CHAPTER 3: MIHRAB IN MEDIEVAL MOSQUES

The field of Islamic art and architecture takes up a huge coverage of Islamic lands between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans; from the Sahara Desert to the greens of Central Asia (Bloom et al 2002; xi). The styles of these Islamic art and architecture were formed from the 7th until the early 20th century and have influenced the Islamic built environment around the world since then especially in the design and making of mosque and its components.

Figure 3.1 below, shows the timeline of various Muslim Dynasties that has administered, expand and spread the Islamic faith, guided by verses of the Al-Quran and Hadiths, throughout the world beginning with the Ummayad Dynasty to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1922.

![Figure 3.1: Medieval Timeline](www.middle-ages.org.uk/middle-ages-timeline.htm)
3.1 THE ISLAMIC DYNASTIES AND THEIR MOSQUES

According to Hasan-uddin (1983) mosque is a centre piece of research that has formed and treasured the fundamental basis of Muslim architecture. With this notion, prior to a study on mosque architecture is planned to take place, it is only fair that study on the mosques built in the medieval period to be studied first. In order to avoid indeterminate state, the author sees that it is best to go through the periods of Islamic dynasties in selecting the mosques to be on this study list. The Islamic Dynasties are customarily linked with the genesis of Islamic art and architecture because simultaneously, history of Islamic military conquests from the death of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in 632 AD could be traced in chronological and geographical ways (Hillenbrand, 1999; 11).

3.1.1 The Umayyads and Their Mosques

Most of the mosques during the Umayyad Dynasty were conversion of temples and churches, which had undergone major renovation. Different from churches, which normally give the feeling of being enclosed, mosques in the medieval Islamic era, especially during the Umayyad Dynasty, is opened to the courtyard providing free flow of daylight and air.

According to Wijdan Ali (1999), Umayyad architecture is respectfully shown in the Great Mosque of Damascus. It is also a clear example on the innovative use of space, where a number of new, important and meaningful elements of Islamic architecture are contained.

When Damascus was taken by the Muslims, many churches were converted into mosques. A prominent example is the Great Mosque of Damascus which started as an Aramean temple in 3000BC. It was then taken by the Christians, under the Emperor Theodosius, as their church of St John the Baptist, in 379 AD.
Major changes were made to the floor plan in order for it to become a mosque.
The west door of the church had to be blocked and the north wall was pierced to
allow the existence of doorways which ended with a lateral axis perpendicular
to the direction of the Qibla. In inaugurating the mosque, it was said that Caliph
Al-Walid bin Abdul Malik made the announcement stated below (Flood 2000).

“Inhabitants of Damascus, four things give you mark superiority over
the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruits, and your
baths. To this I wanted to add a fifth: this mosque”.
Flood, 2000 on Caliph Al- Walid bin Abdul Malik

The Great Mosque of Cordoba is another significant example of Islamic
architecture built in the Umayyad Dynasty. Even though the mosque went
through major renovations and expansions, the basic formula of arcades was
maintained in each of the additions. The arches create mysterious space that is
often described as a forest of stone (Alejandro, 2005; 81-85).

![Diagram of floor plans with imaginary axis lines](Retrieved from: Arieda, 2003)

Figure 3.2: Umayyad Mosques

- **Mihrab Visibility**

  The floor plan of both mosques in Figure 3.2 shows clear visibility of the
  Qibla wall from the entrance via the courtyard creating focal point for the
  users towards the Qibla direction. In Damascus Mosque, a series of
  arcades provide aisles that emphasized position of Mihrab (Flood, 2000;
  193).
• **Mihrab Shape**

The Mihrab is in semi-circular shaped niche and formed in concave. This is one feature that is certain to be found in Caliph Al-Walid mosques (Flood, 2000). A small dome in front of the Mihrab is employed to terminate the axial nave made by the centre aisle. However, Mihrab of the Cordoba Mosque is not a niche from the Qibla wall but rather an octagonal shaped chamber built along the Qibla wall.

![Figure 3.3: Mihrab Niche of Damascus Mosque and Mihrab Chamber of Cordoba Mosque](image)

**Figure 3.3: Mihrab Niche of Damascus Mosque and Mihrab Chamber of Cordoba Mosque**

![Figure 3.4: Vine Frieze in Damascus Mosque After Flood 2000. Retrieved from: www.hispanic-muslim-architecture-iii.html (figure 3-3 & 3-4)](image)

**Figure 3.4: Vine Frieze in Damascus Mosque After Flood 2000. Retrieved from: www.hispanic-muslim-architecture-iii.html (figure 3-3 & 3-4)**

• **Mihrab Ornamentation**

According to Flood, (2000; 111) in the Great Mosque of Damascus, existence of vine frieze on top of the Mihrab frame is part of building standards during the reign of Caliph Al-Walid. It was set to be a defining decorative style in most imperial mosques built during the time. The
vision of Al-Firdausi is taken as the main component of ornamentation in the prayer hall especially the Qibla wall of both Umayyad Great Mosques. Syrian architectural features in Cordoba Mosque were apparent at the beginning but then through renovations and time, they were absorbed by local traditions and new innovations; for example the horse-shoe arch framing the Mihrab chamber (Figure 3.3), is said to be borrowed from the 6th century Visigoth Church of Santa Maria de Melque in Spain.

3.1.2 The Abbasids and Their Mosques

During Abbasids era, standard type of Jami’ or Friday or congregational mosques were found. Abbasids’ art and architecture were influenced by Sassanian, Seljuk and Central Asian as what could be seen in the Mosque of Samarra (Jamila et. al., 2001; 18-20).

According to Fairchild (1990), Abbasid architecture built its own characteristics such as the famous Abbasid spiral minaret as seen in front of the Mosque of Abu Dulaf, 848-852 (Yalman, 2000).

Like the other historical buildings in Samarra, Abu Dulaf Mosque is in ruins. An excavation work was conducted by Iraqi Department of Antiquities in 1940 and it was found that its outer main structure consisted of 40 semicircular towers including the main four at the corners of the rectangular mosque.

Figure 3.5: Floor Plan of Abu Dulaf Mosque (Arieda, 2003)
The interior is organized by two sets of arcades running perpendicularly in the form of arches. One is the 16 arcades running north to south and the other set is the 17 arcades running east to west, intersecting right in front of the Mihrab. At both sides of the Mihrab, there are doors connecting the mosque to the governor’s palace.

- **Mihrab Visibility**

  If a line were to be constructed from the *minaret* point, the entrance point and the centre of the Mihrab niche, an axis will be drawn. Mihrab can be seen directly from the entrance point.

- **Mihrab Shape**

  The Mihrab is in semi circular concave taken after Umayyad mosques.

![Figure 3.6: Mihrab Niche of Abu Dulaf Mosque. Retrieved from: www.dur.ac.uk/derek.kennet/abudulaf.htm](image)

- **Mihrab ornamentation**

  The Mihrab is celebrated like a great doorway right at the centre of Qibla wall. The semicircular shaped niche takes up to the ceiling level flanked by two sets of columns left and right. The niche is then framed by rectangular shaped stucco which is at the same level as the wall face. All construction of Abu Dulaf Mosque is from baked mud bricks and stucco.
3.1.3 The Tulunids and Their Mosques

The Mosque of Ibnu Tulun was completed in 879 AD. The baked brick structure became an important landmark of Tulunid capital for 26 years, reflecting most of the characteristics feature of Abbasid art and architecture. These include the famous Samarian spiral minaret, rectangular piers in the prayer hall, semicircular columns on the external structure and stucco decorations. This mosque is the oldest best preserved mosque in Egypt and contains the oldest and richest stucco decorations, resembling the mosque of Samarra (Fikri, 1961).

Similar to the Abu Dulaf Mosque and other mosques of Samarra, there are two doors located on each side of the Mihrab on the Qibla wall. The doors lead to the Dar-al-Imara (governor’s palace) which has three rooms. Altogether there are six Mihrabs along the Qibla wall. The only concaved Mihrab is the main Mihrab its niche reaches the height of the ceiling.

- Mihrab Visibility

As the other medieval mosques, the visibility of Mihrab from entrance point is good.

Figure 3.7: Mosque of Ibnu Tulun (Fikri, 1961)
• **Mihrab Shape**

The Mihrab is in semi circular concave, similar to the one in Samarra. The pointed arch in front of Mihrab niche is flanked by two pairs of marble columns.

![Figure 3.8: Mihrab Niche of Ibnu Tulun Mosque.](Qibla_of_the_Ibn_Tulun_mosque.jpg)

• **Mihrab Ornamentation**

There is a band of calligraphy on top of the Mihrab arch, inscribing the ‘Syahadah’ in Kufic script.

3.1.4 **The Fatimids and Their Mosques**

Similar to the mosque of Ibn Tulun, the interior structure of Al-Hakim Mosque in Fatimid dynasty is formed by series of arcades carried on rectangular shaped brick piers. Two distinguished differences between the Mosque of Ibn Tulun and Al-Hakim Mosque are the newly existed *minarets* and monumental entrance in Al-Hakim Mosque. The portal with ornamental recesses gives the characteristics to Fatimid architecture (Meinecke-berg, 1978; 222). The Mihrab of Al-Hakim Mosque is emphasized with a wide and long aisle perpendicular to the Qibla wall. The aisle is then terminated right in front of the Mihrab and marked by a dome on top. Two other domes are used to mark both ends of the Qibla wall.
• **Mihrab Visibility**

1. The Mihrab can clearly be seen from the entrance point. The position of the Mihrab is also visible from the mosque roof marked by semi circular dome and the central nave in front of the Mihrab is raised higher above the roof.

![Figure 3.9: Al-Hakim Mosque, After K.A.C. Creswell, 1952](image)

• **Mihrab Shape**

The Mihrab is shaped semi circular in concaved form. The ceiling of the Mihrab is defined by semi circular dome.

![Figure 3.10: Mihrab Niche of Al-Hakim Mosque. Retrieved from: www.reviews-Al_Hakim_Mosque-Cairo.html](image)

3.1.5 **The Almoravids and Their Mosques**

The Great Mosque of Tlemchen is in irregular pentagon shape measures about 60 meters by 50 meters. The prayer hall is rectangle made up of thirteen parallel aisles that run perpendicular to the Qibla wall. Similar to other medieval mosques, the central aisle is given special treatment and it leads to the Mihrab. A dome appeared in front of its Mihrab. According to Jairazbhoy (1972), Cordoban influence in Tlemcen mosque is much being expected because
artisans and architects from Cordoba were brought in during the construction of the mosque.

Figure 3.11: Floor Plan of the Great Mosque of Tlemchen, Arieda 2003

Figure 3.12: Mihrab Niche of the Great Mosque of Tlemchen. Retrieved from: www.touristspots.org/tourist-spots-in-algeria/tlemchen

3.1.6 The Ottomans and Their Mosques

The oblong prayer hall of Üç Serefeli Mosque is preceded by an open court. There are three portals to reach the open court located on the northwest, the northeast and the southwest. An ablution fountain occupies the center of the court. On top of the prayer hall appears to be a huge dome measuring 24 meters in diameter.
The upper wall of the Mihrab is decorated with painted patterns of interlocking wheels and stars. The window panes on its left and right sides reflect the wood carving motifs of the period. The niche shape is semi decagonal and finished with plain white marble.

3.1.7 The Safavids and Their Mosques

The Safavids Dynasty (1501-1732 AD) was formed in Iran and Iraq and its center was in Tabriz, Qazbar and Isfahan. Shah Abbas who ruled from 1587-1629 is said to be the initiator of Persian architecture (Pope 1965 p 207). This Persian architecture achieved a high level of visual art through coloured mosaic and glazed tiles that were brought to a peak of perfection during that time. In Isfahan, the Maidan (public square) is the most impressive sight to behold and it is still in operation today. The most prevalent type of mosque design during the Safavid era is the Iwan style. Four Iwans Masjid-i Shah is a typical mosque.
built during Safavid period. The *Iwans* are all open to a central courtyard and the largest is of course the main entrance which is directly connected to the mosque’s prayer hall.

![Diagram of Shah Mosque](www.flickr.com/photos/peteshep/4280496673/)

**Figure 3.15: Orientation of I-Shah Mosque. Retrieved from: www.flickr.com/photos/peteshep/4280496673/**

- **Mihrab Visibility**

  Entrance portal to the Shah Mosque is aligned with the roadside on the *maidan* square but the rest of the building is rotated about 45 degrees to face Mecca (Blair and Bloom, 2004:512-513). From the portal an axis is seen through the courtyard and the middle of prayer hall. The visual peak of this axis is at the centre Mihrab.

- **Mihrab Ornamentation**

  The Mihrab is in semi hexagonal shallow niche. The Mihrab and the Qibla wall are fully decorated with mosaic of ceramic tiles forming various geometric and floral patterns. During the Safavids Dynasty, every surface and element of the mosques are covered with colours and patterns. A simple *muqarnas* topped the Mihrab and fronted by pointed arch.
3.1.8 The Mughals and Their Mosques

During the Mughal Dynasty most of the mosques were built in the city centre. Muslims lived within the vicinity of the mosques. Urban expansion continued with the opening of more cities, therefore more mosques were built (Blake, 1991: 26-30). In the fort of Agra, a unique mosque was built in white marble and so called the Pearl Mosque or Moti Mosque. This mosque is an evidence of the great craftsmanship of the Mughals. It is crowned by 3 domes, all of which are on top of the Qibla wall; one at the centre and the other two at the extreme ends.

Moti Mosque employs multiple niches on its Qibla wall and the Mihrab is in direct axis from the entrance point. There are six more niches on the left and right of the Mihrab emphasised by the outline of multi foil arch in white marble similar to the second layer of the Mihrab arch.
Mihrab Shape and Design

The niche of Mihrab is shaped in semi hexagonal. The Mihrab wall is concaved and merged as a half domed ceiling on top. Mihrab is finished with white marble.

3.1.9 The Han’s Muslim in the Ming Dynasty and their Mosques

During the days of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Islam was informally brought to China by the Arab traders. Islam formally began to spread in China during the time of the Caliph Uthman bin Affan r.a. (650 AD). The Emperor of China was called Yung Wei.

Yung Wei loved Islam so much that he ordered a ‘memorial mosque’ to be built. The Great Xi’an Mosque is said to be the largest and best preserved mosque among the available historical mosques in China and it still stands proudly today.

Culture and tradition have deeply influenced the overall floor plan of the Great Mosque of Xi’an as it resembles a Chinese temple (Figure 3.19) which normally has courtyards with pavilions and pagodas. There is an axis collecting all the courtyards in line and the main focus is at the prayer hall court. The axis starts from the entrance court of the mosque and stops directly at the Mihrab end which lay at the centre of the Qibla wall.
This axis runs through the prayer hall entrance and the Mihrab. The Qibla wall is situated at the western end of the mosque court. During the day, the Qibla wall seems dimly lit due to the existence of two skylights.

The Mihrab is shaped in rectangular niche with flat ceiling. The arch on the façade of niche is about two meters high and is ornamented with carved arabesque and calligraphy.
### 3.2 MEDIEVAL MOSQUES AND THEIR MIHRABS

Bloom (2002; xi), stated that the development of mosque’s spatial organization, calligraphy and arabesque took off during the Medieval period. Hence, worldwide Islamic architecture got their forms, techniques and themes in erecting their mosques during the Medieval period starting from the Umayyad Dynasty.

During the reign of the Umayyads, Christian Byzantine architecture had great influences on Islamic design with capital columns structuring hypostyle mosques. In the middle of 8th Century, Abbasid architecture started to appear with its spiral minaret and semi circular columns. Later, ‘Four Iwan’ mosque plans came into picture sometime during the 11th century under Seljuks Dynasty of Iran, especially in Isfahan. In the middle of 13th century i.e. during the reign of Ottoman Empire, huge internal space was created by employing a single central dome (Grabar, 2007; 44).

#### 3.2.1 Mosque Floor Plan

Designers and builders of Medieval mosques put great emphasis on the axis and visibility of Qibla direction. In the Abbasid mosque, the axis is much stronger with the existence of a spiral minaret before the entrance point.
In all the 10 selected medieval mosques, shape of their floor plans is rectangle, with the longer sides lay parallel to the Qibla wall providing a longer *saf* (praying line) formation.
Most of the prayer halls are filled with series of columns forming aisle sanctuaries. The biggest aisle collects the entrance point of the prayer hall to the Mihrab thus enhances the Mihrab visibility.

Most of these Medieval floor plans are divided into three spaces, namely the entrance portal, courtyard and prayer hall. The entrance portal is signified by a dome on top or by Iwan (Safavid mosque) whilst the courtyard is mostly centered by an ablution fountain where it is most conveniently situated.

3.2.2 Mihrab Shape and Form

Most of the mosques under study owned semi circular niche concave Mihrabs. This type of Mihrab is also called Mihrab Mudjawwaf. However, in the Tlemcen and Moti mosques, semi octagonal shaped niche are employed for the Mihrabs. This octagonal shaped niche found in the Tlemcen Mosque (1136) and the Moti Mosque (1662) during the Almoravid and the Mughal period respectively, is not something new as it had already been used earlier in the Great Mosque of Cordoba during the Umayyad Spain period. However, instead of having a niche, the Great Mosque of Cordoba employs a full octagonal shaped room positioned in the middle of the Qibla wall as a Mihrab chamber. The Great Mosque of Xi’an is the only Mosque under study that owns a rectangular shaped niche with a flat ceiling. Rectangular shaped niche was first introduced by the Persian and reached China through the traders during the 7th century (Dillon, 1999; 11-15).

- Mihrab Mudjawwaf

*Mihrab Mudjawwaf* is a semi-circular concaved Mihrab. It was first introduced by Umar b. Al-Aziz, the governor of Medina, when rebuilding Prophet Muhammad ﷺ’s mosque (706-707) on the very site of the
Prophet Muhammad 🗝️’s house (Whelan, 1986; 205-223). According to Whelan, the first Mihrab Mudjawwaf was built to commemorate the point where the Prophet Muhammad 🗝️ faced when leading the congregation. Therefore the Mihrab was not initially introduced as part of architectural elements but rather as a commemorative and historical value. Whelan (1986) then goes on concluding,

“Yet, from its inception, the mihrab mudjawwaf was the focus for the imam as he led the Friday prayers; it thus served to indicate the surah (praying space) for him and for the entire congregation. Surely it was this very precise function in the Islamic worship service that caused the mihrab mudjawwaf to be adopted almost immediately for every mosque in Islam, large or small.”
Whelan, 1986; 215

The existence of semi circular concaved Mihrab is then studied by Khaiyat (1996) who agrees on its use as an indicator towards the Qibla direction and a praying space for the imam whilst leading the congregational prayers. Khaiyat (1996) also found that semi circular concaved Mihrab has a certain acoustical implications. Sound wave reflected on concaved form provides better vibration in projecting the imam’s voice when reciting verses during prayers hence could be heard by larger congregations.

In the architectural vocabulary of Mihrab by El-Gohary (1984; 123), Mihrab consists of two elements i.e. walls and columns. The imam will face a solid wall which is normally built in a concaved form and the columns are erected on both his sides.

- **Other Mihrab Niche**

Iraqi and Persian introduced the rectangular Mihrab as a rule to their territory. This could be influenced by Persian Iwan or the rectangular recesses of Nestorian churches in Iraq. Later, sizes of Mihrab began to vary according to the size of mosque. However, Mihrab does not need to
be enlarged because its usage is still for a single person (*imam*). Sauvaget, (1947; 149) commented on Umayyad’s Mihrabs which are fairly uniform in size regardless of the mosque scale. He viewed the Mihrab to be just big enough for one person. Whelan’s (1986; 221-222) study of 12 Umayyad Mihrabs showed that most Umayyad’s Mihrabs have a maximum width of 2m and thus suits a single user regardless of the mosques size’ but his table is incomplete without the Mihrabs’ height and hence no concrete conclusion could be made.

3.2.3 The Visibility of Mihrab

Directional guidance on ‘where the believers’ focus should be turned to is an important aspect to be considered in designing mosques. One way to achieve focal point is by celebrating the Mihrab and Qibla wall. Hillenbrand’s (2001) study on medieval mosques clearly shows that decoration is concentrated at places where it has the most effect such as the Portals (entrances), Mihrabs and Royal Throne rooms. The Mihrab which is considered to be a late comer in mosque components accorded the most visual prominence and status compared to other mosque components (Hillenbrand 1994).

Babur’s mosque which was built in 1527 (under Mughal dynasty), it is seen that the Qibla wall is finished with stone-faced while the other walls are finished with plastered stucco over brick work. There is a bay leading to the centre of Qibla wall (Mihrab) in most of medieval mosques that suggests the focal point of the entire prayer hall. The Mihrab is also visible from the outside through the wide opened entrance. The Mihrab draws the visitors’ attention with verses

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1 ‘The wall facing the Ka’aba. Islamic architecture has always converges on a focal point; in mosque the point of emphasis is the Mihrab, if it is in a garden pavilion the points meet at the center of a cross axis and the tomb of saint will be the point of emphasis in any mausoleum (Ardalan et al 1973 pp70-75).
from Al-Quran written in artistic calligraphy (Geraldine et al, 1992). Ardalan (1980) confidently mentioned that Mihrab is the ‘object’ of Islamic architecture. This object is the main physical component of mosque architecture. Allah the Almighty is the centre of the universe and this is carried by the central focus of Ka’aba where all the mosques throughout the earth align their Mihrabs and Qibla walls (Wijdan Ali 2001).

Ardalan (1980) believes that art historian scholars should not take examples of figurative art in examining and explaining Islamic art and architecture. On the other hand, tangible elements of sacred architecture such as Mihrab on the Qibla wall ought to be given similar consideration as it carries the entire architecture comprising of geometry, arabesque and calligraphy.

3.2.4 Mihrab Ornamentation

Mihrab should be comprehended, honoured and treasured as one of the important elements of Islamic art and architecture. When mosques were built during the Umayyad Dynasty (661-750), Mihrab and Qibla wall started to receive a facelift, where they were heavily decorated with meaningful motifs and ornamentation defining its distinctive features of Al-Jannah (paradise) in Islamic art and architecture. In contemporary mosques, the meaning and significance of Mihrab is taken literally and superficially, resulting in most raw motifs and ornamentation being copied bluntly, leaving doubts and queries. Some of the mosques only give full attention on the Mihrab alone, leaving the rest of the Qibla wall, which is impregnating the former, less ornamented or sometimes even blanked.

The scope of beauty covers the desire to create with motifs and ornamentations which goes as far as virtually every aspect of daily life i.e. clothing, utensils, cars, lighting fixtures, electric appliances and of course architecture (Kerlogue
Modern art and architecture stressed on design principles, spatial organizations, the structural and physical strength of buildings without paying much attention to the motifs and ornamentation.

Motifs and ornamentation help beautify the ambiance of mosques internally. Pleasant and comfortable environment encourage believers to pray and meditate towards Allah the Almighty in the mosques. However, ornamenting Mihrab and Qibla Wall is not as simple as choosing wall papers for the bedrooms.
There are a lot of aspects that need to be considered because ornamentation in mosques and mosque architecture is not merely decoration. Since there are no guidelines to be followed, historians such as Nasr (1985) pays much attention to the aesthetical aspect in his works and they are fruitful for the upcoming generations. As quoted from his book,

“The calligraphy related directly to the Divine Word, may be said to symbolize the Principle of creation, the geometric elements symbolizing the immutable patterns or masculine aspect while the arabesques, related to life and growth, represent the living, changing and maternal aspect of creation. Seen in this light, the calligraphy can be contemplated as the principle from which the two other elements of Islamic patterns, namely the geometric and arabesques, originate and into which they become integrated as all the cosmic dualities become integrated in the unity of the Principle.”

Nasr (1985; 29)

From Nasr’s explanation, it is clear that all the elements in Islamic ornamentation are mostly captured together and seldom leave anything behind. According to Nasr, appropriate elements of Islamic ornamentation will be highlighted through evidences from the medieval mosques and studies made by scholars. The result will be taken as comparisons to the Malaysian mosques under study in the following chapters.

**Calligraphy**

Some Mihrabs in medieval mosques contain one of two verses from the Al-Quran which mentioned the word 'Mihrab' i.e. verse 3:37 or verse 3:39 shown below.

“Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty: To the care of Zakariya was she assigned. Every time that he entered (Her) chamber (Mihrab) to see her, He found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! Whence (comes) this to you?" She said: "From Allah: for Allah Provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure."”

Al-Quran, sura 3: verse 37

“While he was standing in prayer in the chamber (Mihrab), the angels called unto him: "Allah doth give thee glad tidings of Yahaya, witnessing the truth of a Word from Allah, and (be
besides) noble, chaste, and a prophet, - of the (goodly) company of the righteous.”

Al-Quran, sura 3: verse 39

Hamzah 2007 reported another popular inscription for Mihrab below.

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His Light is as a niche where in is a lamp. The lamp is in a chandelier (of glass). The chandelier is as it were a star glittering like a pearl; it is lighted from the blessed olive tree which is neither of east nor of west, it is near that its oil may flare up even though the fire touches it not. The Light is upon the Light. Allah guides to His Light whomsoever He will and Allah narrates examples for the people. And Allah knows all things.”

Al-Quran, Sura An-Nur (24): verses 35-38

Another frequently used verse for ornamenting Mihrab and Qibla wall is:

“It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and give Zakat, to fulfill the contracts which ye have made; and through all periods of panic, such are the people of truth, the God–fearing.”

Al-Quran, Sura Al-Baqarah (2): verse 177

The verse has been elaborated that Allah the Almighty wants Muslims to believe in what they are doing. It is not only a matter of facing the Ka’aba but most of all joining the two aspects of believing and doing at the same time (Ayatullah and Fadlullah, 2002). The verses mentioned above are among the most appropriate ones taken from the Al-Quran to be commemorated in mosques especially at the Mihrabs.

**Geometrical Patterns**

Craftsmen in the world of Islamic art and architecture have adorned buildings with ornamentation in term of geometrical designs. These geometrical expressions are still among the most recognizable expressions of Islamic art, architecture and culture among Muslims and non-Muslims in a similar way (Broug, 2008). The word culture is included in Broug’s (2008) explanation because culture is the main influence that differ one
design to another even though the basic theme is geometrical. Different dynasties have different aesthetic sensibilities and this is elaborated and shown in this study that looks into selected medieval mosques. Apart from that, identity of Islamic art is still remained by the existence of ‘originality’. According to Ardalan et al (1973), ‘originality’ comes with permanence and changes. Permanence is derived from the archetypes that follow the geometrical rules of art forms. Changes happened when creative imagination of certain community or culture proposed for new techniques, functions and materials according to their needs.

Most of the time art in Islamic worlds would make anybody fix his eyes on with great admiration (Broug 2008). This is one of the qualities of Islamic art and architecture that is needed in mosques; to be admired by anybody, thus giving the welcoming effect not only to the Muslims but also to the rest of the world. Like the verses chosen for the inscription on Mihrab and Qibla wall, the themes for geometrical patterns are also judged in high deliberation by the medieval craftsmen. Remembering Allah the Almighty is the foremost thing to do in Muslim everyday activities. This is supported by Al-Quran and Hadiths.

"Then do ye remember Me I will remember you.”
Al-Quran, Sura Al- Baqarah (2): Verse 152

“The Prophet (Peace be upon him) said that Allah Ta'ala has angels roaming the roads to find the people of dhikr, i.e. those who say La Ilaha Illallah and similar expressions, and when they find a group of people (qawm) reciting dhikr, they call each other and encompass them in layers until the first heaven -- the location of which is in Allah's knowledge. (This is to say, an unlimited number of angels are going to be over that group).”

Hadith from Al-Bukhary and Muslim

This is the basic guideline of ornamenting Mihrab and Qibla wall. For example, the decoration of the prayer hall in the Great Mosque of
Damascus is derived from the imagination of *Al-Firdaus* (the highest level of paradise).

“Al-Firdaus is the vineyard and the grapes on a high mountain from which the rivers of Paradise are born: it is the centre of Paradise, the highest part of Paradise…”

Flood (2001) on *Kitab Wasf Al-Firdaus* by Ibn Habib

Those images of paradise were then transformed into geometrical expression in the later mosques and this job is called “*art duty*” by Wijdan (2001); transforming the physical environment into a reflection of the spiritual world to enhance the awareness of God through the creation and contemplation of aesthetic creation.

### 3.3 CONCLUSION

By pointing towards Mecca, the direction in which all Muslims pray, the Mihrab symbolizes unity in the diverse world. Apart from this strongly agreeable notion the Mihrab, for all the believers of Islam, must act as a welcoming element despite the physically simple look of the mosque. Typological study of the floor plans, (Figure 3.21), shows that in the medieval mosques, the Mihrab appears in all Qibla walls. The aisle leading to the Mihrab is most of the time the biggest among the other aisles in the prayer hall. The builders of medieval mosques were concerned on the Mihrab visibility from the entrance point. Upon standing at the portal of mosque, visitors will readily face the Qibla direction. The visibility of Mihrab is made clearer with the appearance of ailed sanctuary. In the case of Shah Mosque or Imam Mosque in Isfahan, the floor plan is rotated at about a forty five degree angle from the road line to get the entrance and prayer hall parallel to the Qibla wall.

Study of ten selected medieval mosques concludes that in designing the mosque interior, attention must be given to the four aspects as listed:
1. Prayer Hall floor plan with rectangle shape, the longer sides parallel to the Qibla Wall.

2. Increasing the Mihrab visibility from the entrance point/points by having liturgical axis that leads believers to the Qibla direction upon entering the mosque.

3. Designing the appropriate shape and form of Mihrab

4. Ornamenting the Mihrab and Qibla wall with appropriate verses of Al-Quran, calligraphy and motifs.

The Mihrab and Qibla wall started to receive changes and improvement from time to time when Muslim builders realized the importance of Mihrab and started to express it in terms of ornamentation and variety of designs. There are times that they combined the shape of the niche plan as in the Great Mosque of Mawsil, which appears to hold a combination of flat and rectangular type Mihrab. During the reign of Al-Walid, Mihrab had become an important architectural element as the most significant feature of the entire mosque.

Ardalan (1980), made a research on 130 major mosques across the Muslim world and each mosque (100%) showed the existence of Mihrab. Therefore, it is confirmed that Mihrab is accepted by all cultures and diversities. It is also important to recognize the true meaning behind the existence of the Mihrab on the Qibla wall. This heart of mosque also acts as a symbol of Islamic faith that needs to survive with some preservation of its unique identity and dignity for Islam globally.