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## Original Research Article

# A Comparative Study of Common Cultural Elements in the Decorative Patterns of Blue Mosques in Iran, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Turkey \*

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** Decoration is an inseparable element of Islamic architecture. The use of vegetal motifs in the form of simple geometric or realistic patterns on tiles has always been a focal point for architects. Tilework with vegetal motifs in mosques has played a significant role as a tool for conveying religious and spiritual concepts in the Islamic world, establishing a human connection with the divine, and creating a spiritual atmosphere.

**Research objective:** This study aims to conduct a comparative examination of the common cultural elements in the decorative patterns of blue mosques in Iran, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Turkey. The present study seeks to answer the question of how the examination of common cultural elements in the decorative patterns of blue mosques in Iran, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Turkey can be articulated through a comparative method.

**Research method:** This study is done using a comparative approach and relies on library and field sources, as well as a method of analysis based on a comparative study of decorative patterns.

**Conclusion:** The results indicate that there are significant similarities in the vegetal motifs of tiled decorations in blue mosques, which serve as signs and symbols of the cultural heritage of the four regions. These vegetal motifs are inspired by nature and are simplified and stylized in a geometric-vegetal form of decoration. The decorative vegetal motifs in the mosques of Yerevan and Iran exhibit more similarities, while the Blue Mosque in Turkey shows the influence of Ottoman-Byzantine art and culture. The Blue Mosque of Mazari Sharif incorporates vegetal motifs ranging from simple to intricate, drawing inspiration from the Blue Mosques of Tabriz and Turkey. The surrounding nature serves as a source of symbols that evoke meanings in the human mind, such as the tulip flower symbolizing resurrection, the clove representing power, the multi-petal flowers signifying abundance, the thistle leaf symbolizing vitality, and the pomegranate flower which is the symbol of immortality and fertility. Considering that mosque decorations are influenced by governmental tastes, religious beliefs, personal experiences, and climatic conditions, as well as the beliefs and traditions of the local people, the Blue Mosque of Tabriz has played a significant role as the primary and influential model for the other three blue mosques over time.

**Keywords:** *Cultural elements, Common motifs, Vegetal, Geometrical, Blue mosques.*

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Hassanvand" and advisement of Dr. "Mohamad Aref" it has been done at the Faculty of Art & Architecture, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran.

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## Introduction

The decorative patterns used in the four blue mosques have a special impact and add grandeur and beauty to the space. This heritage, which represents the culture and art of the Islamic era in each country, has common elements derived from the culture of each region. The mosque, as a place of worship and sacred space, can be a safe haven for believers. Turkish culture has great diversity, shaped under the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire with a Byzantine background, possessing distinct characteristics of this region. The formation of Armenian culture dates back to the history and civilization of the ethnic groups who have long lived in the mountainous lands of Armenia. Afghanistan, due to its strategic and geopolitical location, has played a key role in the formation of a rich collection of cultures and civilizations, including Iran, Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. It is evident that the similarities between the Blue Mosques of these countries differ in terms of their construction dates. Although the decorations of the Blue Mosque of Tabriz have been the primary source of inspiration for the other Blue Mosques, the climatic influences, culture, art, and government of each country have also played a role in the way the decorations were executed. Moreover, despite the intercultural differences among these four countries, the influence of Islamic culture has resulted in many commonalities. Therefore, this study attempts to comparatively examine the cultural influences of these countries on vegetal decorative patterns in the four blue mosques and answer the question of how the study of common symbolic elements in the decorative patterns of blue mosques in Iran, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Turkey can be articulated through a comparative method. Artists in the Islamic era, inspired by other arts and civilizations while adhering to religious principles, showcased their brilliance in the design and combination of patterns in architectural decorations, introducing the mosque as a symbol of Islamic culture and civilization to the world. Now it is essential to revive these symbolic and magnificent patterns with a fresh approach through comparative

achievements and interpretation of the patterns in the four blue mosques and achieve new roles in the decorations of contemporary mosques and other Islamic structures.

## Research Methodology

The research method used is analytical-descriptive. The data collection method is both library-based and field-based, with the research population being the four blue mosques. The analysis method is based on the comparative study of the decorative patterns, emphasized with a comparative approach.

## Research Background

In the article titled “A Comparative Study of the Influence of Climate on the Blue Mosque of Tabriz and Jameh Mosque of Yazd”, Amini Ahour, S. & Jamali (2020) examines the strategies for constructing mosque architecture suitable for the climate, followed by the architectural features of the physical structure. The difference between the present study and the mentioned article lies in the fact that our study focuses on four case studies. Nazari Vala & Toofan (2020) in an article titled “Parametric Architecture and Geometric Patterns of Iranian-Islamic Architecture of Blue Mosque of Tabriz” discuss the characteristics of parametric architecture and geometric patterns of Iranian-Islamic architecture. To achieve better results, one of the blue mosque patterns in Tabriz was modeled using the Grasshopper software. The distinction of the present study lies in the fact that the authors have studied four different mosques and examined the common cultural and symbolic themes through a comparative approach. Nejad Ebrahimi et al. (2019) in an article titled “Factors Influencing Communication and Semiotics in the Architecture of the Blue Mosque of Tabriz” study the symbols used in the mosque to extract the methods of communication. The research results indicate that the effective factors in communication include cultural and social aspects, symbolic function, architectural codes, means of communication, and meta-architectural codes. In addition to the differences in content and theme,

the broad population of the scope of the study is to be considered. The distinctive feature of the present study and its novelty lies in the introduction and analysis of symbolic decorative patterns and the identification of common and different roles in the four mentioned mosques.

### Research body

#### • Semantics of Vegetal Patterns in Blue Mosques

The dependence of human life on plants in various aspects such as food, clothing, and shelter has led to the emergence of folktales and narratives that are sometimes associated with spiritual and transcendental matters. Plants have been imbued with spiritual essence and significance in human beliefs since ancient times, greatly influencing religion, customs, traditions, and culture. Plants have always been revered and honored as sacred elements by people, such as the trees of life and special flowers rooted in ancient beliefs.

The vegetal patterns on the tiles of the Blue Mosques draw inspiration from nature and express beauty in a unique form, enhancing the tranquility and spirituality of the mosque space. These patterns typically consist of designs featuring pomegranate flowers, tulips, carnations, roses, acanthus leaves, and multi-petaled flowers. Intricate geometric patterns combined with vegetal motifs create a symmetrical composition. The combination of cobalt blue tiles on a white background with meticulously arranged geometric designs enhances the visual elegance and attractiveness of these patterns. The turquoise and lapis lazuli blue colors of the tiles symbolize tranquility and inspiration from the vast sky (Table 1).

#### - Islamic Arabesque patterns

Islimi (arabesque), one of the fundamental patterns in Iranian decorative art, represents the twisting and turning of plant stems along with their leaves, delicately extracted from nature. Hatayi (lungwort) is a pattern derived from the twisted stems of plants that create a composition of flowers, leaves, buds, and shoots. These patterns have existed since ancient times. The bifurcated leaf arabesque pattern with its stems called “Band-e Islimi” (arabesque stems), which

was not referred to as “Islimi” before the Safavid period, is the variation of the arabesque pattern in the Safavid era and the point of its spread (Fig. 1). Although in many sources, vegetal motifs are also referred to as arabesque, what is known as “Islimi” (arabesque) is a leaf and branch. Simple and primitive examples of this pattern can be found in pre-Islamic plaster works, and later, it evolved in the plasterwork decorations of mosques and other Islamic-era structures (Khosroviani & Javadi, 2021, 21).

#### - Pomegranate flower pattern

The use of the pomegranate motif dates back to Iranian mythology and can be seen in ancient Iranian art and architecture, including the palaces of the Achaemenid and Sasanian dynasties and Iranian mythological narratives. One of the significant and symbolic motifs in Iranian art, appearing in various forms, is the pomegranate flower and fruit. This plant represents the goddess Anahita, symbolizing fertility and pure waters. Its numerous seeds are considered a symbol of abundance. The red color of the pomegranate also refers to Mithra, the god of the sun (Table 1). The pomegranate flower has been commonly used in the decoration of Iranian tiles and carpets and later gained attention among the Ottomans, becoming a prominent decorative element in conjunction with the tulip (the beloved flower of the sultans) and carnation leaves in the decoration of the Blue Mosques (Table 1).

#### - Tulip flower pattern

Different ethnic groups with various cultures have attributed symbolic meanings to natural elements such as plants with regards to their use, beauty, diversity, and abundance, based on the geographical region they inhabited. The tulip, in Persian culture and literature, signifies love, symbolizes eternal life, and represents



Fig. 1. Islimi Arabesque and Hatayi, part of the interior wall of the courtyard of the Blue Mosque in Mazār-i-Sharīf, Afghanistan.  
Photo: Kaveh Basharat, 2023.

Table 1. Meaning and symbolism of vegetal patterns in the four blue mosques. Source: Authors.

Row	Pattern	Meaning & symbol	Tabriz blue mosque (Photo: Saeedeh Joshaghani , 2023)	Afghanistan blue mosque (Photo: Kaveh Besharat, 2023)	Armenia blue mosque (Photo: Ivet, 2023)	Turkey blue mosque (Source: <a href="https://www.shutterstock.com">https://www.shutterstock.com</a> )
1	Islimi arabesque Hatayi	Fertility				
2	Tulip flower	Love & resurrection	-		-	
3	Carnation flower	Politics and Power	-	-	-	
4	5-6-8 petal flower	Birth & multiplicity			-	-
5	Pomegranate flower	Vitality & liveliness				
6	Pomegranate flower	Eternity & fertility				

resurrection after death and the arrival of spring. In general, the word “Gol” (flower) in Iranian culture and literature delves into spiritual values, and diverse decorations and forms have extensively appeared in artistic and architectural works of Islamic art.

**- Carnation flower pattern**

The carnation has flourished in Iran and Turkey in various forms. It has a long history and symbolizes both love and politics. This flower is particularly beloved by the Ottoman Turks. In the architectural decorations of Ottoman mosques, the carnation, along with the tulip, is prominently displayed in realistic or abstract forms, exhibiting a diversity of angles and colors. Its color carries meanings of loyalty, honor, admiration, and superiority. In addition to the Ottoman rulers, it has also garnered attention in Christianity (Table 1). The carnation is

sometimes seen in Iranian carpet and tile work as well.

**- Multi-petaled flowers pattern**

The flower with multiple petals symbolizes paradise, tranquility, and beauty. The four-petaled flower is an ancient and historical plant depicted in works of art, symbolizing both love and politics. Known in Persian as “Chelipa” (cross), it represents the sun, the seasons of the year, and the four primary elements of water, wind, earth, and light. The number four in this motif signifies the importance of the seasons and their effects on agriculture, the four cardinal directions, the four primary stars at the four corners of the world, the four social classes in Zoroastrianism, and the four important Zoroastrian prayers (Sarbakhshian & Hejazi, 2019, 137). The eight-petaled flower within a circle symbolizes the sky and

continuous movement in the realm of spirituality, with the circle representing the presence of God, whose center is everywhere and has no boundaries. However, these interpretations have emotional aspects, and what is certain is that the decorative patterns in these mosques are inspired by nature, and presented in a simple yet distinctive decorative style (Table 6).

#### - Thistle leaf pattern

The broad-leaved plant known as “Kangar” (Thistle) with serrated edges on both sides is a symbol of the essence of life due to its numerous properties. It is prominently featured alongside other patterns in the decoration of mosques and other sacred structures. It has a rich history and is considered a useful plant. It has garnered attention both in the West and the East. It was used in funeral ceremonies and signifies rebirth or protection against malevolent spirits (Adam & Soltanzadeh, 1996, 77). The thistle leaf represents the beauty of the world, the connections between people, and the vitality among them (Table 4).

#### Theoretical Foundations

The foundation of a culture is firmly based on religion, and Islam is the principal religion shaping and connecting cultures. Therefore, the most important aspect of cultural cohesion among countries is the relationship between religion and culture. Art and architecture serve as tools for the growth and excellence of an Islamic society’s culture and can also convey religious messages and directives. They can boost the progress and power of Islamic countries. By utilizing tradition and indigenous design, an artist or architect can transform a structure into a sustainable model and transmit the cultural symbols and worldview of that community. In this way, the culture and symbols of a society can be taught (Bahrami Nejad & Kaboli, 2020, 30). Throughout the history of Islam, religion and politics have been two important elements in shaping culture, and art, architecture, and decorations

are considered means of conveying religious and spiritual concepts and values. The mosque is a prominent symbol of Islamic countries, a space that simultaneously addresses the religious, spiritual, political, and social needs of the people at a given time. It is the most important manifestation of Islamic art and represents the religious beliefs of that land. Decorative elements extend beauty alongside spiritual meanings in Islamic architecture. Although the blue mosques of the considered countries vary in terms of time, location, and culture, they share commonalities in the decoration of tilework and the selection of vegetal patterns due to their adherence to the Islamic faith, with only minor differences in details. The vegetal decorative patterns in these blue mosques have various cultural aspects that can be explored through comparative analysis, revealing shared elements and cultural and social differences among other Muslim countries.

#### • The cultural aspects of the fourfold Blue Mosques’ decorations in vegetal patterns


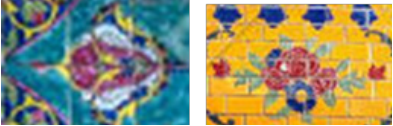


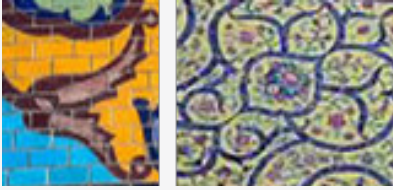

##### - Blue Mosque of Tabriz

The mosque, located in the historical and cultural path of Tabriz city on one hand, and possessing unique architectural features and decorations with distinctive designs and colors on the other hand, is a collection of mental and communicative symbols for the people (Table 3). From the perspective of contemporary Tabriz people, the Blue Mosque, built in 1465, is considered an invaluable element indirectly representing the historical identity of the city (Karimi, 2019, 97). One of the characteristics of the decorations of the Blue Mosque of Tabriz, known as the “Turquoise of Islam”, is its delicate blue tilework with intricate patterns and designs.

##### - Blue Mosque of Afghanistan

This structure, built in 1480 in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, features predominantly architectural decorations made of plaster and tiles with vegetal patterns. However, it also incorporates hexagonal glazed tiles with beautiful geometric compositions and interlaced designs. Although it was gradually completed under different administrations, the

Table 2. Vegetal patterns in the blue mosque of Yerevan, Yerevan. Source: Authors.

Row	Description	Image
1	Yerevan Blue Mosque	
2	Rose, red flower, or Farang flower	
3	Pomegranate	
4	Carnation	-
5	Toranj (bergamot)	
6	Five-petaled flower	-
7	Islimi arabesque & Hatayi	
8	Thistle leaf	

overall appearance of the mosque is characterized by turquoise blue tiles (Table 5).

**- Blue Mosque of Armenia**

The Blue Mosque of Yerevan, built in the early Safavid era in 1765, is one of the most beautiful examples of Iranian-style mosques and is also known as the ‘Jaame’ Mosque of Yerevan. From the perspective of the people of Yerevan, it represents Islamic culture and a part of their history and cultural and political relations with Iran (Haqnazarian, 2009, 44) (Table 2).


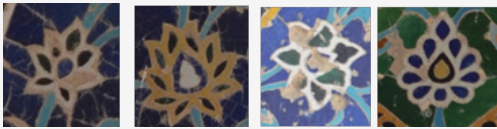

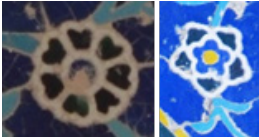


**- Blue Mosque of Turkey**

The mosque was built in Istanbul between 1608 and 1615 by order of Sultan Ahmed. In addition to the engraved windows, the interior decorations are adorned with regional İznik tiles featuring vegetal designs in blue. These patterns are designed not only on the tiles but also on the plaster arches and main walls of the mosque (Table 4).

**Discussion**

The use of vegetal patterns with the elimination of









Table 3. Vegetal patterns in the blue mosque of Tabriz, Iran. Source: Authors.

Row	Description	Image
1	Tabriz Blue Mosque	
2	Tulip flower	-
3	Pomegranate flower	
4	Carnation	-
5	Toranj (bergamot)	
6	Five-petaled flower	
7	Islimi arabesque & hatayi	
8	Thistle leaf	

figurative elements was accompanied during the early Islamic period, which led to the development of geometric and vegetal decorations throughout the Islamic world. Plant motifs inspired by nature serve as symbolic representations with significant meanings. For example, the rose symbolizes love and beauty, the pomegranate represents eternity and fertility, the tulip represents love and resurrection, the carnation represents politics and power, and the thistle leaf symbolizes vitality in geometric patterns, while the Shamsah motif represents the

sun. On the blue tiles used in mosques, designs of cypress trees, tulips, roses, and various fruits can be seen, which are symbolic combinations of paradise (Khajeahmad Attari & Sadeghi, 2018). The combination of native nature-oriented elements from Turkey and Afghanistan, influenced by Iranian decorations, resulted in differences and similarities in the creation of the mentioned mosque tilework. The use of tulips and carnation flowers and the color of crimson or orange are only found on Ottoman tiles. Tulips and carnation flowers were symbols of power

Table 4. Vegetal patterns in the blue mosque of Sultan Ahmed, Turkey. Source: Authors.



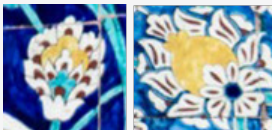

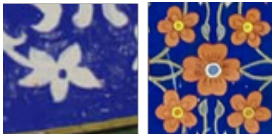
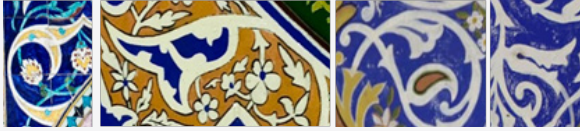

Row	Description	Image
1	Sultan Ahmed Blue Mosque	
2	Tulip	
3	Pomegranate	
4	Carnation	
5	Toranj (bergamot)	
6	Five-petaled flower like Narcissus	
7	Islimi arabesque & hatayi	
8	Thistle leaf	

and were beloved by the Ottoman rulers, evident in tilework, textile weaving, and their paintings (Joshaghani et al., 2020, 6).

The Blue Mosque of Yerevan has a smaller variety of vegetal patterns compared to the other three mosques.

Most of its decorations consist of geometric designs on plaster, tiles, and bricks. Islimi arabesque and Hatayi motifs are set against a Qajar yellow background, accompanied by motifs of grape tree branches and stem in the main entrance facade of the central courtyard.

Table 5. Vegetal patterns in the blue mosque of Mazar-i Sharif, Afghanistan. Source: Authors.

Row	Description	Image
1	Mazar-i Sharif Blue Mosque	
2	Tulip	
3	Pomegranate	
4	Carnation	-
5	Toranj (bergamot)	
6	Five-petaled flower	
7	Islimi arabesque & hatayi	
8	Thistle leaf	






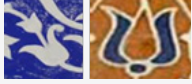


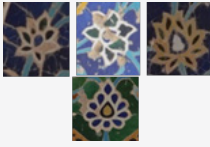
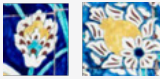
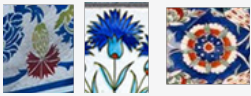


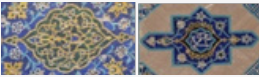
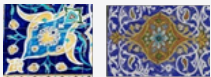
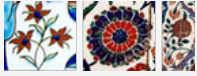
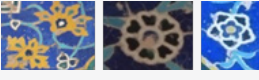

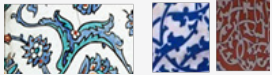
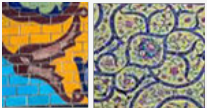
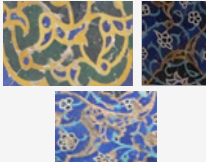




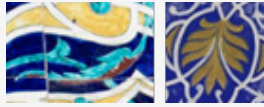
Pomegranate flowers, roses, or red roses (farang) are depicted as single stems or clusters along with plant leaves alongside geometric decorations (Table 2).

The Sultan Ahmed Mosque (Blue Mosque) is characterized by its vastness, diversity of patterns, and blue color. Various pomegranate designs, carnation flowers accompanied by diagrammatic cuts, multi-petal tulips, arabesque and Hatayi motifs, thistle leaves, and other vegetal patterns such as cypress trees, hyacinth flowers, and fuller flowers, similar to red roses or dahlia flowers, are used. Most colors and patterns are influenced by Iranian art (Table 4). The Toranjs (bergamot

shapes) are decorated with arabesque patterns or embellished with the names of Allah, Omar, Osman, and Abu Bakr, either independently on a white background inside the dome or amidst vegetal patterns (Table 4).

The Mazar-i Sharif Mosque features simple to intricate vegetal patterns. This process can be observed in the composition of the patterns. The muqarnas inside the frontal dome, between the columns, main walls, and arches are adorned with vegetal patterns in vibrant and contrasting colors. Vegetal patterns are predominantly used inside the structure, with a variety of pomegranate motifs alongside arabesque patterns, transitioning from

Table 6. Comparison of vegetal patterns in the four blue mosques. Source: Authors.

Row	Image			
1				
	Sultan Ahmed Blue Mosque	Yerevan Blue Mosque	Tabriz Blue Mosque	Mazar-i Sharif Blue Mosque
2		-	-	
	Tulip	Tulip	Tulip	Tulip
3				
	Pomegranate	Pomegranate	Pomegranate	Pomegranate
4		-	-	-
	Carnation (Full & with diagrammatic cut)	Carnation	Carnation	Carnation
5				
	Toranj (bergamot)	Toranj (bergamot)	Toranj (bergamot)	Toranj (bergamot)
6		-		
	Five-petal flower like lily-rose-dahlia	Five-petal flower	Five-petal & platanaceous flower	Five-petal flower
7				
	Islimi arabesque & Hatayi	Islimi arabesque & Hatayi	Islimi arabesque & Hatayi	Islimi arabesque & Hatayi
8				
	Thistle leaf	Thistle leaf	Thistle leaf	Thistle leaf

color or flower patterns to the Toranj shapes and beyond. Orange, green, black, blue, and white colors are more prominent on plaster and tiles (Table 5).

The Blue Mosque in Tabriz showcases intricate arabesque and Hatayi patterns with delicate twists and turns, accompanied by multi-petal flowers, pomegranate flowers, plane tree flowers, and other flowers that guide the viewer's gaze infinitely with thistle leaves. The Toranjs are adorned with various-sized and shaped stems, and the colors of black and white, gold, green, lapis lazuli blue, and turquoise blue are used on the entire surface and borders. The vegetal patterns in design, color, and execution exhibit a high level of intricacy and create a harmonious composition (Table 3).

### Conclusion

The decorations and architecture of mosques in different historical periods signify the power, wealth, and beliefs of their creators, reflecting the religious characteristics and personal taste of the rulers of that era. By studying the tile decorations and vegetal patterns in the blue mosques of Iran, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Turkey, the shared elements and differences influenced by culture are evident in the design and color of the tile decorations. The cultural commonalities between Iran and Afghanistan have roots in Timurid architecture, while Yerevan is influenced by Qajar and Ottoman art inspired by Eastern Roman, Safavid, and Qajar art. Tilework decorations, a combination of tiles and bricks, as well as seven-color tiles can be observed in these structures. Factors such as governance and politics, climate conditions, indigenous culture, and beliefs play a significant role in the utilization and symbolism of vegetal patterns. Differences also stem from these factors, with the Blue Mosque of Turkey combining Byzantine and Ottoman cultures, while the Blue Mosques of Yerevan, Mazar-i Sharif, and Tabriz have adopted Iranian patterns. Tabriz is rooted in Iranian Islamic culture. The research findings indicate that although all four blue mosques have shared elements and differences in their decorations, they generally

follow the pattern of the decorations in the Blue Mosque of Tabriz. Vegetal patterns, along with man's depictions of the beauty of nature convey historical and artistic symbolic meanings. As religion has played a fundamental role in human culture, its reflection in art has allowed artists to use symbolic elements as a means of conveying messages. Pomegranate flowers, multi-petal flowers, thistle leaves, Islimi arabesque & Hatayi, and Toranj (bergamot) motifs with similar colors are observed in the four blue mosques. The Mazar-i Sharif Mosque features indigenous, vibrant, and diverse colors, while the Sultan Ahmed Mosque combines Byzantine and Islamic colors, and the Yerevan Mosque incorporates colors inspired by the Qajar style. The Tabriz Blue Mosque exhibits exquisite patterns and authentic Iranian colors, which, combined with vibrant motifs, create a dazzling effect. The Ranunculus flower is only used in the Blue Mosque of Tabriz and Mazar-i Sharif, while in Turkey, the hyacinth or rose is used, and the tulip and carnation (favorite flowers of the Ottoman sultans) are used in the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, and a cluster of rose flowers are used exclusively in the Yerevan Mosque. The ultimate conclusion is that tilework is an Iranian artistic technique that has been exported from Iran to adorn Islamic architecture worldwide. Afghanistan and Armenia were part of Iran in the past and have a greater influence on Iranian art.

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