Oleg Grabar compared architecture in the formative period of Islam, with its novel synthesis of Byzantine and Sasanian elements, to "a sort of graft on other living entities." "The Muslim world," he wrote, "did not inherit exhausted traditions, but dynamic ones, in which fresh interpretations and new experiments coexisted with old ways and ancient styles." In this study dedicated to him I would like to show that a similar process continued to inform the dynamics of later Islamic architecture whose history in the early-modern era was far from being a repetition of preestablished patterns constituting a monolithic tradition with fixed horizons. The "formation" of Islamic architecture(s) was a process that never stopped. Its parameters were continually redefined according to the shifting power centers and emergent identities of successive dynasties who formulated distinctive architectural idioms accompanied by recognizable decorative modes. Novel architectural syntheses that both remained rooted in a shared Islamic past and self-consciously departed from it created a perpetual tension between tradition and innovation, often articulated through pointed references to the past that endowed monuments with an intertextual dimension.

Though the semiotic charging of buildings with reference to specific architectural pasts had its roots in the formative period of Islam, it came to play a particularly important role in the intertextual architectural discourse of the early-modern era, extending roughly from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century. This period representing the "adolescence of modernization" was characterized by its growing independence from traditional culture, but at the same time its reluctance to sever ties from the past. My essay will identify a shared early-modern preoccupation with challenging the past without rejecting its heritage, first by focusing on the programs of Sinan's imperial mosques and then by situating their competitive discourse within a broader spectrum of examples chosen from the Uzbek, Safavid, and Mughal realms.

The competitiveness of Islamic architecture can be traced back to the imperial ambitions of the Umayyads. As Spiro Kostof noted, "The very first monument of the new faith, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, was a patently competitive enterprise" that constituted a conspicuous violation of the Prophet's strictures against costly buildings. The Dome of the Rock and other Umayyad imperial projects not only challenged the modest architecture of the early caliphs stationed in Medina, but at the same time invited a contest with the Byzantine architectural heritage of Syria, the center of Umayyad power. A well-known passage by the tenth-century author Muqaddasi identifies the competition with Byzantine architecture, a living tradition associated with the greatest rival of the Umayyads, as the central motive behind the ambitious building programs of ʿAbd al-Malik (685–705) and al Walid I (705–15).

The Caliph al-Walid beheld Syria to be a country that had long been occupied by the Christians, and he noted there the beautiful churches still belonging to them, so enchantingly fair, and so renowned for their splendor as are the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the churches of Lydda and Edessa. So he sought to build for the Muslims a mosque in Damascus that should be unique and a wonder to the world. And in the like manner, is it not evident that his father Abd al-Malik, seeing the greatness of the martyrdom of the Holy Sepulcher and its magnificence was moved lest it should dazzle the minds of the Muslims and hence erected above the rock the dome which is now seen there?

The Umayyads and the early Abbasids, who were the only caliphal dynasties to have unified nearly the whole world of Islam, effectively competed with the past in constructing their imperial architectural image. After their cultural hegemony had ended, the smaller states that emerged often sought to legitimize their dynastic claims by making allusions to the prestigious monuments of these two early caliphates. For example, architectonic and decorative elements from the eighth-century Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus were selectively quoted in the tenth-century Great Mosque of Cordoba built by the exiled Spanish Umayyads who wished to establish an iconographic link with their imperial ancestral past to support their own claims to the caliphate. A similar
claim was made through the Fatimid caliph al-Mansur’s tenth-century round city of Mansuriyya, with its obvious reference to the eighth-century round city of Baghdad, the ultimate symbol of caliphal authority built by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur.

The monumental south dome (1086–87) of the Great Mosque in Isfahan, which appears to have been inspired by that of the fire-damaged Umayyad Great Mosque in Damascus (rebuilt by a Seljuq vizier in 1082), can be read as yet another allusion to the royal authority of the Umayyads. Coupled with the palatial element of the iwan, Malikshah’s dome projected the prestige of his sultanate which provided support to the weakened caliphate of the Abbasids who no longer enjoyed royal power. The numerous domed maqasras it engendered in Iran and in the smaller mosques of the splintered Seljuq successor states of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia reflected a resurgence of royal symbolism at a time when independent princely successor states, who perpetuated the Sunni revival of the Great Seljuqs, were establishing themselves in a Middle East no longer unified by colossal imperial caliphates.5

The reverence towards the past seen in these examples from the middle period of Islam differs fundamentally from the references found in early-modern monuments. They more frequently allude to the past in order to challenge it and to affirm the superiority of their own time. This competitive attitude first emerges in the post-Mongol era in the fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century architectural projects of the Ilkhanids, Timurids, and Mamluks, whose domineering monumentality stands out from the modest structures of their immediate predecessors, which had abandoned the ambitious scale of the early imperial caliphates. It is embodied in such monuments as the colossal domed mausoleum of the Ilkhanid sultan Uljaytu at Sultaniyah (d. 1316) whose sheer size, commented on by most contemporary historians, reflected an attempt to challenge earlier royal mausoleums such as that of the Seljuq ruler Sultan Sanjar in Merv. With its gigantic iwan the roughly contemporary Masjid-i Jami’ at Tabriz, built by the Ilkhanid vizier ʿAli Shah (d. 1324), gave concrete expression to its patron’s stated intention to surpass the Sasanian Arch of Chosroes in Ctesiphon, the ultimate symbol of royal power. The monumental funerary madrasa of Sultan Hasan in Cairo (1356–61), which no doubt was a Mamluk response to the challenge posed by contemporary Ilkhanid projects, also boasted iwans larger than the arch at Ctesiphon; measurements were taken to prove the claim. Khalil al-Zahiri wrote in the mid fifteenth century:

As for the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan, this edifice has no equivalent in the whole world. It was reported that Sultan Hasan, when he ordered its construction, summoned all the architects (muhandisin) from all the countries and asked them: Which is the highest building in the world? He was told: Iwan Kiswa Anushirwan. So he ordered that the iwan should be measured and revised (yuḥarrar) and that his madrasa should be 10 cubits higher than it, and it was constructed…. Iwan Kiswa has but one iwan, this madrasa has four!6

Timurid architecture showed a similar preoccupation with height, monumental scale, and spectacular effects. The unprecedented scale of Timur’s Great Mosque in Samarqand (1398–1405) represented its patron’s ambition to build one of the most colossal mosques of the Muslim world in a capital he regarded as its microcosm. According to the historian Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAli Yazdi, with its soaring height “rubbing against the heavens,” Timur’s mosque proclaimed the verse frequently cited by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century historians: “Verily our monuments will tell about us, so look to our monuments after we are gone!”7 When the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun wrote that “the monuments of a given dynasty are proportionate to its original power,” he noted that those of the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Fatimids surpassed the ones built by the “less important dynasties” of his own time, among which he singled out the “Turks of Egypt” (Mamluks) and Timur (with whom he had several meetings) as the two most powerful rulers.8

The competitive streak that emerged in the architecture of these two late medieval dynasties was to culminate in the early-modern era with the ambitious imperial projects of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals. These empires shared the same self-conscious attitude toward the vast accumulated heritage of Islamic architecture that could endlessly be elaborated to define new identities. No longer faced with the problem of inventing ex novo building types or forms that had preoccupied earlier generations, architects could now concentrate on creating innovative reinterpretations of inherited models, with subtle quotations and intertextual allusions becoming the avenues for creative expression. They could draw on a multitude of codified Islamic building types, architectural idioms, and decorative modes awaiting to be revised, edited, and refined.

Such multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious frontier empires as the Ottomans, and the Mughals self-confidently synthesized Islamic and non-Islamic regional forms with their shared Timurid architectural heritage, which had unified the international Turco-Iranian cul-