Dutch mini-'caliphate' is no paradise

In the grip of the sheik

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Abdul Wahab Siddiqi was my great example", says Alwin, once the right-hand man to the bearded Pakistani leader - But then he raped my two daughters

NUNEATON - One hour away by plane there is a Dutch 'mini-caliphate'. In the middle of England, Dutch Muslims numbering double figures are living on a county estate under the leadership of a clan of radical sheiks. It is no earthly paradise: ex-followers are sounding the alarm through De Telegraaf. They have destroyed my life."

The Noeroel Islam mosque in The Hague pours thousands of Euros per year into the coffers of the 'Hijaz' Islamic community, a country estate not far from Birmingham. Tens of believers from The Netherlands, Surinamese people in particular, are travelling there to settle around the little castle belonging to sheik Faiz Siddiqi and his family members. The Siddiqis are no everyday imams, but are gurus of mystical Pakistani Islam. They are revered as saints, but they are by no means of unblemished record. Injured parties are coming forward with accounts of sexual abuse, manipulation, intimidation with demons and the financial extortion of members.

Behind an electrified fence and ’no entry’ signs, a driveway stretches some 700 metres. At the end, a 1001 Nights-like- mausoleum looms and on the right hand side there is a dilapidated country house, like the set for a horror film. There is a faint smell of incense. A woman wearing the veil is walking back and forth, as a car with Dutch registration plates turns on to the car park. There is a tranquil serenity; there are no prying eyes for miles. The commune of over a hundred members has the place to itself.

This is Hijaz, an Islamic sanctum in the hills of the British Midlands. "In Hijaz everybody is warm and hospitable, 30 year old Halima said. Whoever you are. Nobody looks down on you. The more I heard about Hijaz, the more I knew that this was what I wanted."

Sheik Faiz Siddiqi rules over the Islamic enclave like a monarch. He is a busy man. He arranges marriages between Hijaz members and advises on business and life issues. He also runs a Sharia court, where violent husbands are sentenced to anger management courses instead of a custodial sentence, for example. The sheik is also wading into the terrorism debate. One month after the shooting of Charlie Hebdo editorial staff in 2015 he organised a protest march. Not against the murder of eleven members of the editorial staff, but against insulting cartoons. ’Learn manners’, one banner said.

Faiz wants to play a leading role in the Muslim community”, according to religious researcher Santi Rozario of the University of Sydney. „He is very articulate and active, modern and traditional at the same time. He is charming and charismatic and has a huge appeal to young people.”

At the same time she identified that some women in Hijaz were extremely fervent in their belief in Faiz. Tahera (23), who wore a burqa, left all the big decisions in her life up to him. The sheik advised her and she did everything he told her to.”

De Telegraaf spoke to fifteen former members, relatives and other injured persons. All of them are angry, afraid or aggrieved. A charlatan”, Muslim woman Gulshar Akthar calls the sheik. From the outside the Siddiqi brothers’ group looks like a sweet shop. But once you are inside, you notice there is something sinister behind it. Yes, Faiz is charming, but when I was with him in his office wearing the veil, I saw him staring at the uncovered parts of my body. It was uncomfortable and I wondered if that wasn’t inappropriate for a sheik. A lot of stories are going around about his behaviour. His marriage to a student half his age caused quite a stir.”

For some time now, there seems to be something seriously wrong in Hijaz. "I’ve still got scars", says one of two Dutch women who used to live with the Siddiqis during their childhood. They were supposed to receive an Islamic education but they were made to be domestic slaves instead. The family members called me ’the dirt beneath their feet’, I always had to clean, wasn’t fed properly and was beaten with a baseball bat.”

Even more disturbing is the statement by the sisters that they were systemically sexually abused by Abdulwahab Siddiqi, now deceased, the father of the current sheik Faiz. Faiz, too, couldn't keep his hands to himself. One of the women stated that Siddiqi senior made her keep quiet about the rape by threatening her with jinns, a kind of Islamic demons. If she were to speak out, they would take revenge. The jinn would destroy my parents and my future. I was afraid every day. I was eleven years old, I had nowhere to go."

The police investigation into the rape of the two sisters ended when Siddiqi senior suddenly died in 1994. The allegations were subsequently swept away as 'slander'. Still, followers continue to revere him as a major saint and suggest a supernatural glow emanates from his tomb on the estate grounds. Believers can purchase a burial plot in the consecrated soil for a hefty price tag. „We have to look up to my father's life, do as he did and follow in his footsteps", Faiz said during a memorial service in The Hague.

Both the faith in Siddiqi senior and the fear of demons remain prevalent in 2017. Fences, cameras and motion sensors are not the only means being deployed to protect the 33 hectare site, according to the believers. There is also a jinn who watches over the site twenty-four-seven. They call him 'Babi Ji'.



The Islamic boarding school in the mini-caliphate (above) is bankrupt. The diplomas were not recognized anywhere. In the background the mausoleum of Abdulwahab Siddiqi, father of Faiz Siddiqi.

Many former members are wary about speaking negatively about the Siddiqi father and sons because of these jinn spirits. Because the Quran is full of references to these creatures, they are part of reality for many devout Muslims. The sheiks possess an army of a thousand jinns who will go to your house and attack you", a former member whispers. Then your children get sick and the doctor can't understand why. Your customers leave. Your wife's ovaries are destroyed."

Sometimes the Siddiqis give the spirits a helping hand. I experienced us seeing a little gnome-like man creeping through the gardens outside the house", says a former admirer of Siddiqi senior. „I was shocked. Siddiqi said: don't look, it is a jinn. Later, I found a rubber mask of the same frightening grimace in the basement."

I don't believe in goblins", says a former business partner of Faiz Siddiqi. I always say: I've only heard of jinn and tonic. But for them, the spirits are a real specialisation. People come to Faiz when a relative is sick, for example. Then he writes a paper amulet and when the patient recovers he says: 'look, it works, we need another donation'. It couldn't be any easier, it is the ultimate licence to print money, you are literally changing worthless paper into bank notes. On any given Sunday afternoon he can write out fifty of those amulets. Uneducated immigrants from third world countries believe in it."

Superstitions therefore form a source of income for the Siddiqis. But is not their only one. For years the family ran an expensive boarding school at Hijaz, which was full of Dutch-Surinamese children from the age of 11 upwards. It isn't surprising that it went belly-up, when you hear the accounts of two former pupils. „The school fees were twice as high as anywhere else. After three years, our qualifications turned out to be worthless: they weren't recognised anywhere. Meanwhile, they were keeping back our allowances and driving expensive cars. The food was completely inedible and there wasn't enough of it. We had to break into the kitchen, that's how hungry we were. The heating wasn't working. In the winter, we lay there in bed wearing all of our clothes, shivering. We were supposed to view it all as a spiritual battle. But, in the sheiks' own wing there was plenty of luxury."

'Does not meet the requirements', was the view of the British ministry of education in 2012. The boarding school closed down. Now, the dormitories have been converted into rental apartments for the believers. This way, the Hijaz members bring in thousands of pounds every month.

Hijaz is clearly more than a commune, it is a commercial enterprise. Or, to put it better: a mishmash of commercial enterprises. Faiz Siddiqi is registered with a long list of companies to his name, such as 'Divine Cosmetics', 'Cardiac Cars' or 'Halal corp'. In all, there are at least 28 companies of which Faiz currently is or has been a director. His right-hand man in The Netherlands, Archino Chedie, also registered in connection with 28 companies. Faiz's brother in law has eight.

Faiz' brothers have their own companies, but there, too, things didn't always run smoothly. In 2008, one younger brother was temporarily suspended as a barrister due to some unlawful financial transactions involving large sums of money. Another brother's legal practice was closed down for malpractice this year, without notice.

It isn't surprising that the victims this newspaper spoke with called the sheiks crooks and con-artists. The injured parties have lost hundreds of thousands of pounds. Their accounts are a sorry collection of fiascos. They were persuaded to make investments that resulted in nothing. One person recounts how he had a mortgage foisted on him making him, and not the sheik, liable for the financial risk of a large building project. A second person performed work on the construction of apartments, but was never paid, even though the flat were sold at a premium. A third person donated money to an orphanage for ten years until he found out that there was no orphanage.



„They are cruel and vengeful and they have destroyed my life and others' lives", says one of the victims. „Nobody knows where the money is going. It disappears. Hijaz is a black hole."

Sheik Faiz Siddiqi refuses to answer questions himself. Dutch members are issued with the warning that Hijaz is under attack by 'Dutch extreme right wing politicians and islamophobic media'. „Their agenda is to destroy the good in Islam. May Allah protect us and unite us against this evil."

Child stabbed

A Dutch disciple of the Siddiqi sheiks is active as an imam in Rotterdam, even though he was found guilty of child abuse in England earlier this year. It was pointless denying it: there was camera footage. Harun Karamat of the Shan-e-Mustafa mosque, Coventry hit children, twisted their arms and stabbed a nine year old in the hand with a pen multiple times.