

# Keys to the House of God

## CONVERSATION WITH DR SALEH BIN TAHA AL SHAIBI KEEPER OF THE KAABA

Saleh Al Shaibi obtained his doctorate from Umm Al Qura University in Makkah and became Head of its Department of Religion for seven years, after which he was appointed as member of the Shura Council. He then became deputy to his uncle, Asim Abdullah al-Shaibi, eventually succeeding him as Keeper of the Kaaba.

There are few places on Earth as venerated or as holy to so many people as Makkah. This valley in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia is, by any objective standard, the most celebrated religious site on the planet, receiving around 1.8 million pilgrims a year. What's more, millions of homes on every continent are adorned with pictures of it and more than a billion people face it to say prayers five times a day.

And at the centre of Makkah is the Kaaba, literally, the Cube. This building next to Islam's most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, is the holiest site in Islam and considered the House of Allah.

All Muslims who are able to do so are required to perform the Hajj pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. Part of the Hajj requires pilgrims to make Tawaf, which involves walking seven times around the Kaaba in an anti-clockwise direction. Tawaf is also performed by pilgrims during the Umrah, the lesser pilgrimage. At the height of Hajj, thousands of pilgrims gather to circle the building over a five-day period, 24 hours a day.

Made of granite, the Kaaba is approximately 43 feet high, and its walls measure some 36 feet by around 42 feet. Its floor is made of marble and limestone, while the interior walls are clad with tiled, white marble halfway to the roof, with darker trimmings along the floor. The floor of the interior stands about seven feet above the ground area where Tawaf is carried out.

The Quran contains several verses regarding the origin of the Kaaba, stating that it was the first House of Worship, and built or re-built by Ibrahim and Ishmael on God's instructions:

*"Verily, the first House (of worship) appointed for mankind was that at Bakkah (Makkah) full of blessing, and a guidance for mankind." — Quran, Chapter 3 (Aale-Imran) verse, 96.*

*"Behold! We gave the site, to Ibrahim, of the (Sacred) House, (saying): Associate not anything (in worship) with Me; and sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer)". — Quran, Chapter 22 (Al Hajj), verse 26.*

*"And remember Ibrahim and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House (With this prayer): Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us: For Thou*

*art the All-Hearing, the All-knowing." — Quran, Chapter 2 (Al Bakarah) verse 127.*

Since the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ handed over the key to the Kaaba to Othman bin Talha, the prophet's companion's lineage have inherited it and the title Sadin of the Kaaba until today. The Sadin is the keeper of the Kaaba's key.

"Sadins are originally members of the Al-Shaibi family whose history can be traced to pre-Islamic period," explains Dr Saleh ibn Zayn Al Abidin ibn Abdullah Al Shaibi, the current keeper of the Kaaba. His family has held the key for the past 15 centuries.

"During the days of the Prophet Muhammad, his companion Abdullah bin Abbas asked the Prophet to assign Kaaba key-keeping

*The Kaaba is a real and present symbol that connects all Muslims together wherever they may be. It also connects us to our past so that we may derive lessons and feel that we are a part of an eternal mission*

*Bag for the key of the Kaaba – Turkey or Egypt, dated ah 1137 (ad 1724–5) Green silk, embroidered in silver-gilt wire over padding*



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to him,” he explains, adding: “but the prophet told him that in Surah An Nisa, Allah ordered us to return trust to those to whom it is due, and then he took the key to our grandfather Talha, saying ‘Take it, O Bani Talha, eternally up to the Day of Resurrection, and it will not be taken from you unless by an unjust, oppressive tyrant.’”

Whether Caliph, Sultan or King – the most powerful men in the world have all had to bow to the words of the Prophet and ask permission before they can enter the Kaaba. Even the King of Saudi Arabia has to seek the permission from the senior member of the Al Shaibi family before he can enter the Kaaba.

Measuring six-and-half inches long, the gold-and-platinum Kaaba key is painted in Islamic green with a glazed gold head. Verses from the Quran are engraved on either side.

Until recently, the Kaaba was opened twice a week for anyone to enter and pray. However, due to the rapid expansion in the number of pilgrims and other factors, Dr Al Shaiba explains, the Kaaba is now opened only twice a year for dignitaries and exclusive guests only.

“The key leaves its locked cabinet twice a year, when the Saudi King opens the door to the Kaaba for cleaning of the interior and to change its black cover, as well as when he guides Muslim heads of state on visits,” explains Dr Al Shaibi.

“In the past the Kaaba was opened twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. Now it is opened only twice a year for washing with zamzam and rose water and oud, which is done in an Islamic ceremony and in the presence of a large number of officials and ambassadors, consuls and guests of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” explains Dr Al Shaibi.

“The key is only used twice a year: once in the month of Muharram and on the first day of the month of Sha’ban. Many people say to me, the key, the key! The important thing is not the key, the greatness and the sanctity do not belong to the key and they don’t belong to the building, rather the greatness and the sanctity belong to the place, the place of the Kaaba,” insists Dr Al Shaibi.

“It’s a huge honour of which we are proud, and we ask Allah to enable us perform our duties toward this trust perfectly,” he says.

Dr Al Shaibi explains that the Kaaba that we see today is not exactly the same Kaaba that was constructed by the Prophets Ibrahim and Ishmail, and that from time to time, it has been rebuilt after natural and man-made disasters.

Since the days of the Prophet, there has been a major reconstruction every few centuries. The last renovation took place in 1996, says Dr Al Shaibi, and was extremely thorough, leading to the replacement of many of the stones and re-strengthening the foundations, as well as a new roof. This is likely to be the last reconstruction for many centuries, as modern techniques mean that the building is more secure and stable than ever before.

Dr Al Shaibi’s family has also traditionally been responsible for looking after the Kiswah, the black cloth with gold banding that covers the Kaaba. But as Dr Al-Shaibi explains, this tradition seems

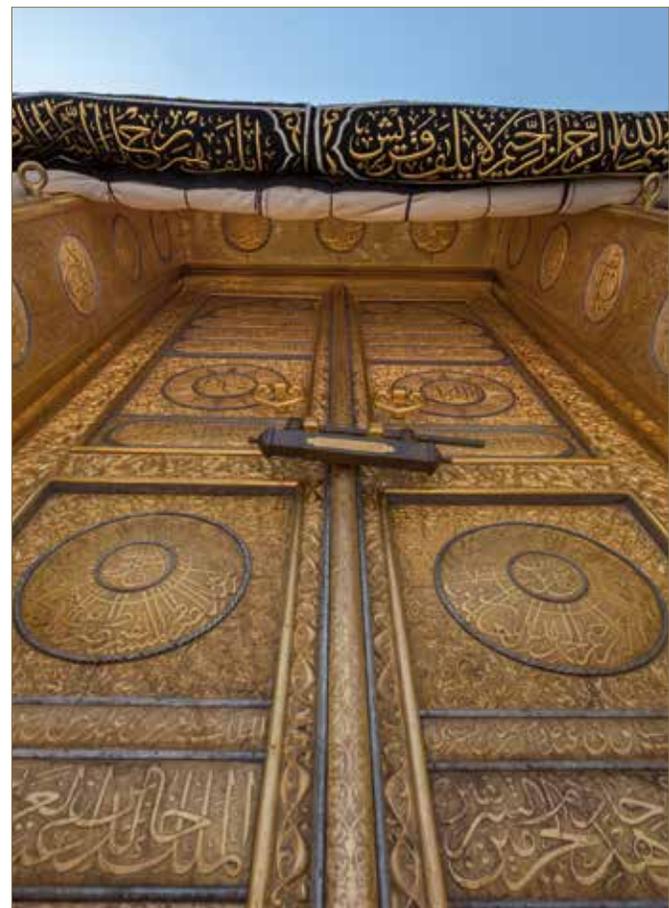
to have started at the time of the Abbasids (whose household colour was black) and before this the Kaaba was covered in multiple colours, including green, red and even white.

He likes to tell the tale of how a group of Muslim jinns, or desert spirits, helped his grandfather renew the Kiswah from the inside: “They worked on renewing the Kiswah from the inside until night fell, then they said, ‘we will finish tomorrow.’ And then on the next day they came and discovered that the work had been finished, and they were very surprised. Then a group of jinns came and said to them, ‘We are Muslims, and this is the House of God, and we helped you, we finished the work which you left.’”

Dr Al Shaibi says it is important to remember that the Kaaba is not just an interesting story from the distant past: “The Kaaba is a real and present symbol that connects all Muslims together wherever they may be. It also connects us to our past so that we may derive lessons and feel that we are a part of an eternal mission.”

In a day and age when many Muslims are becoming disconnected from their history and each other, Dr Al Shaibi believes the Kaaba is a powerful reminder of a shared heritage and bonds in Makkah, the holiest city in Islam: “Makkah is the city of peace and Islam. Makkah is the source of awareness. Makkah is the source of light. Makkah is all that is good.”

*The door of the Kaaba, which remains locked for the majority of the time*



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