to all Muslims. In addition, the Prophet's Mosque is one of the three mosques to which pilgrimage is strongly recommended to be undertaken – the other two being *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* in Makkah and *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in Palestine. The Prophet's Mosque, it follows, stands for an everlastingly global mosque with a global agenda, meaning and purpose. It is special, commanding a special treatment in every respect.

‘Umar II’s (R.A.) time as the governor in the city of the Prophet (ﷺ) – as well as in the cities of Makkah and Ta’if – was so extraordinary and productive that formal complaints forwarded by the people of the territories under his jurisdiction to Damascus, the seat of the Umayyad power, virtually stopped. Moreover, as a result, many people started migrating to Madinah and Makkah from Iraq, running from and looking for refuge from their governor, al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf (d. 96 A.H./714 C.E.). ‘Umar II (R.A.) regularly complained to al-Walīd against the harshness and oppression of al-Hajjaj towards his people in Iraq, stressing that such was occurring “without any right (on his part) or offense (on theirs)”.³⁰ However, this approach of ‘Umar II (R.A.) did not go down well with the infamous nature of al-Hajjaj’s personality. He held it against ‘Umar II (R.A.) and wrote to al-Walīd, pressurizing him to remove ‘Umar II (R.A.) from his job. Al-Walīd eventually bowed to the mounting pressure from Iraq and in the year 93 A.H./712 C.E. dismissed ‘Umar II (R.A.).

When he became the Caliph in 99 A.H./718 C.E., ‘Umar II (R.A.) ultimately saw the post as an opportunity to diversify and take his reforms, which he in his limited capacity as the governor of Madinah had once instigated, to a whole new level. If truth be told, ‘Umar II (R.A.) never coveted the post of the caliphate. He perceived it as too big a burden to bear, and it was placed on him without obtaining his prior opinion and consent. He reiterated on many occasions that he did not ask for the caliphate because there was no single Muslim anywhere in the world who did not have a right upon him which he had to duly fulfill without demand or notice.³¹ Indeed, that was a dreadful prospect which only a few persons as were granted a special spiritual insight were able to comprehend. Being the governor where the scope of responsibilities was substantially smaller and their intensity lighter was in comparison distinctly less strenuous and exhausting.

To ‘Umar II (R.A.), the caliphate thus was a necessary evil with which, he thought, he was greatly tested, and which on account of his unparalleled spiritual, intellectual and moral aptitude, on the one hand, and the will of those who mattered most in the state insofar as the wellbeing of Muslims and the Muslim community was concerned: the scholars, the righteous and the ordinary people, on the other, he had no choice but to reluctantly accept and responsibly discharge. He felt that he owed it to

the religion of Islam and the people, even if he personally had to suffer. His wife, Fatimah, once said that ever since he became the Caliph, her life and the lives of the members of their household became miserable. “May he never been made the Caliph”, she exclaimed.³²

Thus, when ‘Umar II (R.A.) became the Caliph, on the basis of mutual consultation as a new political culture, benevolence and respect for all, broad spectrum implementation of the national social, religious and economic reforms got into full swing. They covered education, morality, religious zeal and observance, inviting people to Islam (*da‘wah*), welfare programs for the people of all strata of society, taxation systems, military, state administration and improving the Umayyad establishment from the inside. It was as part of this wave of sweeping reforms and general developments that ‘Umar II (R.A.) said what he said about the decorative styles and elements of the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus which, as intended, had instantaneously become the symbol of the Umayyad state and rule. Those views were uttered when he relatively unhindered was carrying through his nationwide reforms deeply rooted in his clear Islamic vision, mission and purpose. Hence, there was nothing inconsistent in ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) personality – and so, in his views towards mosque decoration – at the beginning and end of his political career. There was only gradual maturation as well as crystallization of certain, especially complex, ideas and views, which naturally come to pass in people as they get older, more experienced and more insightful mentally and spiritually. As a standard-setter, ‘Umar II (R.A.) wanted to articulate an extreme sense of religious fervour and practical austerity in relation to the subject of mosque decoration, particularly in situations where many vested interests were also at play – and such was becoming increasingly widespread and condoned – so that the people could take those viewpoints into consideration in their future mosque building undertakings. He wanted to provide an antidote to what was fast becoming a potentially repugnant custom.

The Evolution of the Identity of Muslim Architecture

Generally, it is asserted that the history of Muslim architecture started in earnest with Caliph al-Walīd.³³ Notwithstanding the fallacy of this belief – for the history and identity of Muslim architecture, which

lays emphasis more on the function and serviceability of buildings than on their sheer forms, started with the commencement of the first and exemplary Muslim society in the prototype Muslim city-state of Madinah – it nevertheless clearly demonstrates that during al-Walīd's tenure as the Caliph, some of the final acts of the crystallization and generous enrichment of the recognizable identity of Muslim architecture, as well as its imposition and assertion on the world scene, were more prominent and vibrant than ever before, and rarely paralleled ever after. The whole matter was commensurate with the rest of the happenings on the cultural and civilizational scenes of the dynamic Muslim state, embodying and mirroring their scale and potency. For instance, it was during the rule of al-Walīd that in terms of its conquests and expansion the Muslim state was approaching its zenith. It was then that Andalusia (Spain), Transoxiana, Sindh, Samarkand and Farghana were conquered. Envoys were sent to China as well. Thus, Muslim architecture was increasingly becoming a global phenomenon. If it heretofore was extensively borrowing from other fairly advanced cultures and civilizations, while it was shaping its own distinct identity, the time has finally come for Muslim architecture, while the Muslim state was at the apex of its power, to start giving back to and enrich the general theater of the world's architectural styles.

Indeed, the entire development signified a foremost law or principle of the evolution of civilizations. It was a natural thing and its currents could neither be stemmed nor redirected. That is why 'Umar II (R.A.), despite being an embodiment of piety, simplicity and austerity, did not hesitate to partake in and contribute to the architectural developments in the state. In doing so, he even demonstrated a strong sense of ardor and enthusiasm. For example, when many people objected to the proposition of demolishing the houses of the Prophet's wives, which stood adjacent to the eastern side of the Prophet's Mosque, significantly expanding the Mosque towards that particular direction, 'Umar II, after consulting the Caliph in Damascus, overruled the initial doubts and objections of the opposition and proceeded with the given task anyway.³⁴ The people contended that the houses should have been kept intact so as to serve to everyone as signs of simplicity, propriety and purity. 'Umar II (R.A.) did not deny the validity of their arguments and the aptness of their overall sentiments, but felt that by expanding the Prophet's Mosque as envisioned by the Caliph and himself, greater benefits were set to be

achieved. In its capacity as the second most consequential mosque on earth to which pilgrimage has been strongly urged, the Mosque needed to welcome and accommodate the ever increasing number of worshippers and pilgrims. It had to epitomize, facilitate and further promote and advance the exceptional greatness and strength of the Muslim community on the world scene, thereby advocating the Islamic values and standards that stood for the root-causes of such civilizational triumphs.

Furthermore, ‘Umar II (R.A.) was happy to be associated with some of the greatest innovations in the realm of the vocabulary of Muslim architecture. As mentioned earlier, while rebuilding the Prophet’s Mosque, the notion of the *mihrāb* (the praying niche) was for the first time introduced in Muslim architecture; as was the domical vault in front of the *mihrāb*.³⁵ The minarets were added as well for the first time to the morphology of the Prophet’s Mosque. Their number was four. Likewise, the extent, style and content of Mosque decoration were unheard of in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. Even in the whole of the Muslim world, the only existing structure that could match the Mosque was the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as part of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, which was built by al-Walīd’s father, Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (d. 87 A.H./705 C.E.). ‘Umar II (R.A.) was so enthusiastic about what he was doing that he used to reward with extra bonuses those who really excelled in their work.

It is noteworthy that Raja’ b. Ḥaywah (d. 112 A.H./730 C.E.), a leading scholar and jurist (*faqih*) of the day who was most instrumental in ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) appointment as the Caliph, was also a calligraphist and was the artist most responsible for the detailed calligraphic and decorative inscriptions on the walls and ceilings of the Dome of the Rock.³⁶ All this shows that the evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture was at the heart of the development of the identity of Muslim culture and civilization at large, one reflecting and supporting the other. There were no lines drawn between the religious and secular, and the spiritual and material, realms in the multidimensional social development processes to which the Muslim state was subjected since the inception of its existence. That also shows that, accordingly, everyone was able to participate and make a contribution. The evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture was thus all-inclusive, representing a framework for the implementation of Islam. At a micro level, it mirrored the identity of Islamic culture and civilization.³⁷

What ‘Umar II (R.A.) and some other prominent scholars and religious personalities, like Raja’ b. Haywah, have done was in fact an affirmation of a rising culture in the spheres of the built environment, something that was characteristic only of Islamic civilization. The trend continued for many subsequent centuries and did not start to wane until the serious decline of Islamic civilization when, as a consequence, the spiritual and material, and the religious and secular, aspects became at odds with each other and eventually separated. That further shows that just like every other vital sector of Islamic civilization, architecture and its growth, too, were not only supervised and watched over from a distance by the intellectual and religious leadership in society, but also practiced, directed and regulated right on the ground where the correct translation of ideas and theories into practice was acutely needed. Such was a truly commendable tactic subtly anchored in mutual consultations and a form of *ijtihād* (the exercise of critical thinking and independent judgment). At times, the matter was tantamount to a minor form of *ijmā’* (the universal and infallible agreement of the Muslim community spearheaded by scholars).

An interesting additional illustration – as a small detour – is the creation of the city of Baghdad in 145-150 A.H./762-767 C.E. by Abu Ja‘far al-Mansur (d. 159 A.H./775 C.E.), the second Abbasid Caliph, which transpired less than a half a century after the caliphate of ‘Umar II (R.A.). In the course of building the city, the seat of the Abbasid caliphate, Imam Abu Hanifah (d. 150 A.H./767 C.E.), one of the most illustrious scholars and jurists in the history of Islam, is reported to have been in charge of making the mud bricks until the construction of the city wall next to the moat, one of the two protective walls that encircled the city, was finished. He used to measure and count the bricks with the reed linear, a practice that proved so effective and feasible that the people emulated it thereafter. One of the city’s main streets was later named after him.³⁸ There was also al-Hajjaj b. Arṭāh (d. 149 A.H./766 C.E.), a traditionalist and jurist who lived in Kufah along with Abu Hanifah and later served as the judge of Basrah in Iraq. He was the architect of one of Baghdad’s main mosques by the orders of the Caliph al-Mansur, and he is said to have laid its foundations. It seems, furthermore, that he also played an important role in planning the northern suburbs of the city of Baghdad.³⁹

Obviously, ‘Umar II (R.A.) was regarding the creation of the great Umayyad Mosque as part of the natural evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture as well. As the Umayyad Mosque and the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah were built almost at the same time, albeit with the former starting about one year earlier (87-96 A.H./706-715 C.E.) and finishing due to its size and complexity five years after the latter (88-91 A.H./707-710 C.E.), ‘Umar II (R.A.) could not really follow the exact developments as regards the construction of the Mosque in Damascus. He was so absorbed in the construction and enlargement of the Prophet’s Mosque that he had little or no time to genuinely worry about other projects somewhere else. In addition, he was dismissed as the governor of Madinah three years before the completion of the Mosque in Damascus, so, whatever he might have felt or said about it following its completion was definitely for the consumption of his small inner circles of friends and family members, for he is said to have withdrawn into seclusion, strict religious observance and spiritual contemplation after his dismissal.

However, on becoming the Caliph himself, ‘Umar II (R.A.) developed some grave misgivings concerning the excessive decoration of the Umayyad Mosque, but not because he changed his views about Muslim architecture and the laws that governed the evolution of its identity, but because such evolution was displaying signs of being tainted by certain deviational both conceptual and applied tendencies which resulted from myriad deviations and malpractices connected with several other critical segments of Muslim civilizational development. Thus, when ‘Umar II (R.A.) voiced his concerns about the excessive and disproportionate decoration in the Umayyad Mosque, suggesting that the matter ought to be corrected, he was only defending the intrinsic processes of the Muslim architectural evolution. He was promulgating that Muslim architecture must continue developing, but only along the lines of its natural principles and the principles as well as benchmarks of the Islamic spirituality and ethics. Deviating either from the intrinsic path of civilizational evolution and development, or the path of the Islamic spirituality and ethics, was bound to present itself as the most unnatural and aberrant course of action. It, therefore, had to be rejected and set right.

That ‘Umar II (R.A.) in the end did not strip the Umayyad Mosque of its extravagant decoration implies the astonishing power of the laws

which preside over the evolution of an architectural identity. It also implies how much ‘Umar II (R.A.) was aware of such laws and their authority, and how much he subscribed to their legitimacy. What’s more, ‘Umar II (R.A.) did not do away with the decoration in question because so dynamic and fast-evolving was the identity of Muslim architecture, and so novel and embryonic were the deviations associated with it, that many ambiguities and questions about them kept emerging, but were left adequately neither answered nor solved. Hence, many vague and debatable matters were to be given more time and extra chances to resolve themselves either as potentially constructive or detrimental aspects of Muslim architecture. As we can gauge from ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) debates with the people regarding the decoration under discussion, it was still unclear whether those issues were set to become integral or deviational elements within the body of the Muslim architectural identity. Owing to that, ‘Umar II (R.A.) incessantly consulted people, respecting their opinions and collective wisdom, because the formation and maturation of authentic Muslim architecture was the concern of the whole Muslim community (*ummah*), rather than individuals, and was a global, rather than local, phenomenon.

The Emergence and Impact of the First Muslim Architectural Deviations

The end of the 1st A.H., the beginning of the 8th C.E., century signified the zenith of the Umayyad rule. The most outstanding epoch-making individuals who contributed most to the molding of one of the most memorable legacies were Caliphs al-Walid and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. With regard to the subject of Muslim architecture, it was not a coincidence that exactly around that time it was coming of age and was expanding very rapidly and on a broad front. It was finding its own definitive language principally in its major forms, details and overall physical, intellectual and spiritual functions. If the creation of the Dome of the Rock between 69 and 73 A.H./688 and 692 C.E. was still regarded as belonging to Byzantine art and as Muslim only in terms of the choice of its constituent elements, and if the masterpieces of the second half of the 2nd A.H./8th C.E. and through the 3rd A.H./9th C.E. centuries, such as the great Mosque of Cordova in Andalusia

(Spain), founded in 169 A.H./785 C.E., and the great Mosque of Ahmad b. Tulun in Cairo, finished in 266 A.H./879 C.E., were regarded as the true representations of the fully developed and completely matured identity of Muslim architecture,⁴⁰ then the creation of the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, and all the other high-profile building projects successfully executed during the reign of Caliph al-Walīd, including the reconstruction and expansion of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, signified a critical transition from the formative to the golden era in the history of Muslim architecture.

However, the latest developments came at a price. With the expansion and flourishing of Muslim architecture, such deviations and outright vices as are normally associated with excessive and intense building pursuits, such as extravagance, pride, haughtiness, unhealthy competition, covetousness, self-indulgence, wealth misappropriation, commemorating and symbolizing rulers and dynasties, deadening symbolism and formalism, etc., started to emerge and slowly establish themselves on the Muslim religious and socio-political scenes. The matter was exacerbated by the presence of some persons at the helm of the Muslim cultural and civilizational reality who possessed inadequate intellectual, spiritual or ethical penchant as well as capacity. It is interesting to observe at this point that both the Qur'ān and the Prophet's (ﷺ) *Sunnah* are replete with enlightening edicts as to the true meaning, importance and objectives of building, warning of its two-edged and potentially hazardous nature. For instance, the Prophet (ﷺ) once said: "Every building is a misfortune for its owner, except what cannot, except what cannot (that is, except that which is essential)".⁴¹ He also said: "The Day of Judgment will not come to pass till people start competing in erecting high buildings".⁴²

Some of the biggest architectural deviations for which al-Walīd was responsible for setting in motion at least were constructing buildings with the intention of rendering them as symbols of power, rulers and dynasties, over-spending, pride and making certain aspects of architecture an end in themselves rather than the means. On that score, he is reported to have said, for example: "O people of Damascus! You pride yourselves against others on four things: your air, your water, your fruits and your pigeons, and I wished to add you a fifth one, which is this Mosque".⁴³

And the plan worked perfectly well. The Mosque was universally regarded as a wonder of the world. It was even compared to a palace from Paradise (*jannah*). It was held in awe by both Muslims and non-Muslims. But if it was a source of pride and delight to friends and allies, it was very much a source of distress and unhappiness to foes and rivals. The Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi (d. 169 A.H./785 C.E.), while paying once a visit to the Mosque, lamented: "The Umayyads outshone us (the Abbasids) because of three things: this Mosque for which I know no equal on earth; the nobility of their supporters; and 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, by God, there will never be anyone like him among us." Two other Abbasid Caliphs, al-Ma'mun (d. 218 A.H./833 C.E.) and al-Mu'tasim (d. 227 A.H./842 C.E.), are also reported to have expressed their highest admiration for the Mosque when they visited the Syrian capital.⁴⁴ Moreover, Ibn 'Asakir reported that an official Byzantine delegation while visiting on one occasion Damascus sought permission to visit the Mosque. When they entered and stood under its main dome, they were humbled by its greatness and beauty, feeling compelled but to praise the Caliph as a man behind the vision and construction, and to secretly compliment the religion of Islam which the Mosque, both as a concept and sensory reality, was personifying.⁴⁵

Some historians reported that for the Umayyad Mosque's construction al-Walid brought together the best skills of Persia, India, the *Maghrib* (Muslim West) and the Byzantine territories. He spent the land tax (*kharāj*) of Syria of seven years, and eighteen shiploads of gold and silver obtained as war spoils from Cyprus, plus the mosaics and devices offered to him by the Byzantine Emperor.⁴⁶ Many others questioned, nevertheless, the accuracy of those reports, claiming that they were exaggerated, at best.⁴⁷ Apparently, al-Walid's obsession with architecture and its far-reaching repercussions for other life sectors at last became a burden on the population. The predicament even worsened owing to the exploits of those members of the ruling Umayyad family who followed in al-Walid's footsteps. Thus, when Yazid III (d. 126 A.H./744 C.E.) ascended the throne, he made explicit reference to the matter by saying: "O people, I promise you I will not put one stone on another, nor a brick on another ... I promise you not to use the money of one town in another one until the first town is well served, and its people are not in need".⁴⁸

When ‘Umar II (R.A.) as the governor in Madinah became thrust into the latest state developments as regards architecture, he without the slightest hesitation actively partook in them for the reasons explained in the preceding sections of this paper. However, following his dismissal from the governorship post, ‘Umar II (R.A.) devoted himself to spiritual isolation, contemplation and self-assessment which lasted about three years, from 93 A.H./712 C.E. to approximately 96 A.H./715 C.E.⁴⁹ That phase of his life ended with the death of al-Walīd and the commencement of the caliphate of Sulayman b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 99 A.H./718 C.E.) for whom ‘Umar II (R.A.) acted as advisor. Three years later, Caliph Sulayman died and ‘Umar II (R.A.) became the Caliph following the earlier appointment by the former.

During the phase of isolation and contemplation, ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) eyes became more opened to what exactly was transpiring in the state. He had then more time and was in a better position than before to assess the conditions. He was not burdened by the endless responsibilities of governorship, nor did he owe any answers or explanations for anything to anybody, save his consciousness and God. Among the things that ‘Umar II (R.A.) must have realized were the seeds and the initial manifestations of the first architectural deviations at the forefront of which stood some aspects of the Umayyad Mosque, in particular its decoration. There is no mention of the decoration in the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah and whether he had ever developed a sense of regret concerning it, because, firstly, such was not as extensive, luxuriant and off-putting as was the case with the decoration in the Umayyad Mosque, and, secondly, because the Prophet’s Mosque enjoyed an extraordinary heavenly status in the Islamic faith as well as in history and the hearts and minds of the people.

So, upon becoming the Caliph based in Damascus, ‘Umar II (R.A.) decided to resolve the dilemma. His most farfetched plan was to eliminate altogether the problematic decorative elements. However, he changed his mind when, after consulting the people – as well as his consciousness – he realized that the decoration in question did not amount to clear-cut and conclusive deviations about which the people could arrive at a broad consensus. As such, it was better to leave the quandary as it was, for going against the will of the people in disputed and divisive issues, and worse yet, by imposing on them some difficult and to many unacceptable

propositions, could backfire and produce in the long run more damage than benefit. ‘Umar II (R.A.) thus felt that it was better to educate the people as to the real meaning of those subjects and themes as are pertinent to the notions of building, decoration and aesthetics taken as a whole. And surely, his intensive discussions on the subject of the Umayyad Mosque and its doubtful decorative styles served as the first and perhaps most emphatic lessons in that regard which have been passed on to posterity. It is on account of this that ‘Umar II (R.A.) never ceased to be a true source of inspiration and guidance to the Muslims of all epochs in virtually all segments of the Islamic culture and civilization building processes.

Practically ‘Umar II (R.A.) thought that his own behaviour and personal example will also serve as good lessons. Hence, when it comes to the building enterprise during his tenure as the Caliph, we are told that no single grand building was constructed. He constructed only a few necessary buildings of an ordinary type, and most of them were religious. After a mosque in Madinah had collapsed, its governor drew Caliph ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) attention to the necessity of rebuilding it. ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) reply was: “It was my wish to go from this world without having placed one stone or one brick upon another. However, rebuild this mosque on a medium scale with mud bricks”.⁵⁰ There is a marked resemblance between this statement of ‘Umar II (R.A.) and the earlier one ascribed to Yazīd III where the influence of the former on the latter is readily apparent.

Finally, the following account sums up the above sentiment. According to Ibn Kathīr,⁵¹ al-Walīd’s main obsession was building which was so impactful on the masses that they, too, were so preoccupied and passionate about it that whenever they met, they would ask one another: “What have you built?” and “What have you developed (in terms of buildings and estates)?”. Whereas during the caliphate of ‘Umar II (R.A.), they would ask: “How are your prayers (and other religious obligations)?”, “How much of the Qur’ān did you recite today?” and “How much of *dhikr* (God remembrance) do you perform daily?”, reflecting thereby the extent and profundity of the effect of ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) personality and lifestyle on the masses, and confirming a life principle that *cuius regio, eius religio*, which means “whose realm, his religion”.

Conclusion

At the time of ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) governorship in Madinah, then his caliphate based in Damascus, the phenomenon of Muslim architecture was coming of age and was expanding very quickly and on a broad front. Its vocabulary was being enriched more rapidly and more generously than ever before. Among the personalities who actively participated in the evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture, contributing significantly to its manifold conceptual and palpable physical aspects, were ‘Umar II (R.A.) himself and Caliph al-Walid, the latter definitely surpassing the former in many respects.

At the core of the development of the Muslim architectural identity stood the subject of mosque decoration, both as an idea and a tangible reality. Because the mosque institution played the most prominent role in the growth of Islamic civilization, on the one hand, and because the theme of beauty (aesthetics) occupies such a remarkable rank in the orb of the Islamic message and, as such, in the Muslim psyche, on the other, mosque decoration was no ordinary concern which the Muslim mind needed to put up with. Indeed, it was as good as a heavenly subject matter and so, two-edged. Thus, if not correctly dealt with, it could entail some hazardous consequences.

‘Umar II (R.A.), certainly more than anybody else, was aware of the challenges posed by the rapid developments in the realm of Muslim architecture in general, and mosque decoration in particular. Accordingly, his views and concrete actions as regards mosque decoration were fluid, flexible, multi-dimensional and almost open-ended, so as to accommodate both the general precepts and specific guidelines of the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s *Sunnah*, and the growing exigencies of the time, space and cultural factors. ‘Umar II’s (R.A.) views signified that he was cognizant of the astonishing power and authority of the laws that hold sway over the evolution of an architectural identity, fully subscribing to their legitimacy. He indirectly defended the intrinsic processes to which the Muslim architectural evolution and its most critical segment, mosque decoration, were subjected. He upheld that the authentic mosque decoration styles and systems must continue developing, but only in line with their natural principles and the principles as well as benchmarks of the Islamic spirituality and ethics. Swerving either from the intrinsic path of

civilizational evolution and progress, or the path of the Islamic ethos, was bound to present itself as the most unnatural and deviant strategy. It thus had to be repudiated and rectified.

Surely, failure to come to terms with these physical and metaphysical variables that whittle the core of 'Umar II's (R.A.) position on mosque decoration inevitably leads a casual observer to contend that his views on the subject were rather incoherent. However, that would be grossly inappropriate and unfair to the authentic history of Muslim architecture and mosque decoration, as well as to the amazing and standard-setting personality of 'Umar II (R.A.).

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