

# The heroine of Kerbela:

## A Visit to the mosques of Sayeeda Zainab in Egypt and Syria

> Cairo & Damascus -  
Moushira El-Fishawy

Muslims always built, mausoleums and sanctuaries particularly for members of Ahl Al Bayt (family of the Prophet), to honour them and to receive their blessings. It is generally observed that each prophet or companion of a prophet has a mosque with only one mausoleum.

The single exception to this rule is the construction of two mosques and two mausoleums for the same person in two different countries, Egypt and Syria. Both countries ▶



The dome of the mosque of Sayeeda Zainab/Cairo

قبة مسجد السيدة زينب/القاهرة



نسخة خطية من القرآن الكريم تنسب إلى الإمام علي (ع)  
Imam Ali's copy of the Koran

نسخة خطية من  
القرآن الكريم تنسب إلى  
الخليفة عثمان (رض)

Caliph Othman's copy  
of the Koran



The pulpit and mihrab/Cairo

ضريح السيدة زينب/دمشق

have their arguments and evidence supporting their version that the holy burial is on its ground. Whatever the historical truth, this divergence reveals the deep love for this lady and the competition to have the honour to accommodate her remains and profit from her blessings.

She is the girl of Banu Hashem, the heroine of Kerbela, the "Mother of Hashem", known to the Egyptians as "Um Al Awajez" (mother of needy) and the "President of Diwan", namely Sayeeda Zainab, the daughter of Ali Ben Abi Taleb and Fatema-Azzahra, and grand-daughter of Prophet Mohammed.

### Birth and early life

Sayeeda Zainab was born in the 6th year of Hegira in the house of the Prophet in Medina. The Prophet chose her name, in commemoration of his daughter Zainab, killed by a non-believer. She was known as "Zainab the Senior", to distinguish her from "Zainab the Middle One", her sister born in year 9 of Hegira (named "Um Kaltoum", after her aunt), and of her sister "Zainab the Junior, whose mausoleum is in Arrawiya village in Damascus, according to Ibn Al Hourani, in his work "Places of Visits" and al-Mousilli, in his book "Al Ma'aref" (Knowledge).

"Zainab the Senior" grew up in the house of the Prophet, profiting from the benevolence of her majestic grandfather. She was only five when the Prophet died. Six months later, her mother also passed away. She told her to take good care of her brothers and sister, Al Hassan, Al Hussein and Um Kaltoum.

Zainab had various qualities: she resembled her mother in kindness and sociability; and her father in knowledge and piety. She held a religious discussion seminar which attracted many women in search of religious knowledge.

When she reached the age of marriage, her father chose Abdullah Ibn Ja'afar Ben Abi Taleb, her cousin, as a husband. She had three boys by him: Ja'afar, Ali and Awn Al Akbar; and two girls, Um Kalthoum, and Um Abdullah; from whom the sherifs Zayaneba and Ja'afara descended.

### Her life and jihad

Sayeeda Zainab witnessed important events during the life of her father and brother Al Hassan. She stood by her brother Al Hussein during the battle of Kerbala, supporting the fighters and looking after the casualties. The battle which took place close to the Euphrates in 61 Hegira, ended with the tragic death of Al Hussein and his

companions. Zainab, and the rest of the women and children, were taken prisoner and marched to Damascus. She subsequently returned to Medina with the survivors of Ahl Al Bayt, including her nephew Ali Ben Al Hussein.

Her presence in Medina was sufficient to raise a feeling of mourning for Imam Hussein and the martyrs. She wanted to pass the remainder of her life close to her grandfather, the Prophet, but the Omayyad's prevented this. Yazid Ben Mouawiya ordered the dispersion of Ahl Al Bayt into various provinces. The governor of Medina asked Zainab to leave the city to settle where she wanted to. She chose Egypt, and arrived there in Sha'aban of 61 H. She was received by the governor, Mouslima Ben Makhled Al Ansari, and by a mass of Muslims, who had accompanied her to Al Fastat (the capital of Egypt at that time).

Mouslima invited her to reside at his place. She accepted and held councils of consultation (Shura), which the governor and his men attended regularly. She remained in her residence almost a year (11 months and 10 days) without leaving until her death, on Sunday 14 Rajab 62 H/March 27th, 682 A. D, in a place called "Al Hamrae Al Qoswa", known for its orchards - the ▶

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place where the mausoleum of Zainab is currently located. It became a large mosque and the area was renamed "the district of Sayeeda Zainab".

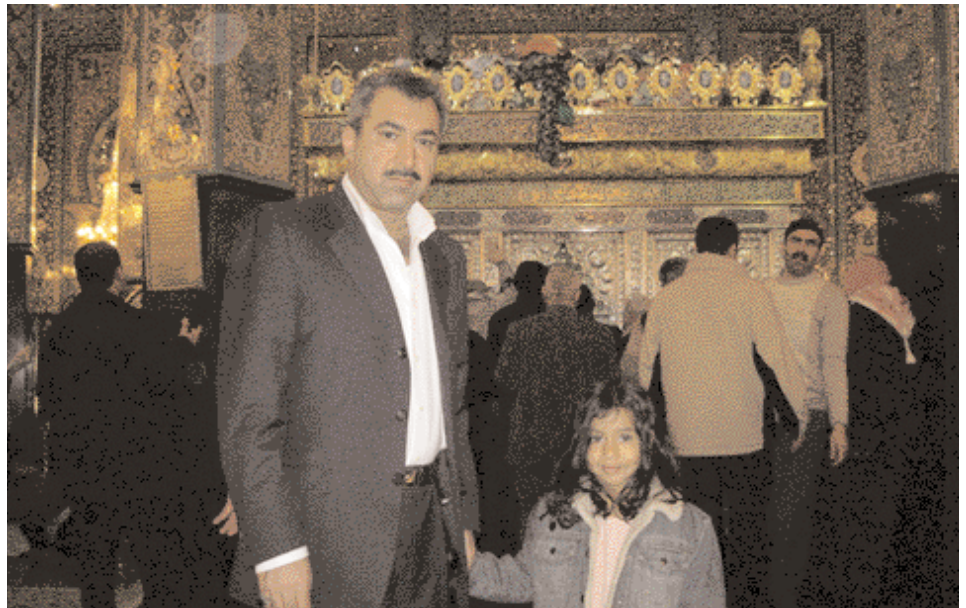
### **Titles of Sayeeda Zainab**

Sayeeda Zainab's rich and eventful life prompted the believers to give her various titles. She was called the "Lady of Banou Hashem", in reference to her knowledge of religious sciences and her concern to transmit it to other Moslem women who attended her seminars. She was also called "Um Hashem" (mother of Hashem), because she is of the House of Hashem and "the heroine of Kerbela", because of her role in the battle of Kerbela when she stood by her brother Al Hussein and his companions.

In spite of her short residence in Egypt, she left a deep impression in the hearts and souls of the Egyptians; her house was the refuge of the poor, the sick and the needy. She was even called "Um Al Awajez" (The Lady of the Needy) and "President of the Diwan" (Head of the Court), because of the religious councils she held.

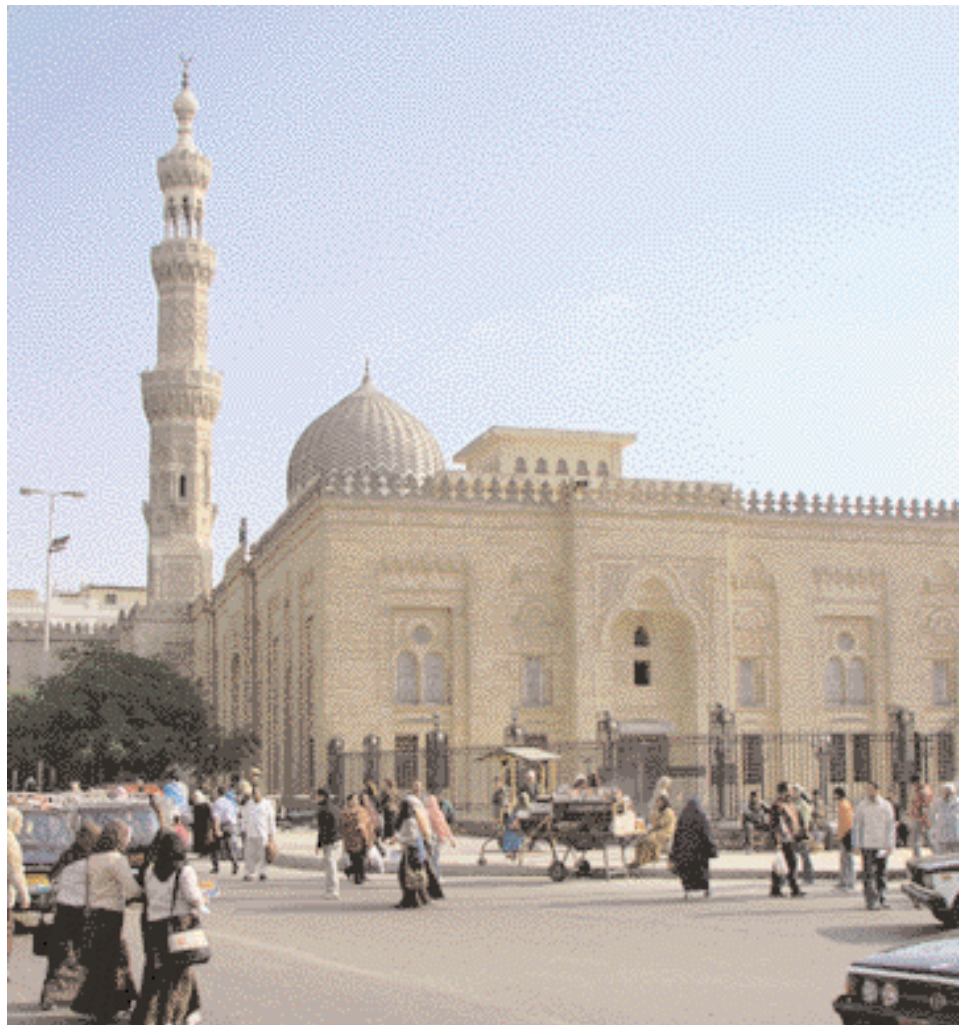
### **The mosque of Sayeeda Zainab in Cairo**

The mosque of Sayeeda Zainab is located in the centre of Cairo, in a zone known as "Kantarat Assibaa" (Bridge of Lions), which was built on the Nile. This mausoleum is the first of Ahl Al Bayt in Egypt. In 1315 H/1898 A. D, the central part of the creek was filled with soil. The bridge then disappeared and



Inside the mosque of Sayeeda Zainab/Damascus

ضريح السيدة زينب/دمشق



The mosque of Sayeeda Zainab/Cairo

مسجد السيدة زينب (رض)/القاهرة



the esplanade of the mausoleum was widened, revealing the frontage of the mosque of Sayeeda Zainab. The Othoman Wali, Ali Pasha restored this mosque in 951 H/1547 A. D. and built another mosque close to it. In 1170 the Emir Abdul Rahman Katekhda H/1768 A. D. restored the gallery and put a copper plate on the door with the inscription: "O Sayeeda Zainab, O daughter of Fatema Azzahra, give me strength". It is still there.

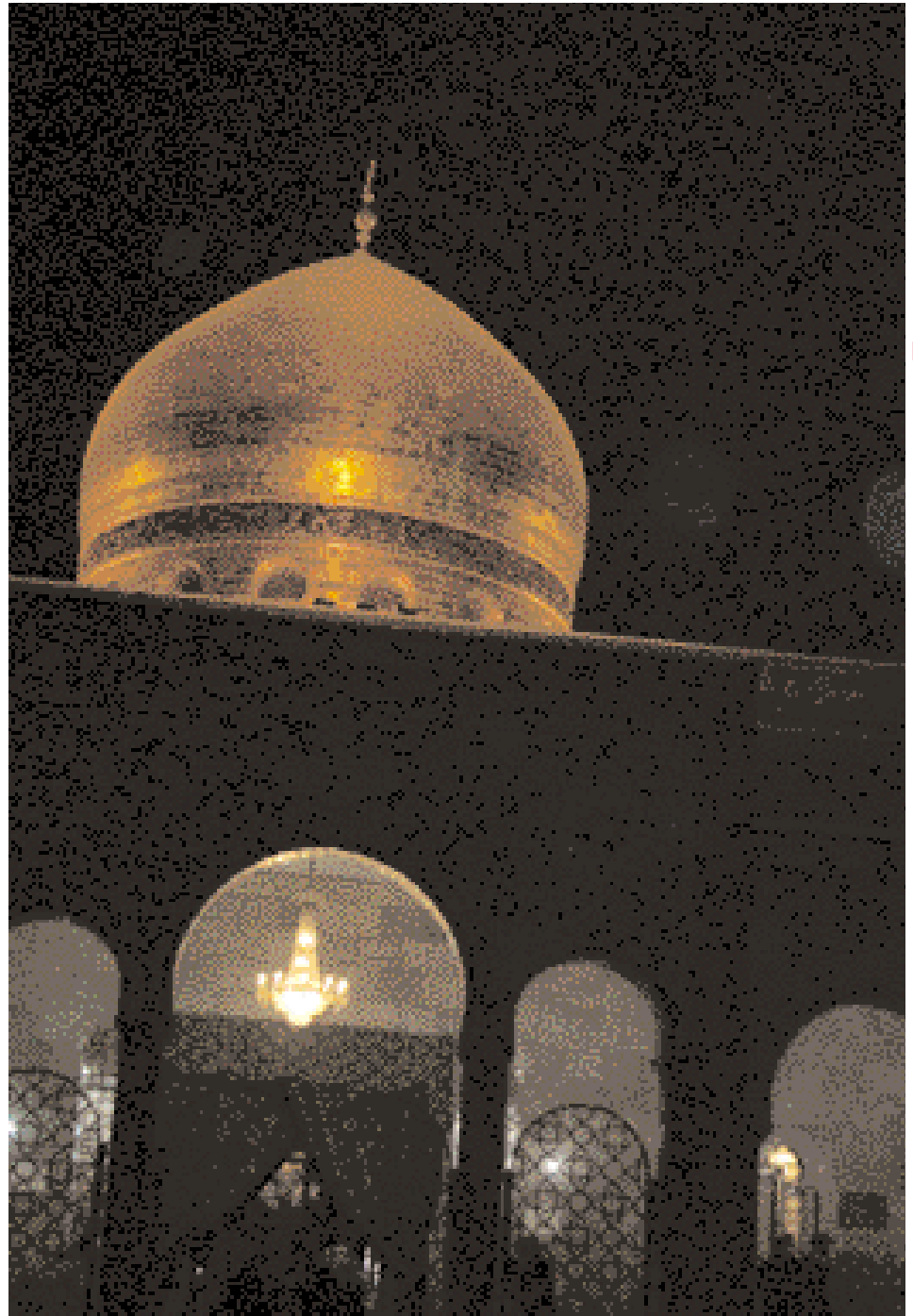
The mosque comprises seven halls directed towards Qibla, in the centre of which an esplanade is covered with a dome. Under this dome is the mausoleum of Sayeeda Zainab. In the northern side of the mosque, are two halls with two principal entrances separated by a corridor with a light and ventilation structure know by the old architectural term of "Shakhshikha". In the north-western zone, one finds the mausoleum of Sidi Al Atriss, a man of religious knowledge and piety who used to look after the mosque of Zainab.

The mausoleum of Sayeeda Zainab became a place of pilgrimage: successive Egyptian governments have accorded it great attention by restoring, widening and decorating the site.

### Historical evidence

Certain researchers have proved Sayeeda Zainab came to Egypt. Rokaya Bent Oqba Ben Nafi' AlFihri said: "I was one of those who welcomed Zainab Bent Ali, when she came to Egypt after the tragedy of Kербala. Mouslima Ben Makhled, Abdullah Ben El Hareth and Abu Amira Al Mazini came to welcome her. Mouslima presented his condolences to her while crying; Zainab also cried and everyone present cried. She said: "This is what God had promised; and true was the word of the apostles" (Yasin/52).

In the books "Mashariq Al Anwar" and "Tabaqat Asha'arani", there are indications of her arrival in Egypt. Hafed Ben Asaker Addimashqi, the 6th century of Hegira historian, mentioned her arrival in Egypt in his history book, preserved in the Al Khalidiay Library in Damascus. This event is also mentioned by the historian Ibn Toloun Addimashqi, in a separate book. Among the contemporaries is Dr. Ahmed Asharbassi, who mentioned her arrival in one of his books. ▶



A night view of the mosque of Sayeeda Zainab/Damascu

منظر ليلي لمسجد السيدة زينب/دمشق

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One also finds in Aleppo a book by Abdalli (Al Hassan Ben Yahya, descendant of Ali Ben Abi Taleb, born in 194 H in Al Aqiq in Hijaz. The book is called "Akhbar Azainabiyate" (Information on Zainabs), and mentions all the people of Ahl Al Bayt bearing the name of Zainab. It indicates that Sayeeda Zainab left Medina and settled in Egypt. He gave the same date and length of stay as mentioned in this article.

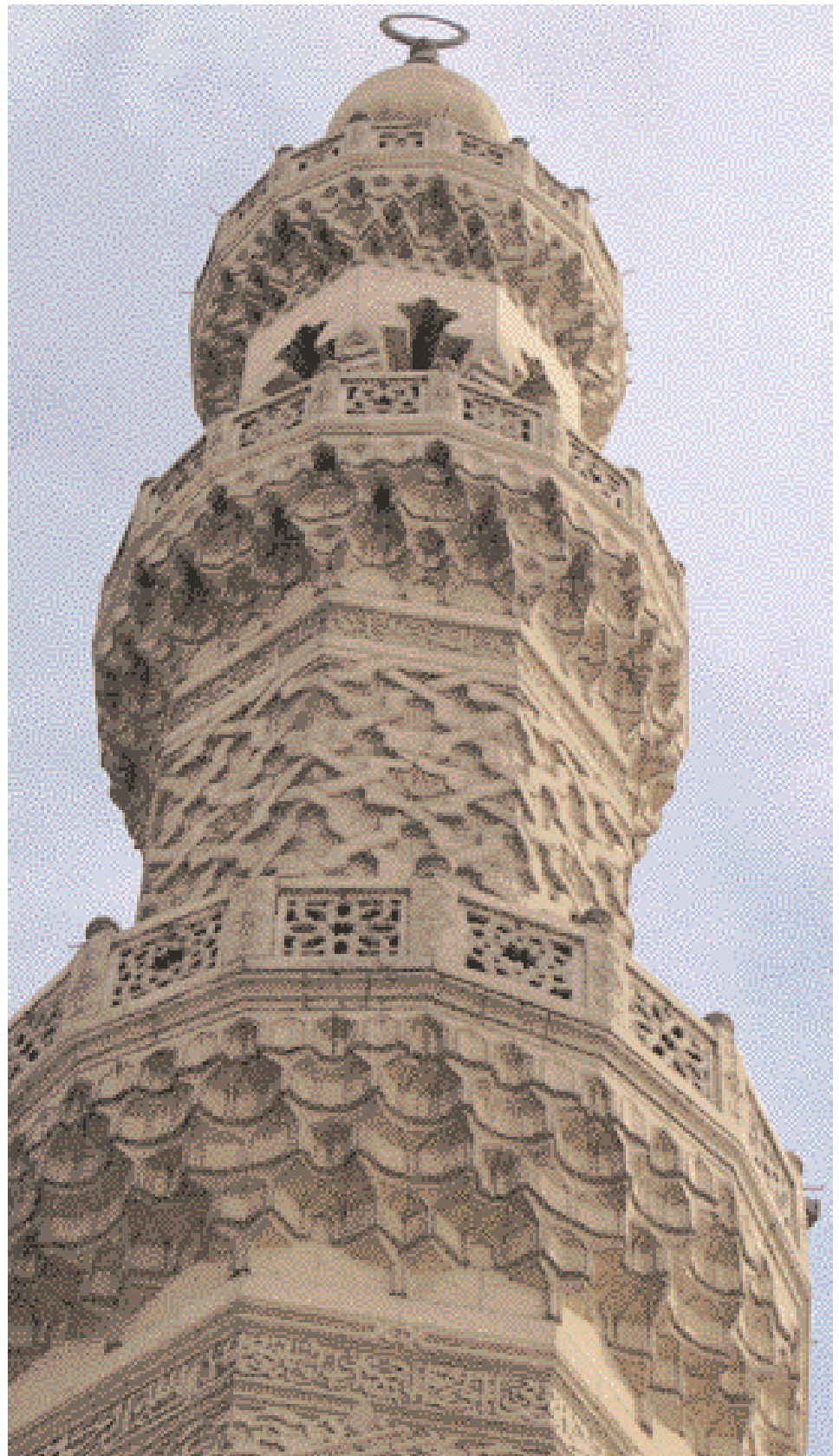
There is also an indication in the work "Addor Al Manthour fi Tabaqat Rabbat Al Khodour", of the fact that there are two sanctuaries for Sayeeda Zainab, one in Damascus, visited by the Shiites, and the other in Egypt.

These divergences of opinions about the place of her burial prompted me to go on a journey to Damascus to find out. All Islamic accounts and references indicated that Zainab refused to go to Sham, because Yazid, who ordered the killing of her brother Al Hussein, lived there.

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### **Mosque of Sayeeda Zainab in Damascus**

On my arrival in the Syrian capital, I went to the mosque of Sayeeda Zainab, located in Arrawiya village, also called "the Village of the Lady" in the Ghatta in Damascus, 7 km to the south-east. Approaching the places, I saw two high minarets in the middle of which, was a majestic gilded dome. There were also religious bookshops, shops selling religious cassettes and itinerant salesmen who hope to have the blessings of this holy lady. I heard various accounts by tradesmen ▶



The minaret/Cairo

منارة مسجد السيدة زينب/القاهرة



مسجد السيدة زينب/دمشق  
The mosque of Sayeeda Zainab/Damascus



The dome the mosque of Sayeeda Zainab/Damascus

قبعة مسجد السيدة زينب/دمشق

of her miracles which became a place of attraction for weak, sick and needy people. When entering the mosque, I was struck by the beauty of the decorations and architecture. I learned that this mosque was restored in the year 768 H/1366 A. D, as well as in 1302 H/1884 A. D and 1370 H/1951 A. D, and more recently.

### Modernization and development of the mosque

The modernization of the mosque and the mausoleum of Sayeeda Zainab in Damascus dates back to 1952 when the ground was covered with beautiful, invaluable Italian marble.

The mausoleum of Sayeeda Zainab has four entrances each about four meters wide, with a four meter walk way on either side covered with polished dark grey and brown limestone. Behind the walkway, are 70 rooms with basalt frontages, reminiscent of old Damascus houses. Above the doors and windows are beautiful traditional arches.

The ceiling of the mosque is characterized by its gradual architecture; its height reaches 6-8 meters, and between each graduation, there is glass allowing the entry of natural light and providing for ventilation. Splendid Iranian Islamic pottery with its floral decorations and Koranic inscriptions decorate the frontages of the walkways of

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the esplanade, the columns, the supports of the arcades, the dome and the two minarets. In addition, fine mirrors from Belgium were used to cover the top of the walls, overlapping with beautiful Kashani tile decorations which confer a splendid beauty on the mosque. The external parts of the dome are covered with gold. The mosque glitters day and night, beautifying the surroundings.

### Invaluable gifts to the mosque

The mosque received three doors as a gift. They are covered with gold, splendid decorations from Esfahan, with silver plates covered with gold decorated with Koranic verses and the words of the Prophet. In 1955, the Iranian people offered a mausoleum, the work of Mohamed Sanni' Khatem, to Sayeeda

Zainab. It is made of wood encrusted with ivory and magnificent decorations.

Another artistic wonder was presented by a benefactor, named Hajj Mohamed Ali, in the form of a Pakistan-made cage of wood covered with silver plate on a marble bottom. After the erosion of the first silver cage, Hajj Abbas Hassan Farouche presented a new manufactured cage by the artist Barotche. Richly decorated, it carries a speech by Sayeeda Zainab, over which is a golden dome, with the names of God.

At the end of my two visits, I looked again at the notes I had taken, and felt a great psychic quietude in these two sanctuaries. I was happy not to be influenced by the fanatic visions affirming the burial of Sayeeda Zainab in Cairo or Damascus; both places have wonderous sites and a glorious history. ■