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Engagement and Resistance: African Americans, Saudi Arabia and Islamic Transnationalisms, 1975 to 2000

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ENGAGEMENT AND RESISTANCE:
AFRICAN AMERICANS, SAUDI ARABIA AND ISLAMIC TRANSNATIONALISMS,
1975 TO 2000

by

JEFF DIAMANT

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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African Americans, Saudi Arabia and Islamic Transnationalisms,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Engagement and Resistance:
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Advisor: Clarence Taylor

Since the 1960s, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has financed missionary efforts to Muslims around the world, attempting to spread a Salafi form of Islam that professes strict adherence to Islamic sacred scripture. The effects of this transnational proselytization have depended on numerous factors in “host countries.” This project explores the various impacts of Saudi transnational religious influence in the United States among African-Amercians. By relying on previously unused documentary sources and fresh oral histories, it shows how Saudi “soft power” attempted to effect change in religious practices of African-American Muslims from 1975 through 2000. It provides the most detailed examination and interpretation yet of Wallace Mohammed’s groundbreaking tenure as leader of the Nation of Islam and its successor groups after 1975, showing how he led his organization to variously accept and resist Saudi efforts to dictate the terms of Islam in America to African-Americans, while he oversaw a general acceptance of Sunni Islam. This project also describes and interprets the acceptance of quietist Salafi religious ideals and practices by thousands of African-Americans, in a Salafi movement associated with African-American graduates of Saudi Islamic universities.
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Note on Transliteration

When transliterating Arabic words, I have relied on the system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. One exception is that plurals for Arabic words have been given a slightly simplified English-style plural (*hadiths, masjids, madhhabs, shaykhs*), rather than their actual Arabic plural (*ahadith, masajid, madhahab, shuyukh*) Another exception is that, on second and additional references of each chapter, I have removed the al- from last names that, in Arabic, are preceded by it (Shakyh Nasir al-Din al-Albani and Shaykh Rabi al-Madkhali become Shaykh Albani and Shaykh Madkhali after the first reference in each chapter).
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Not a day passes without multiple reminders that other people helped me do this. Back in 2008, my loving wife was unflinchingly and enthusiastically supportive, in every way possible, when the possibility arose I would “transition” from my journalism career to academia. She has remained the same wonderful life partner that I have long known her to be, not to mention an encouraging, sharp and constructively critical editor. My parents have also been supportive in every way possible, and their confidence in my mid-career switch was extremely helpful in solidifying my own. Meanwhile, the professors who helped me at the CUNY Graduate Center and elsewhere all lived up to their excellent reputations for brilliance and depth and breadth of expertise in their various fields. Clarence Taylor, my adviser, enthusiastically supported this project from the start, providing expert advice at each step and serving as a sage guide through the entire process. He consistently dazzled me with his thorough knowledge of the historiography. Beth Baron challenged me at every step to examine problematic preconceptions I hadn’t even realized I had, while wisely urging me to widen my range of sources. Her critiques helped me shape this project in essential ways. Simon Davis generously lent his encouragement
and a holistic outlook on my subject matter, one that very impressively merged high levels of expertise in the areas of diplomatic history, Middle Eastern affairs and African-American history. Edward E. Curtis IV graciously lent his critical expertise from six hundred miles away in Indiana, helping to both expand and sharpen my focus while never letting my confidence flag. Bernard Haykel generously offered his advice from Princeton, admitting me into his graduate courses on Saudi history and Salafism and offering valuable guidance along the way. Martin Burke, K.C. Johnson, Kathleen McCarthy and Andrew Robertson, who taught my first-year seminars at the CUNY Graduate Center, lent me their ears and their minds at critical junctures. My fellow fellows at the Scholars-in-Residence program of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture – Caree Banton, Andrianna Campbell, Sylvia Chan-Malik, Tanisha Ford, Kaiama Glover, Tsitsi Jaji, Soyica Roberts, Sonia Sanchez, C. Riley Snorton, Nicole Wright, and our incredible leader Farah Jasmine Griffin – accepted me fully as a junior member. The Committee for the Study of Religion at CUNY, led by Bryan Turner and his administrator Lydia Wilson, proved a helpful presence throughout my graduate study, as did Anny Bakalian of the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center at CUNY. Years earlier, while I was still a journalist, Benjamin Madley, Randall Balmer, Amaney Jamal, Robert Snider, Robert Wister, Jonathan Sarna, Alexander Schenker, Ilhsan Bagby, Judith Weisenfeld and John Green all coached, encouraged or otherwise helped me as I considered the transition to graduate school.

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candid about what, from their knowledge, could and could not be supported by available evidence. Others who were especially helpful in this regard included Ahmed Burhani, Abdul Wasi, Cynthia Wilson, Tahir Wyatt, and Mustafa El-Amin, as well as my Arabic teachers Muhammad and Yusuf Jaaber. A special mention to George Jordan, a former Star-Ledger colleague, for introducing me to Alfred Muhammad in 2007, and to Star-Ledger editors Suzanne Pavkovic, David Tucker and Jim Willse for allowing me time in 2007 and 2008 to report on African-American Muslim communities in East Orange and Newark, New Jersey, for what we thought would be a single Sunday story in the paper. Back again to my family: my wife, two kids, parents, brother, and everyone else, including friends and colleagues whose love, friendship and emotional support made this whole thing much easier than it otherwise would have been.
Preface

The roots of this project trace to a phone call I received in the newsroom of the Newark Star-Ledger in April 2007. The caller, an African American Muslim man, knew I was the Ledger’s religious affairs reporter, and he voiced frustration with recent articles I had written on Muslims and Islam in the United States.

Why is it, he asked me, that every time you write about Muslims, you interview immigrant Muslims as the experts? He reminded me that I worked in a city and region with a large black population, a rich Islamic history, and plenty of African-American Muslims to interview as authorities about Islam. Why didn’t I ever quote any of them?

I was stuck for an answer. Like many other journalists, not to mention many Muslims, I had come instinctively to view Islamic authority as emanating from overseas. When I needed to interview Muslim “experts” for a story, I had sought to quote imams and Muslim professors who were born abroad, or whose parents were born abroad. Part of this pattern was related to the post-9/11 state of journalism’s “religion beat” in the United States. African-American Muslim communities faced far less public scrutiny and were subjects of far less news coverage than immigrant Muslim communities, and New Jersey had sizable immigrant Muslim populations in
the South Brunswick, Jersey City and Paterson areas. Still, the totality of my work could be seen as contributing to the impression that African-American Muslims were incapable of answering questions that journalists and the American public might have about Islam.

As I remember it, the caller did not tell me his name. He relayed his concern and politely hung up. But the obvious agitation in his voice, and, more importantly, the substance of his complaint, resonated with me. I began regularly visiting African-American mosques in Newark and the surrounding cities of East Orange and Irvington. I learned about their histories and that, during the 1990s, the area had been a focal point of a national Salafi movement among African-American Muslims. This was a transnational movement that had important links to the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, where the movement’s most important leaders had studied for years, on scholarship. African American Salafis maintained links to shaykhs there.

I persuaded my Star-Ledger editors, in that summer of 2007, to let me report a large project on the Salafi movement among African Americans. I was particularly intrigued by transnational angles: To what degrees did African American Muslims accept or resist the religious guidance of Saudi shaykhs? What were the relationships like between African American Salafis and other African American Muslim groups? What led some African American Muslims to identify as Salafis, and others not to, or to avoid the movement entirely?

In 2008, my newspaper experienced first-hand the financial difficulties that had long plagued the broader newspaper industry, and for reasons related to that the project was never published. Yet I wanted to pursue it further as a writer, having become increasingly drawn to the topic as a matter of American religious history. In 2010, I was fortunate to receive a five-year fellowship to the doctoral program in History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. With my professors’ encouragement I expanded my topic beyond Salafism to also
encompass broader trends in post-1975 African-American Muslim engagement with the Sunni world in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, starting with Wallace Mohammed’s movement. A dissertation-completion fellowship followed in 2015, to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Along the way, I learned of the excellent existing scholarly research on African-American Muslim history. It is my hope that the pages that follow will be a valued contribution to that growing body of work.
Introduction:

New Islamic Transnationalisms

“Don’t think any Arab is coming here to tell you anything. If he comes here, he will have to come by me. I don’t care if he’s been reading the Holy Qur’an since the day Arabia became sandy. He’s not coming here to lead these sheep.”¹

-- Imam Wallace Mohammed,
February 25, 1975,
to ministers of the Nation of Islam²

In the first hours of a critical new era in Muslim-American history, new concerns about Islamic religious autonomy and authority already loomed large. On the evening of February 25, 1975, hours after his father died, the Nation of Islam’s new leader reassured his increasingly nervous ministers with the words above, saying that the power to interpret Islam for their African-American community would remain in their African-American community. Wallace Mohammed had long aligned himself with Sunni Islamic beliefs that were more popular among

² Wallace Mohammed, who died in 2008, changed the spelling of his name several times throughout his life. Monikers included W.D. Mohammed, W.D. Muhammad, Wallace Muhammad, and Warith Deen Mohammed. Excepting references, this paper will use Wallace Mohammed, which he used late in life.
Muslims than with his father’s followers. But he insisted his organization would not defer to Arabs or other Muslims from elsewhere.\(^3\)

And yet in coming months and years, increased interactions between African American Muslims and Muslims from other countries would force a slew of uncomfortable questions related to authority: Did Muslims in Wallace Mohammed’s organization in fact require religious guidance from other Muslims? From whom and from where might they receive it? Should they and other African American Muslims defer to religious leaders and political agendas from Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia?

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would prove the most persistent and well-funded of Islamic missionaries in the United States. Seeking to position itself as the most Islamically authentic government, able to unify and lead the Muslim world (\textit{umma}), the House of Saud created several international institutions in the 1960s in a massive international proselytizing campaign designed to affect the contours of Sunni Islamic practices and ideals wherever Islam was practiced. Yet the Saudis were not operating on a blank slate. The NOI since the 1930s had developed its own system of beliefs including controversial teachings on issues of divinity, prophethood, race and the afterlife that other Muslims criticized as heterodox.\(^4\) The NOI also had its own economics program, characterized by successful businesses it owned and operated, and by a do-for-self philosophy taught by longtime leader Elijah Muhammad.\(^5\)

The leader’s death, and his replacement by his son Wallace, would lead to dramatic change in the group’s religious worldview. Wallace Mohammed had long questioned the NOI’s

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\(^3\) “Ministers Meeting, February 25, 1975,” Ministers Kit March 14, 1975, 7 (26), NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.

\(^4\) The NOI taught that God had appeared on earthy in the twentieth-century as a human, in the form of Master Fard Muhammad, the NOI’s founder. It also taught that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet, that the white race had been created by an evil black scientist, and that there was no afterlife.

\(^5\) The NOI operated profitable restaurants (Steak ‘n Take) and a fish business (Whiting H&G).
heterodoxies, instead supporting more conventional Sunni Islamic norms. In the aforementioned meeting with NOI ministers the night of his father’s death, in a basement of the NOI’s Chicago headquarters, he reiterated those preferences, expressing his intention to rely on Qur’anic teachings more than his father had. At the same time, he remained sensitive to his followers’ fears that he would sacrifice their group’s autonomy. With this in mind, he insisted the NOI would not rely on the guidance of outsiders. Muslims from abroad, whether from Saudi Arabia or elsewhere, were “not coming here to lead these sheep.”

Still, in the years to come Wallace Mohammed’s group would engage deeply with Saudi-financed missionary efforts. The same would be true for a separate group of African American Muslims known as Salafis, whose very development as a movement in the United States was directly linked to Saudi Arabia and its network of Islamic universities. Adherents of Salafism emphasized an intent to replicate Islamic practices from the religion’s first three generations, dating to the seventh century. African-American Salafis broadly accepted the quietist Salafi worldview favored by the kingdom, where the most prominent African American Salafi leaders had studied on Saudi-funded scholarships. The Salafi community, unlike Wallace Mohammed’s group, was a willing recipient of Saudi religious guidance, and its leaders and members broadly accepted the notion that U.S. Muslim communities lacked the resources and knowledge to properly train their own religious leaders. This explains why African American Salafis often looked to Muslim authorities in other countries, especially Saudi Arabia, for rulings on matters

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6 Ministers Meeting,” February 25, 1975, Ministers Kit March 14, 1975, 7 (26), NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
profound and mundane. One of the founders of a prominent African-American Salafi mosque in Newark, New Jersey, succinctly expressed this point of view in an interview with me:

Some people are under the impression that there are [Islamic] scholars in America. There are actually no scholars in America, no scholars in the West. What we do have in the West, we have students who have graduated [from Saudi universities], and when you graduate they give you the title Shaykh…, but they are actually what we would call daw’is [missionaries], people who bring the message. They are not scholars. In the Islamic world they’re not considered scholars.

During the quarter-century examined in this study, the Muslim population in the United States grew by leaps and bounds. This study, though, is less about the spread of Islam in America than about the internal dialogues of people who were already Muslim. Being recipients of Saudi attention would raise a host of contentious issues for African American Muslims. The related transnational exchanges would force questions not only about what kind of Muslims they wanted to be, but also about what kind they did not want to be. It forced them to ask whether to direct their religious worldviews around interpretations of Islam prevalent in a different country. It raised the question of whether they should adhere to the strictest interpretations of sacred scripture and oral traditions, even when these appeared to conflict with Western sensibilities. It led to re-orderings of religious, racial and national loyalties, which have often tugged from different directions, as they do for people of other religious backgrounds as well. (Members of Wallace Mohammed’s group would express concern that Muslims from abroad viewed them as a “fifth column” of sorts, a tool to influence U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world.)

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9 Author’s interview with Abdul Wasi, telephone, January 26, 2016.
Religious Authority and Transnationalism

The central components of African American Muslim history have been transnational in nature since the first Muslim slaves were forced from Africa and taken to American shores in the antebellum South. Later, in the early 20th century, an Indian immigrant found success proselytizing thousands of African Americans into the Islamic Ahmadiyya movement, while African Americans in the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Nation of Islam envisioned themselves as “Moors” and “Asiatics,” rather than as Americans. A deeper transnational engagement occurred in the mid-20th century, when the NOI politically aligned itself with Arab nationalists and the so-called “Muslim International,” a deterritorialized entity that opposed Western (and Soviet) dominance in geopolitics.11 After 1975, the two Muslim groups studied here would emphasize religious politics over racial and class politics, while nurturing relationships with religious and political leaders in Saudi Arabia. These two African American Muslim groups – Wallace Mohammed’s organization and the Salafi movement – each favored distinct approaches in their relationships with Saudis, as we shall see.

The transnational nature of Saudi proselytization is similarly self-evident. The Muslim World League, Islamic University of Medina, and World Association of Muslim Youth were all created by the Saudi royal family during the 1960s to proselytize around the world and to increase the kingdom’s regional and international influence. The extent of Saudi missionary efforts has been so widespread that Muslim communities in virtually every country can be said to have a transnational relationship with the kingdom.12

11 Sohail Daulatzai coined the term “Muslim International,” defining it as an entity consisting of “those who struggle for dignity by other means after being left at the margins by the violence of neoliberalism.” Sohail Daulatzai, Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
12 For discussions on how Saudi universities may have affected Muslim movements in different countries, see, for example, Roel Meijer, ed., Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
Another transnational aspect of Islam among African Americans is the migration narrative, which occupies essential spaces within communal histories and imaginations of almost every American ethnic and religious group. Migration narratives are central to both African-American and Islamic histories, both independently of one another and when intertwined. The initial “migration” in African American history, of course, was a forced one, depositing kidnapped Africans into the United States where they were sold into slavery; a more traditional moving of peoples, the “Great Migration” of the early 20th century, brought millions of African Americans from the South to northern cities and western lands. Throughout, the possibilities of migration embedded in the biblical Exodus story, in which Hebrews fled Egypt for the Promised Land, have lent comfort to African Americans enduring antebellum slavery and the various discriminations thereafter. For Muslims – whether of African American or other backgrounds -- migration carries meaning as well, stemming from the prophet Muhammad’s migration in the year 622 C.E. from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution. The contemporary idea of Muslim migration from the West, where Muslims constitute a religious minority, to the Muslim-majority world in the Middle East retains its own hold on Muslim imaginations, even when in competition with the desire to remain in the West. The early African-American Muslim groups – the aforementioned Ahmadiyya movement and the NOI – combined these black and Islamic migration narratives into a worldview directing their identities toward the Muslim world abroad as a way to contend with racism and segregation in the United States.

This study, then, explores the transnational spread of religious beliefs and how they were received in a “host” country, the United States. It illuminates important efforts by African-American Muslims to determine the nature of Islam for themselves, to orient themselves culturally and politically, and to decide whether religious authority was properly sited in the
United States or in the Middle East. It also measures the reach of Saudi global efforts to affect the contours of Islamic practices around the world, demonstrating how the kingdom’s religious authorities since the mid-1970s variously succeeded and failed in attempts to influence the Islamic practices of African-American Muslims. It shows that African American Muslims were hardly passive recipients of the Saudis’ proselytizing efforts. And it places the transnational encounters within the framework of longstanding debates over religious authority, identity, gender, and cultural diplomacy, asking core questions that include:

- Who is given the religious authority to lead Muslim communities? On what basis is that authority constructed?

- How do Muslim-Americans balance their perceptions of “universalistic” Islamic values that are common across the Muslim world, on the one hand, and “particularistic” ones of greater importance to regional Muslim communities, on the other?

- What is the nature of religious authority in a period of mass globalization, when ideas about religion and authority are increasingly spread across cultures and national boundaries?

Far from being consigned to the realm of scholarly debate, these questions on the transnationalism of religious authority have resonated across the Muslim world, especially where Islam is a minority religion and certainly among African-American Muslims in the United States. Within the Islamic world, African American Muslims held an unusual historical position in the 1970s, due to Elijah Muhammad’s heterodox teachings. Many of his former followers had concluded by the mid-1970s that he had promoted a false religious worldview to them in the previous decades. They did not want to be fooled again, so they sought an Islamic belief system
aligned with more conventional Sunni norms, accepted by Muslims around the world. At the same time, their grounding in ideas relating to autonomy and Black Nationalism cautioned them against accepting leadership from outside their community.

As a result, tensions over authority often arose when African-American Muslims engaged with Muslims from historically Muslim lands, who were better grounded in classical Islamic studies and practices. The Islamic Studies professor Sherman Jackson wrote in 1999 that African-American Muslims too often found themselves “reduced to a position of abject intellectual and ideological dependency,” and that many of them “lost confidence in their ability to articulate themselves in terms that were likely to be recognized and accepted as Islamic.”

The paradoxes and choices facing African-American Muslims – and other hyphenated Muslims – have been broadly addressed by scholars and other writers in various fields, as has Saudi involvement in international missionary campaigns. Within the disciplines of Anthropology and American Studies, scholars have examined how Muslim-Americans have constructed and perceived lines of religious authority in the Muslim world, while positing that African-American Muslims have often “imagined” ties to Muslims overseas in attempts to re-map personal and communal identities sullied by American racism. Within the disciplines of History, Sociology and Religious Studies, scholars have analyzed the NOI within the context of the social unrest of the 1960s and 1970s, debating whether it was guided during these years mainly by religious ideals or political ones, and whether that dichotomy is a false one. Meanwhile, within the disciplines of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, scholars have

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examined efforts by Saudi Arabia to influence Islamic practices in Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon and Great Britain, while exploring the vast scope of the kingdom’s reach and questioning its actual impact.  

However, to date, very few scholars have examined where these issues come together in the United States; that is, how the NOI’s transition to Sunni Islam and the later development of a Salafi movement among African-Americans were related to the increase in interactions between African-American Muslims and Saudi leaders and institutions.

The Universal and the Particular

Longstanding tensions between the notion of a “universal” form of Islam and “particular” forms are pervasive in debates over Islamic practices and religious authority. As Edward E. Curtis IV observed,

The tension exists between the idea, on the one hand, that a religious tradition is universally applicable to the experiences of all human beings, and the idea, on the other hand, that a religious experience is applicable to one particular group of human beings. The history of African-American Islam provides an especially useful vantage point from which to view this problem, since it has been so central to both African-American religion and American Islam.  

Curtis argues that the very ideal of a universal Islam -- meaning one form that is supreme over all others and must be applicable to all Muslims -- is just that, an ideal. While many modern Muslims try to emulate the practices of the earliest Muslims, the rearview mirror is not as clear

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17 The term Salafism is used to describe an Islamic movement whose adherents emphasize the beliefs and practices of the earliest Muslims, as perceived through the lenses of modernity.

as it may seem; even early Muslims engaged in disputes over Islam’s teachings and expectations of leadership. What is perceived to be universal, the political theorist Ernest Laclau has suggested, is often assumed so only because of temporal political victories that bestow credibility and resources.¹⁹ For scholars who are not theologians, there is an additional problem—a professional one—in assuming the existence of a universal Islam, Curtis writes. The danger is that in using it as a comparative tool, they place themselves “in the position of determining the essential, and by implication, the true Islam.”²⁰ As a result of the comparisons that have nevertheless occurred, he argues, the academic study of African-American Islam “has been too consumed with dismissing certain Muslims as cultists, heretics, and sectarian. All of these pejorative and unhelpful labels presume, by their comparison to “orthodox” Muslims, a normative Islam that in no time and in no place has ever existed.”²¹

And yet, the ideal of a pristine, Qur’an- and Sunnah-centered universalistic Islam remains a powerful force within popular and scholarly discourse on Muslims, an ideal propagated by Western and non-Western writers alike, as well as by Islamic reformers.²² African-American Muslims have indeed tried to measure their religious development against a perceived universal Islam whose geographic source was outside the United States, its correctness often assumed. The nature of this quest presented many questions. Were Wallace Mohammed’s followers comfortable with Islam as taught by their own leader and his imams? Had they instead developed more faith in Islam as presented to them by the Saudi-funded Muslim World League (MWL)? And how much, if at all, should racial identity and awareness matter in their religious consciousness? For almost a century, religious debates among African-American Muslims have

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¹⁹ Ibid., 11.
²⁰ Ibid., 4.
²¹ Ibid., Islam in Black America, 6.
²² Sunnah refers to the oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad, or hadith, that are viewed as proofs, transmitted from Islam’s earliest decades, of the prophet’s sayings and preferences.
engaged this perceived spectrum of particularism to universalism, from the NOI’s early dismissals of other Muslims’ criticism in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s; to acceptance of more conventional Sunni Islamic ideals by Malcolm X and Wallace Mohammed starting in the 1960s and 1970s; and to the Salafi movement starting in the 1980s and 1990s.

Conflicts between perceptions of the universal, on one hand, and perceptions of the particular, on the other, are present throughout this study, relating to rituals, authority, and gender roles. What role was race to play in a Muslim’s identity? On authority from what country should a moon sighting herald the start of Ramadan? What constituted the proper covering for women? Should women be encouraged to pursue higher education? Was polygamy religiously permissible in the United States? What relationship should Muslims have to their government? Attempts to resolve these and other questions would prove complex, as multiple sources of direction arose.

Saudis, and Muslims of other nationalities, presented themselves to African-American Muslims as guides, with separate groups portraying themselves as representing a universal Islam. Choosing among the options proved challenging. Islam has long been practiced in diverse ways, with the estimated 1.5 billion Muslims around the world broadly divided into Sunni (85 percent) and Shi’i (15 percent). That main breakdown obscures myriad other important distinctions, either self-identified or imposed; among Sunnis there are Sufi Muslims, Salafi Muslims, and Tablighi Muslims, for example. In addition, Sunni groups are often associated with one of four distinct “madhhabs,” or schools of thought; adherents of each school tend to view their own as the best one. In time, claims of authority by Saudi religious leaders would face increasing challenges

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23 These are the Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafi’i, and Maliki schools of thought. Islam in Saudi Arabia is associated with the Hanbali school, while Islam in northern and western Africa is associated with the Maliki school. Islam through much of the Ottoman Empire was associated with the Hanafi school. For a discussion of characteristics of each school, as well as contrasts with Shi’i Islam, see Mohammed Hashim Kemali, Shari’ah Law: An Introduction (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 68-98.
within the United States, from immigrant-run organizations such as the Fiqh Council of North America, Zaytuna College, and the AlMaghrib Institute, which tasked themselves with building a domestic Islamic educational infrastructure to serve Muslims in the United States.

Scholarly studies evaluating Muslim populations around the world bolster the case that cultural norms in host countries help shape the development of Islam in a given region. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his well-known work contrasting Islam’s development in Morocco and Indonesia during the sixteenth century, observed the effects of culture on religious practices. In Morocco, which lacked a strong unifying religion prior to the onset of Islam, an “aggressive fundamentalism” would prosper. In Indonesia, where the dominant culture in the Javanese state had been Hindu-Buddhist, the main versions of Islam that developed tended to be pluralist and syncretistic.24 In Morocco, the development of Islam led to “cultural homogenization,” while in Indonesia it resulted in “cultural diversification.”25 It is not a stretch to extrapolate Geertz’s assertions internationally, to surmise that the development of world religions in a specific host country is at least partially reliant on cultural factors unrelated to theology. In the United States in the mid-20th century, the growth of Sunnism among African-Americans was affected by a cultural landscape with historic discrimination against black Americans. And the flow of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries led to increased interactions between these new arrivals and African-American Muslims at NOI mosques and other Muslim communal events.26 These interactions often led African Americans to question the

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25 Geertz uses the following words to explain Islam in Morocco: “activism, fervor, impetuosity, nerve, toughness, moralism, popularism, and an almost obsessive self-assertion, the radical intensification of individuality.” His words for Islam in Indonesia, on the other hand, are: “inwardness, imperturbability, patience, poise, sensibility, aestheticism, elitism, and an almost obsessive self-effacement, the radical dissolution of individuality.” Ibid., Islam Observed, 54.
26 Malcolm X, the former Nation of Islam minister who was killed in 1965, after he had left the Nation of Islam for a more mainstream form of Sunni Islam, said in his autobiography that his encounters with Sunni Muslims born in
NOI’s racialist theology and helped introduce many of them to the more conventional variant of Sunni Islam that Wallace Mohammed would advocate. In addition, Black Nationalist groups – the NOI had been the quintessential example – were in political decline by the time Elijah Muhammad died in 1975. By that time, the racialist ideology that had powered the NOI’s growth faced increased competition from more orthodox religious appeals such as that voiced by Wallace Mohammed.27

Attempts to measure a “Saudi” influence on regional Muslim groups, then, are fraught with obstacles. Distinguishing between the Islamic traditions viewed as universal, on one hand, and cultural norms stemming from religious practices, on the other, can be a struggle for Muslims and non-Muslims alike; Islamic teachings and national religious cultures are often easily confused. As Edward Said observed in 1997, “Islam defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world, which numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages, and, of course, an infinite number of different experiences.”28

Underlying the relationship between the universal and the particular, for African American Muslims, is the relationship between the Muslim-majority world and “Muslim-minority lands” such as the United States, where Muslims generally live as a minority and are governed by non-Muslim rulers. Islamic jurists have for centuries asked whether Muslim-minority populations should migrate to Muslim-majority regions or stay and attempt to convert non-Muslims. Where Islam is dominant, many have professed a responsibility to aid Muslim

other countries had led him to question the Nation of Islam’s racial theology. See Malcolm X and Alex R. Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley (USA: Grove Press, 1965), 328.
communities where Islam is not the majority religion. For African-Americans, as we shall see, being on the receiving end of this largesse has often caused anxiety and conflict.

The Saudis and ‘Soft Power’

The Saudis, of course, had motives in projecting themselves as the conveyors of a universal Islam. In the 1950s and 1960s, as mentioned above, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been enmeshed in what political scientist Malcolm Kerr has called the “Arab Cold War,” in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia were the main competitors for influence among Arab states.29 After Nasser nationalized al-Azhar University in Cairo, the Islamic world’s most prestigious university, and sent troops to Yemen, the House of Saud created its own Islamic university and a pan-Islamic institution called the Muslim World League. Though the main focus of the Arab Cold War was regional, the Saudi kingdom also sought to build and influence elsewhere. In seeking to maintain power, it acted “to bolster its legitimacy in the West and among Muslim states and persons.”30 Promoting itself as the global leader of Sunni Islam, the kingdom promoted a chastened form of Sunnism that favored literalist approaches to scripture and oral traditions, as well as dim views of Western thought and culture.

The location of Islamic holy sites within the kingdom’s borders contributed greatly to the kingdom’s prestige across the Muslim world.31 The official promotion of the monarch as “Custodian of the Two Holy Sites,” and the spending of massive sums to proselytize other Muslims, constituted assertions of what Joseph Nye famously called “soft power,” that is, the

31 Bernard Haykel, general idea of one of his chapters.
effort and ability to shape preferences of others without coercion. The kingdom’s fortuitous location, which granted oil wealth and claims to Islam’s holiest sites, provided the means to acquire soft power.

A caveat is in order here, about my use of the term “Saudi influence.” The ideas about Islam that were conveyed through Saudi-financed proselytization cannot be traced to Saudi Arabia exclusively; key contributors to the Salafi and Islamist worldviews who spent time in Saudi Arabia actually came from other Muslim-majority countries such as Syria, Pakistan, Egypt and Albania. The same is true for many of the people who I portray as conveyors of Saudi-financed influence in the United States; key officials in the Saudi-funded Muslim World League’s North American offices were of Palestinian, Egyptian or Pakistani descent, and while they viewed themselves as practicing Muslims who were well-versed in Sunni Islamic teachings and scripture, they would not have identified themselves (or been identified by others) with Salafism or Wahhabism, the literalist forms of Islam often associated with Saudi religious leaders. And while shaykhs sent by the Muslim World League to teach at African-African mosques had often studied at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, their native countries were elsewhere, including Nigeria, the Sudan and Syria. Furthermore, the curricula at the Islamic University of Medina, where many of these shaykhs did receive their training, was developed and taught by non-Saudis including Abu A’la Mawdudi of British India and Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s. Any understanding of a “Saudi”

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33 For a discussion of other countries’ use of Soft Power, see page 73 of … French spent great sums to promote its culture around the world. USSR used uoptian ideals of communism. Thai food, Thailand promotes its food. P. 49. Cultures are transmitted transnationally through commerce, personal contacts, visits, exchanges, and now, of course, electronically. Other countries use soft power as well. The United States and
influence on Islam around the world, then, must account for these transnational influences and exchanges.

Why, then, my focus on Saudi Arabia? While certainly true that other countries including Pakistan, Iran, Libya, and Egypt also sought to influence the practice of Islam among Muslim-Americans, none of these national efforts rivaled the Saudis’ in scope, depth or resources. In attempting to influence the practice of Islam in the region and around the world, so that religious practices would more closely align with Salafi practices prevalent in Saudi Arabia, and so Saudi influence would be felt around the world, the Saudis used “soft power” by providing grants for mosques around the world;\(^\text{34}\) financing salaries for imams and for Saudi-trained Islamic Studies specialists to work at American mosques; donating millions of Saudi-published Qur’ans and pieces of other Islamic literature; and providing full years-long scholarships to Islamic universities in the kingdom.

These efforts have affected how many Muslims around the world, including African-Americans, relate to Saudi Arabia.\(^\text{35}\) And they have spurred the development, in many countries, of Salafi movements that are led by graduates of Saudi universities who have returned home. Clearly, since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has held a distinctive place in Islamic proselytization around the world. Missionary efforts from other Muslim countries to the United States tended to be more scattered, consisting of occasional donations and scholarships to study abroad. But for

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\(^{34}\) From 1982 to 2005, during the reign of King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz, the Saudi government provided money to mosques on six continents; one public list of beneficiaries, hardly exhaustive, lists sixteen mosques in the United States that received funds during his reign, including the Islamic Center in New Brunswick, New Jersey; the Islamic Center in Toledo, Ohio, and the South-West Big Mosque in Chicago. King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz, “Support for Mosques and Islamic Centers,” [http://www.kingfahdbinabdulaziz.com/main/m460.htm](http://www.kingfahdbinabdulaziz.com/main/m460.htm) (accessed Nov. 2, 2015).

\(^{35}\) It is hard to estimate the size of the African-American Salafi population. In general, estimating religious populations is difficult in America, as the U.S. Census does not ask people about religion. A 2007 survey of the U.S. Muslim population by the Pew Research Center ([Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream](http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf)) estimated that one in five American Muslims is African-American. Combining that Pew data with various estimates of the U.S. Muslim population (from 3 million to 10 million) would place the number of African-American Muslims at between 600,000 and 2 million. While no one can say with certainty, there is no reason to believe that the Salafi portion of that figure has ever extended beyond the low tens of thousands.
Saudi Arabia, proselytization is a full-time, ongoing concern that has produced formidable institutions known to Muslims around the world, including the Muslim World League, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, and Islamic University of Medina.

**Issues of Masculinity, Femininity and Marriage**

The relationship between African-American Muslims and Saudis involved power struggles inextricably linked to notions of masculinity. To emerge victorious in battles over religious authority was to win a crucial power struggle over the ability to interpret ancient Islamic texts and traditions for Muslim-Americans in the late 20th century. These battles were closely tied to perceptions of masculinity, given the history of the Nation of Islam, and, more broadly, of black people in the United States from slavery onward. Slavery had robbed black men of traditional male roles that are common in patriarchal societies – among them, earning income for a family, protecting one’s wife and children from harm, and defending oneself and one’s property. To those who joined the NOI in the mid-20th century, the organization’s explicit calls to manliness, with the associated ideals of self-sufficiency and autonomy, had been major appeals. The NOI taught that black people should work apart from white Americans, own their own businesses, and publish their own newspapers; in other words, they should live as much of their lives as possible among other black people. So Wallace Mohammed’s movement from Black Nationalism and toward more conventional Sunni Islamic norms posed a potential threat to his father’s loyalists, who worried he would hand the leadership reins to Muslims from abroad. Wallace Mohammed clearly recognized this perception, as is demonstrated by his shifting discourse on religious authority over the decades.

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The relationship with Saudi religious leaders and the broader Sunni world also affected African-American discourse over the ideal roles for women in Muslim society, family life, and marriage. Elijah Muhammad’s NOI had stressed the role of women as loyal, obedient wives, and as mothers whose main priorities were at home. Wallace Mohammed, without disavowing his father’s emphases on women’s responsibilities to families and obedience to husbands, also encouraged women to pursue college and graduate degrees and was known within the movement for his sensitivity to women’s issues – likely due to a strong relationship with his mother, with whom he had sided after his father had children with other women.\(^{37}\)

Elijah Muhammad had publicly banned polygamy in the NOI. But in 1975, after he died, at least some ministers viewed Wallace Mohammed’s new Qur’anic emphasis as license to have more than one wife at a time. The new leader chastised them and generally discouraged polygamy, saying it was acceptable only if all wives were treated equally, and if each marriage was legalized.\(^{38}\) Polygamy was less rare among African-American Salafis; it is hard to link this development directly to Saudis, because polygamy had been present in some earlier African-American-Muslim communities such as the Sunni Dar al-Islam movement, which was not directly associated with the kingdom. Communal discourse on family issues, especially in Salafi communities, would often center on marriage and the movement of women, that is, whether a wife should leave home alone without her husband’s permission.

Scholarly debate persists over the roles and status of African-American women in Islamic organizations. The patterns of this dialogue have echoed broader debates within Western discourse on the degrees of restrictions faced by Muslim women. Contemporary comparisons pit

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Western feminist ideals against the perceptions of sexism in Muslim-majority countries, but also posit the seventh-century arrival of Islam as a benefit to women’s rights, a positive contrast to what existed before. In the 1960s, the first major scholarly works on the NOI, by C. Eric Lincoln and E.U. Essien-Udom, portrayed the NOI as a male-centered organization, its women associated mostly with domestic life and activities. In the 1990s, Claude Andrew Clegg, in his biography of Elijah Muhammad, provided a similar impression with a few alterations. He wrote that the ideals of female purity, domesticity and piety played significant roles in the discourse surrounding the NOI, and that women exercised real power in certain “progressive locales.” Edward Curtis, in 2002, turned scholarship in a new direction, highlighting the importance that the NOI placed on girls’ education – not just on home economics and dress making, but also on science. None of these books was entirely devoted to women’s experiences and contributions to African-American-Muslim life.\(^3\)

Since 9/11, multiple monographs have specifically focused on the lived experiences of African-American Muslim women. In 2004, Carolyn Rouse published a study of African American Muslim women in Los Angeles arguing that their experiences defied common stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and passive.\(^4\) In 2014 and 2015, three books were published specifically on the topic of NOI women. Bayyinah Jeffries, focusing on 1950 to 1975, celebrated the role of Elijah Muhammad’s wife, Clara Muhammad, in establishing the NOI’s education system (which her son Wallace named in her honor upon becoming leader), while exploring, through oral histories and newspaper clippings, what attracted women to the NOI.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) The section on Clara Muhammad is reminiscent of the themes from Evelyn Higgenbotham’s *Righteous Discontent* (1994), which identified leadership roles played by women in African-American Baptist churches around
Meanwhile, Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim argued, through analyses of oral histories they conducted, that women’s experiences in the NOI improved considerably after Wallace Mohammed became leader. While they observed that women in the NOI’s early period were excluded from leadership positions, they criticized common Western feminist critiques of the social status of Muslim women. In 2015, Debra Majeed published the first scholarly monograph on polygamy among African-American Muslims. She presented a complex profile that, without prejudging polygamy from her perspective as a Westerner, acknowledged both positive and negative effects for family life and for women in particular.42

**Sources and Methodology**

Initially, this study was geared to join a slew of other projects that focused on a specific local Muslim community in the United States.43 My experience from 2003 to 2010 as the religious-affairs reporter for the *Newark Star-Ledger* of New Jersey had introduced me to the African-American Salafi community in Newark and East Orange, the hub of the national Salafi movement during the 1990s. But after enrolling in graduate school with the intent of writing a dissertation focused mainly on that community, a multiplicity of archival resources and oral histories became known and available to me, and important national figures in various Muslim-American communities agreed to let me interview them about the historical period I was studying. I included Wallace Mohammed’s movement in my research, and the scope of my project became more national.

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42 Majeed, *Polygyny*.


Through use of these data, this project constructs and analyzes an historical narrative of the interaction of African American Muslims with Saudi-financed missionary work between 1975 and 2000. This is an important segment of African-American-Muslim history that has been largely neglected by scholars, the void in scholarship owing to its relatively recent vintage, on one hand, and also to topics of great intrigue adjacent to either side of the timeline. The decades preceding 1975 included the Nation of Islam’s heyday, which has spurred dozens of studies on the NOI, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. On the other side of 2000, scholars have examined dynamics of post-9/11 Muslim-American communities, as well as anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. Yet the years between 1975 and 2000, the subject of my dissertation, include critical developments in both African-American Muslim communities and Muslim-American communities as a whole. For African-American Muslims, these years witnessed dramatic movement away from the NOI’s form of Islam toward more conventional forms of Sunni Islam and, for sizable minorities of African-American Muslims, toward Salafism. For the Muslim-American community overall, these were years of dramatically increasing immigration from Muslim-majority countries, a result of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that substantively increased immigration from Muslim-majority countries.

Some of my sources are used here for the first time in a scholarly study. Wallace Mohammed’s directives to his ministers in 1975, during his first nine months as leader, helped me elucidate in Chapter Two the discourse of the transition’s first year, providing newfound details and speeches that demonstrate immediate concerns about relationships with Muslims

45 While the NOI was the largest African-American Muslim group, there were others that ascribed to more conventional Sunni Islamic norms. They included the Addeynu Allahu Universal Arabic Association and the Dar al-Islam Movement.
from abroad. These directives were assembled into packets called “Ministers’ Kits” and distributed every four to six weeks between March 1975 and January 1976. Usually consisting of one hundred to two hundred pages apiece, they were meant for the ministers’ eyes only. Chapter Three benefits from archived newspapers of Wallace Mohammed’s organization and transcripts of his speeches, which helped me chart and explain the history of his organization’s interactions with other Muslim groups. Chapter Four benefits from internal reports of the Muslim World League’s North American office during the early 1980s, which helped me document that organization’s proselytizing efforts to African-American Muslims, as well as to other Muslim-Americans. Oral histories of Muslim-Americans – leaders and non-leaders alike -- also helped me provide context and fill gaps in information unaddressed by the documents.

Using this data has required great care. Oral histories, reliant as they are on flawed and subjective memories of past events – usually twenty to fifty years old, for my interviewees -- are inherently suspect as records of facts and feelings. Anyone can be fooled by a source’s deliberate or unwitting agendas. My interviewees, while discussing their spiritual and religious trajectories, were revealing their memories of important, emotional events in their lives from decades ago. In addition, many of them probably knew or suspected that their accounts, if published, might have ramifications for how Muslim-Americans are publicly viewed in a post-9/11 environment that subjects Muslim-American activities and perceived loyalties to high levels of scrutiny by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. I was almost always able to corroborate the basic facts of oral histories from broader historical accounts in books and periodicals, other documentary evidence, or other interviews.

46 I transcribed many of these speeches personally, from CDs and cassettes.
47 A list of the people I interviewed begins on page 257.
In choosing people to interview, I was aware of two general categories: leaders in Muslim communities, and non-leaders. In chapters two through four, which cover areas for which documentary evidence was readily available, the oral histories tended to serve the purpose of providing context and filling historical gaps. It seemed more important in these chapters to rely on interviews of Muslim-American leaders, or people who were close to them, who recalled important details of contemporary communal life and controversies. In chapter five, the oral histories played a more significant role in constructing the historical narrative, as there existed few other sources.

Like oral histories, documentary sources also require scrutiny and cannot be taken at face value. The most widely cited periodical in this dissertation, the *Muslim Journal*, was a house organ for Wallace Mohammed’s movement, and the *Journal of the Muslim World League* fulfilled a similar role for that Saudi-based organization. Each had the type of self-professed, organizational agenda that spurs a researcher to extra caution when evaluating matters other than names, dates and details of events.

The sheer volume of available recordings of Wallace Mohammed and other African-American Muslims, especially Salafis, presented another issue. Literally thousands of them were available, with most lasting between one and three hours. It simply would have impractical to listen to more than samplings. Over his thirty-three years of leadership, Wallace Mohammed had virtually every one of his sermons recorded; one loyal follower plausibly estimated the number of recordings at two thousand. It was necessary for me to choose which ones to listen to in their entirety. I accepted guidance in this choice by the lectures’ titles, their dates, and the advice of members of his community who were extremely familiar with his speaking history.
This study has three main limitations. One is a gender imbalance in sourcing. In creating and analyzing various narratives of power, transition and cultural diplomacy, I utilized archives and data that tended to rely on male-centered discourse. That said, the experiences of African American Muslim women among Wallace Mohammed’s followers and within the Salafi movement are discussed in three of the five chapters of this dissertation. And I interviewed women and incorporated their oral histories into my broader narratives. Yet the central narratives on the relationships between African American Muslims and Saudi religious leaders tend to be driven by archival resources and other data that were more concerned with men’s views and statements than women’s.

A second limitation of this study is that by focusing on Wallace Mohammed’s organization and the Salafi movement, I neglect the careful study of several other known groups in African American communities, among them the Addeyne Allahe-Universal Arabic Association, the Dar al-Islam movement, Sufi movements, the Islamic Mission of America, and the Reconstituted Nation of Islam led by Minister Louis Farrakhan. My neglect of these groups is not meant to suggest that they have not played notable roles within the history of Islam among African Americans.48 My focus on Wallace Mohammed’s organization and the Salafi movement owes to these specific groups’ long-term relationships with Saudi and Saudi-financed institutions.

A third limitation of this study is uncertainty over the size of the studied African American Muslim populations. To develop a sound estimate, I would have needed not only the size of the Muslim-American population as a whole, but also of African American Muslims as a single group within that population, and further breakdowns for different African American

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Muslim groups. Yet estimating any U.S. religious population is difficult, as the census bureau
does not inquire about religion. Estimates for Wallace Mohammed’s group range from the tens
of thousands to hundreds of thousands; for African American Salafis, from the thousands to tens
of thousands. There exist no scientific estimates of the sizes of the Nation of Islam, Wallace
Mohammed’s organization, or of the African-American Salafi population.49

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter One, *New Transnationalisms for African
American Muslims*, elucidates the meanings of old and new Islamic transnationalisms within the
narratives of African American history. The structure of this chapter is as follows: First, it
explores the history of transnationalism as a loosely defined field of scholarship, broadly and
then with particular resonance for African American history. Second, it relates transnationalism
to notions of counter-citizenship that were significant to the political and religious consciousness
of African American Muslims in the early 20th century, both in how these groups envisioned

49 From two surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, from 2007 and 2011, respectively, an estimate of the
overall African American Muslim population would fall between thirteen and twenty percent of the Muslim
American population as a whole. In 2007, Pew estimated 2.35 million Muslims, with 20 percent of them African
Americans, which would make 470,000. In 2011 Pew estimated there were 2.75 million American Muslims, with
about 13 percent of them African Americans, which would make about 360,000. (Rather than positing a decline, the
Pew report noted that the database used may have underrepresented African Americans). Other estimates, less
scientific ones by advocacy groups, have posited much larger Muslim-American populations, from six million to
eight million. These seem in line with other religious groups’ overestimates of their own memberships; in one
example, from 2002, a study had counted two million American Muslims who associated with mosques and simply
multiplied it to get six or seven million, reasoning that for every Muslim who went to a mosque, there were at least
three who did not. Were we then to assume four hundred thousand or half a million African American Muslims,
that still leaves the question of how many are part of Wallace Mohammed’s movement. Scholars have cautiously
estimated that anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of African American Muslims have been affiliated with the Nation of
Islam and its successor groups under Wallace Mohammed; that would make about 200,000. The population of these
groups has usually been kept secret. When Wallace Mohammed took over, he indicated it was in the mid-five
figures, but that it was growing. The other African American Muslim group in my study, the Salafi movement, is
much smaller and, as it lacks a central organization, its size is harder to estimate. After conferring with leaders and
drawing upon my own unscientific counts, as part of my fieldwork, the term I use to describe the size of this Salafi
population is “thousands, if not tens of thousands.” “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,”
21, 2016); “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism,” Pew Research
Center, August 2011, http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/Muslim%20American%20Report%202010-02-
themselves and how they interacted with the Muslim International. The following section demonstrates how Wallace Mohammed’s approach dramatically altered this worldview through his quest to incorporate African American Muslims into the American mainstream. The section after that explores the history of the diplomatic relationship between the U.S. government and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The final section explores the transnational elements of the Salafi movement among African Americans, which was more closely associated with Saudi religious leaders than any previous American Muslim movement.

Chapter Two, *The Transition of 1975*, situates the Nation of Islam’s major transition within a decades-long trajectory leading to 1975, the year Elijah Muhammad died and his successor (and son) Wallace Mohammed embraced more conventional Sunni norms for the organization. It analyzes the discourse surrounding these theological changes, especially regarding relationships with Muslims from abroad. The first main section explores shifts in NOI religious teachings during the decades and years approaching 1975, demonstrating how they hinted at changes from the NOI’s racialist teachings. Elijah Muhammad’s teachings were not as forcefully expressed in his later decades as in his earlier ones, and Wallace Mohammed’s new direction, while significant, did not appear to have emerged from nowhere. The chapter’s next section uses oral histories and recordings of sermons to recast the narrative of the NOI’s change of leadership in 1975, while also focusing on the organization’s relationships with Muslims from abroad. The rest of the chapter uses a previously untapped source – thick packets called “Ministers Kits” that included confidential directives from Wallace Mohammed to his ministers and minutes of private meetings. I use these kits for a systematic examination of NOI discourse on the broader Sunni Islamic world; on Wallace Mohammed’s instructions to his ministers about the transition; and on changing gender norms that affected Muslims in the organization. The
chapter’s final section then examines the NOI’s internal discourse regarding its tense relationship with, and feelings toward, Muslims from around the world.

Chapter Three, *Wallace Mohammed’s Organization and the Saudis, 1975-1995*, analyzes the often-tumultuous relationship between the largest African-American Muslim organization and Saudi religious leaders and institutions during the first two decades of Wallace Mohammed’s leadership. The first section examines the nature and extent of financial assistance and religious education that Wallace Mohammed’s organization received from Saudi Arabia and other selected parts of the Muslim world, exploring why it was not more substantive. The next section explores the political dilemmas facing this African American Muslim organization as it attempted to set foreign-policy positions in the 1970s that would alienate neither other Muslims nor the U.S. government. The chapter then explores critical interactions between Saudi-financed missionaries and African Americans in Wallace Mohammed’s organization as the former positioned themselves to guide the latter on Islamic beliefs, practices and rituals. Next, the chapter explores how Wallace Mohammed’s organization altered gender norms governing its members during this period. The two sections after that explore Wallace Mohammed’s contentious relationships with his own ministers and with immigrant Muslims, showing how both sets of relationships related to the overarching relationship with the Saudis. The final parts of this chapter focus on a new era of the relationship, when Wallace Mohammed and delegations of ministers traveled four times to Saudi Arabia in 1990 and 1991. These visits had multiple purposes: showing support for the royal family during the Persian Gulf War; seeking Saudi money for the movement’s school system; and providing support to the U.S. war effort.

Chapter Four, *The Muslim World League in a “Muslim-Minority Land,” 1975 to 1985*, contextualizes African American Muslims’ interactions with Saudi Arabia as one part of the
kingdom’s broad international proselytizing campaign. Focusing on the intercontinental efforts of one Saudi-funded agency, the Muslim World League, the chapter examines the historic and contemporary relationships between the Muslim-majority world and places where Muslims live as religious minorities. The chapter’s first main section analyzes the early history and growth of the Muslim World League from its 1962 creation, showing how its first priorities lay in countries with larger, more established Muslim populations than those found in the United States. Its next section analyzes the MWL’s method of employing non-Saudi locals in its target countries, a strategy that helps ensure its workers will understand the cultures of the Muslim communities they work with. The chapter then links Saudi missionary work to the historic relationship between Muslim-majority regions and Muslim-minority ones, broadly reviewing opinions of Islamic jurists on the needs and responsibilities of Muslims who live under non-Muslim rule. The following section explores the growth in Muslim-American populations and organizations through five stages of immigration from the 1870s to the present, as identified by the researchers Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis in their 1987 study. The chapter then contrasts the Muslim World League’s approach to missionary work in Muslim-majority countries to its approach in the West, with special attention to a MWL-sponsored event, the “First Islamic Conference of North America,” held in 1977 in Newark, New Jersey.

Chapter Five, A Salafi Movement among African-Americans, analyzes the self-identified Salafi movement among African Americans, contrasting it not only with the old Islamic transnationalism of the NOI but also with the newer Islamic transnationalism of Wallace Mohammed’s movement in its willingness to broadly accept religious guidance from Saudi Arabia. The chapter’s first main section historicizes the African-American Salafi movement and

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clarifies common usage of the term Salafi not only to distinguish this group of Muslims from others, but also to distinguish different types of Salafis from one another. The chapter then analyzes the role of Saudi universities, which provided scholarships to people who would become key African-American Salafi leaders. It then profiles the Salafi community of East Orange, New Jersey, which in the 1990s was the hub of a burgeoning national movement. The next section uses a series of communal conflicts in East Orange involving prominent Saudi shaykhs to explore how religious authority was contested among African-American Salafis. It then explores marriage and gender issues among African American Salafis. Finally, it explores the question of “Saudi-ization,” the degree to which the dynamics of Muslim communities – Salafi ones in particular – are influenced by Saudi missionary efforts.

Conclusion

The importance of these transnational religious issues transcends African-American-Muslim history to include the collective experience of Muslim-Americans as a larger group. Better understandings of these issues can illuminate dilemmas of identity faced by Muslim-Americans born in or descended from other countries, who are constantly negotiating their American and Muslim identities in at least three separate sites: within the broader Muslim-American community, within American society as a whole, and within the worldwide Muslim community. (The Muslim-American experience mirrors that of other American ethnic and religious groups in this regard.) And while this study focuses on the quarter-century prior to 9/11, it nonetheless informs post-9/11 scholarship on Islam in America by shedding light on essential growth of Muslim-American communities in previous decades.
Chapter One:
A New Transnationalism for African American Muslims

What makes Islam belong to a place?

-- Zareena Grewal

In her wide-ranging, illuminating monograph *Islam is a Foreign Country*, the historical anthropologist Zareena Grewal explores how Islamic authority is imagined by different groups of American Muslims, and the degree to which they locate it overseas rather than in the West. As part of her quest she examines where the United States falls within the “moral geographies” of Muslim-Americans; in the case of African American Muslims, in particular, the United States has played a dystopic role, in contrast to the “Muslim World” overseas, which has served as a utopian outpost even as the United States since 1965 has increasingly become part of the “Muslim World.”

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52 The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 dramatically increased the number of immigrants to the United States from Muslim-majority countries. Ghanée Bassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 292-295. Such transnational moral geographies and the placement of authority abroad are hardly unique to Muslim-Americans; they are familiar to other religious and ethnic groups.
The main subjects of Grewal’s inquiries are young American Muslim “student travelers” of diverse ethnicities who leave the United States for weeks, months or years to study Islamic theology, jurisprudence, proselytization, and the Arabic language, to reside in countries with historic Muslim populations and scholarly traditions. They partake in the historic Islamic tradition of the *rihla*, a journey taken for the sake of Islamic knowledge. Their main goal, she writes after having interviewed dozens of them, is to “retrieve bodies of traditional knowledge and make them accessible to American Muslims in US mosques on their return.” They can then, she believes, help to raise the level of Islamic discourse in the United States. Grewal asks, What led these student travelers to seek this knowledge from scholars abroad rather than from Muslim authorities in the United States? What perceptions of the “Muslim World,” and the American role in it, did they ascribe to? She posits that these Muslim travelers, in seeking Islamic authority abroad, were imagining connections “to a rich, albeit too often romanticized, past.”

Their imaginations of, and engagements with, an Islamic world that exists as a distinct territorial entity outside the United States, are relevant to a core matter of the present study: how and why a subset of African American Muslims has aligned itself with Islamic worldviews of Sunni Muslim leaders in Saudi Arabia. The Muslim world overseas, as an imagined whole, has long occupied important space in the political imaginaries of African-Americans. From the 1950s through the early 1970s, African American Muslims played notable roles in transnational political alliances, siding with Arab nationalists and non-Muslim leftists in opposition to the Western dominance of world politics. The film and media studies professor Sohail Daulatzai

53 The countries that Grewal cited were Mauritania, Senegal, Morocco, Spain, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country*, 7-8.
54 Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country*, 53.
55 Ibid., 57.
refers to this ideological alliance as the “Muslim International,” an entity consisting of “those who struggle for dignity by other means after being left at the margins by the violence of neoliberalism.” The Nation of Islam figures Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad served especially significant roles in this regard until their deaths in 1965 and 1975, respectively.

And yet after 1975, I argue, the role of African American Muslims within this imagined political alliance would change dramatically, due to the practices and loyalties of the two significant groups discussed in the present study. These two groups were Wallace Mohammed’s organization and a movement of self-identifying Salafi Muslims that arrived on the scene later. These groups had little to no interaction with one another, yet in their distinct manners they nurtured connections with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a crucial ally of the U.S. government. While the kingdom governed the areas including the two holiest sites in Islam, a distinction bestowing authenticity in Muslim imaginations around the world, the royal family was a rival of the Egyptian government, whose former president Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser, an advocate of Arab nationalism, had been a hero to the Nation of Islam and the rest of the Muslim International for his defiant stances against Great Britain, France and the United States. After 1975, the dominant relationships between African American Muslims and Saudi Arabia would favor pan-Islamic imaginaries, while complicating African-American Muslims’ conceptions of religious authenticity and authority.

This chapter situates these transnational components within the contexts of the Cold War, post-colonialism, Islamic revivalism, the U.S. government’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, and the Nation of Islam’s history. The NOI’s racial views and religious heterodoxies would play significant roles in the communal consciousness of Wallace Mohammed’s organization and the

56 Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon*, xxv.
Salafi movement, both of which purposefully avoided political engagement that might brand them overly concerned with secular politics. This entailed placing less emphasis on racial issues and global politics than had the Nation of Islam, and instead stressing their connections to the global Islamic world. (As noted, the NOI and other, earlier groups of African American Muslims had also linked themselves to the Islamic world abroad.)

The main purpose of the chapter is to elucidate the distinct meanings of old and new Islamic transnationalisms within the narratives of African American history. The chapter’s structure is as follows: First, it explores the history of transnationalism as a field of scholarship, broadly and then with particular resonance for African American history. Second, it relates transnationalism to notions of counter-citizenship that were significant to the political and religious consciousness of African American Muslims in the early- and mid-20th century. The next section demonstrates how Wallace Mohammed’s approach dramatically altered this worldview through his quest to incorporate African American Muslims into the American mainstream. The section after that explores the history of the diplomatic relationship between the U.S. government and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The final section explores the transnational elements of the Salafi movement among African Americans, which was more closely associated with Saudi religious leaders than any previous American Muslim movement.

Transcending National Borders

In analyzing how American student-travelers conceptualized the Muslim World and Islamic knowledge, Grewal’s aforementioned monograph stands as a worthy entry to a body of scholarship, transnational in focus, which has grown since the 1980s. A loosely defined interdisciplinary field, transnational studies has explored the movement and circulation of ideas
across national boundaries, benefiting from an increased awareness that theses stemming from the experiences of just a single country can produce overly narrow perspectives and conclusions. It is well suited to the present study on African-American Muslims’ interactions with Saudi Arabia -- not just due to the transnational spread of Islam, but also because of African American Muslims’ perceived attachments to the worldwide Muslim community that have provided them with “imagined communities that are global and inclusive in ways their experience as U.S. citizens fails to be.”

Many historians, when discussing scholarly treatment of nationalism and its limits, cite the publication of Imagined Communities in 1983 by Benedict Anderson. Anderson, an historian and political scientist, argued that all notions of national unity are only imagined; every nation is, instead, essentially an “imagined community” of people who conjure connections to their compatriots, most of whom they have never met. He observed that national boundaries are artificially and socially constructed, rather than natural or logical delineations for the world. It could follow, then, that people’s national loyalties could be less significant than commonly assumed, prioritized below “transnational” connections with citizens of other countries who are of the same race, ethnicity or religion. In 2004, Shelly Fischer Fishkin cited a recent “transnational turn” in scholarship that had increased historians’ emphases on the “multidirectional flows of peoples, ideas, and goods, and thrown into question the naturalness of political, geographical and epistemological boundaries.” Much of the scholarship focuses on “global networks of religious activists,” who meet, communicate ideas, transfer money to each

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57 Grewal, Islam is a Foreign Country, 80.
other, and come to identify more with religious dogma than with ideologies as nationalism, community or liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{61} The political scientist Jeff Haynes identified the global Muslim community and the Roman Catholic Church as examples of “transnational civil societ[ies]… which have important ramifications for the development of local and interstate religious political cultures.”\textsuperscript{62}

In 1999, the \textit{Journal of American History} devoted a special issue to transnational approaches in the discipline. David Thelan, the editor, succinctly articulated the project’s importance: “Nation-states look fragile, constructed, imagined,” he observed, “even as they possess the very real capacities to collect taxes, recruit and deploy armed forces, manage legal systems, and allocate resources.”\textsuperscript{63} The discipline has regarded transnational studies as an explicit focus only since 1990, lagging behind the disciplines of law, anthropology and political science, which took up the transnational decades ago.\textsuperscript{64} And no agreement exists on a definition that would clearly differentiate transnational history from other modes of international history, such as comparative or global. What does exist is a negative definition -- transnational histories are alternatives to histories that are strictly national in scope.\textsuperscript{65}

While the explicit idea of “transnational history” is recent, it is clear that the roots of transnational foci in Western scholarship run deep. The term itself dates to the World War I era, to Randolph Bourne’s 1916 essay “Trans-National America” in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}.\textsuperscript{66} Bourne used it while rejecting the theory of the American “melting pot.” His article noted that

\begin{itemize}
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Thelan, “The Nation and Beyond,” 967.
\end{itemize}
immigrants in the United States, once they assimilated, became established and accumulated wealth, increasingly cultivated the traditions of their homelands. He said,

Assimilation, in other words, instead of washing out the memories of Europe, made them more and more intensely real. Just as these clusters became more and more objectively American, did they become more and more German or Scandinavian or Bohemian or Polish… America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.\(^{67}\)

If the Melting Pot theory was insufficient to explain the assimilation narratives of immigrants in the United States, then what replaced it was inherently transnational; newcomers to the United States, during various stages of assimilation, continued to value their imagined ties to home countries. This is one reason that scholars of American religion, Islam in the Middle East, and African-American history – the fields explored in this study -- have increasingly observed that the best research practices encompass data from more than just one country.

“[R]eligion is increasingly viewed as a transnational phenomenon,” wrote the sociologists Robert Wuthnow and Stephen Offutt in 2008. “Although it exists in local communities and is distinctively influenced by a national cultural and political context, it has connections with the wider world and is influenced by these relations.”\(^{68}\) They expressed wonder that scholarship has focused on the religious diasporas of so-called “micro-communities” -- Haitians in Harlem, Christians in China, and Central Americans in Houston – rather than on larger, more popular Christian denominations in the United States such as Roman Catholics, whose transnational interests are obvious.\(^{69}\) And while transnational ties of religionists to their holy lands are not new, they have become more “pronounced” in recent decades due to “e-mail, the Internet, faster

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\(^{69}\) Ibid., 210.
aviation, and cheaper shipping making it easier to communicate and travel.” Increased migration in recent decades has also supported the trend.

Within the American academy, African-American history has always been studied on a transnational level, across disciplinary boundaries, due to the nature of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the indignities faced by African-Americans that, in threatening their sense of U.S. citizenship, ultimately oriented their moral geographies toward Africa or Asia. Robin D.G. Kelley, writing for a 1999 special issue on transnational history for the Journal of American History, found that African-American scholars and journalists had been immersed in transnational topics, without using the word, in the late nineteenth century. Among them was W.E.B. Du Bois, who famously wrote of the “double-consciousness” faced by black Americans who, to put it one way, had to constantly negotiate between their American and African identities. Later, Hubert Harrison, a journalist/activist, in his book When Africa Awakes, titled one of his chapters “Our International Consciousness,” in which he called on African-Americans to support decolonization struggles in India, Africa, Ireland, and Egypt. Carter Woodson, in 1921, wrote, “The citizenship of the Negro in this country is a fiction,” effectively asking: To what country did he or she belong?

Paul Gilroy, in Black Atlantic, used the image of a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean to posit the merits of transnational approaches to African-American history. Routes were just as important as roots; the ships, he wrote, “immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and

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70 Ibid., 212.
71 Ibid., 214-215
73 Ibid., 1048.
74 Ibid., 1056.
75 Ibid., 1049.
activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts [sic]: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.”76 Scholars needed to re-think the significance of nation-states as political, economic and cultural units, Gilroy wrote, given that “neither political nor economic structures are still simply co-extensive with national borders.”77

By definition, the study of diasporas – whether ethnic or religious – is inherently transnational in nature, involving peoples who conceive of themselves in relation to their perceived, distant and collective homeland. The nineteenth century African American journalist and abolitionist Martin Delany observed the social problems faced by various diaspora communities – Poles in Russia, Hungarians in Austria, and Jews in Europe. These groups lived in homelands assimilated into empires, rather than as a people moved from one region to another, but their members endured less political equality than their compatriots and held “peculiar positions” in their societies. Jews, the religious group he referred to, were “maintaining their national characteristics, and looking forward in high hopes of seeing the day when they may return to their former national position of self-government and independence let that be in whatever part of the habitable world that it may.”78

The alienation of these groups from their countries’ majority populations spurred a sense that they belonged in a different geographic space, similar to the predicament of African Americans. In the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of black Americans moved to Liberia for the chance to live free and unharassed by American racism. The analogy should not be taken too far; imagined connections to Africa, powerful as they were, did not lead to large migrations. The vast majority of freed black Americans stayed put, and most black opinion leaders opposed this

77 Ibid., 7.
so-called colonization of black Westerners, pressing instead for full rights in the United States, where the vast majority of them had been born.

African-American Muslims, Counter-citizenship and Geopolitics

The small yet influential minority of African Americans who accepted Islam in the early-to-mid-20th century learned from their religious leaders to look to the Muslim world, rather than to the United States or the African continent in and of itself, for their roots and true identities. In the process they collectively formed what Sohail Daulatzai has termed a “symbolic counter-citizenship,” defined as “an identity that challenged black incorporation into the dominant discourse of Judeo-Christian Americanness.” Their embrace of Islam so profoundly upset the dominant societal narrative that they did not speak of themselves as “converts” to Islam; rather, they were “reverts,” gravitating back to the Islam that they posited as their origin. In time, limits to this ideological alliance would present themselves when African Americans learned of, and experienced, the legacies of racism in Arab countries, including slavery in parts of the Muslim-majority world. Still, in the first half of the 20th century at least tens of thousands of African Americans joined Islamic or “proto-Islamic” groups such as the Ahmadiyya Movement, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the Nation of Islam, remapping their religious and

79 Daulatzai, Black Star, Crescent Moon, 22.
80 Claude Andrew Clegg, An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 143. For discussions of the extent and severity of slavery and racial attitudes in the Middle East during the 1800s and afterward, in both absolute terms and relative to the West, see Kenneth Cuno and Terence Walz, eds., Race and Slavery in the Middle East: Histories of Trans-Saharan Africans in 19th-Century Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Mediterranean (Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2010); Ehud Toledano, Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Elizabeth Savage, ed., The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade (London: F. Cass, 1992); Eve Troutt Powell, A Different Shade of Colonialism -- Egypt, Great Britain and the Mastery of the Sudan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Eve Troutt-Powell, Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012); Ehud Toledano, As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
national identities in the process.\(^{81}\) I will consider each of these three groups briefly here, with a special emphasis on the NOI.

In the 1920s, the India-based Ahmadiyya movement taught its converts – many of whom were African American – that their Islamic identities transcended their American ones, due to the internationality of Islam. The Ahmadiyya movement, headed in the United States by an Indian immigrant known as Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, posited connections between Christianity and the racist realities plaguing African Americans, holding that Islam, by contrast, “does away with all distinctions of race, color, and creed.”\(^{82}\) Sadiq and his successor, Mohammed Yusuf Khan, attempted to internationalize his followers’ experience of being Muslim, placing advertisements that invited them to services so they could learn the religion of their “forefathers.”

The Moorish Science Temple of America, established in 1925, posited a more territorial Islamic identity, one explicitly located outside the United States. Its founder, Noble Drew Ali, taught his African American members that they were “not Negroes. Rather, their true nationality is ‘Moorish Americans.’” Followers carried membership cards with the following language: “This is your Nationality and Identification Card for the Moorish Science Temple of America and Birthrights for the Moorish Americans… I do hereby declare that you are a Moslem under the Divine Laws of the Holy Koran of Mecca.” It said, at the end, in quotation marks, “I am a citizen of the U.S.A.”\(^{83}\) This served for Drew Ali what religious studies professor Kambiz GhaneaBassiri called a “de-negrofying” process that was designed to ascribe to his followers a

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\(^{81}\) Members of the NOI and Moorish Science Temple of America also changed their names upon becoming Muslims.


positive national identity.” Like Ahmadis, MSTA members wore turbans, robes and fezzes at their leaders’ direction, another way of separating themselves figuratively from American society and associating themselves with cultural norms in the Muslim-majority world. This clothing, Grewal posits, also “symbolized a historical and divine recovery of knowledge lost in the tragic upheaval of American slavery that had wrenched Islam from African slaves, akin to the quotidian objects that archeologists use to provisionally reconstruct history.”

The Nation of Islam, the most historically significant of these groups, also emphasized international connections, classifying followers with terms such as “Asiatic” and “Moorish.” Histories have linked the NOI’s development to the Moorish Science Temple, with one contending that longtime NOI leader Elijah Muhammad had been a member.

All three of the organizations just mentioned contained significant heterodoxies that drew criticism from the Muslim world overseas and from Muslim immigrants in the United States. Yet it was the NOI, founded after the other two, which would achieve the largest following of these groups and therefore encounter the most resistance from Muslims from abroad. The NOI taught that God had appeared in human form in the 20th century, in the form of Master Farad Muhammad. It taught that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet, that black people were “the original

84 Kambiz Ghaneabassiri, A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
85 Grewal, Islam is a Foreign Country, 97.
87 The Ahmadiyyas, for example, taught that the movement’s founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who lived in India from 1835 to 1908, was a prophet, in clear contradistinction to the more mainstream Islamic belief that the last prophet was Muhammad ibn Abdullah, who died in 632. And the Moorish Science Temple distributed a “holy Koran” that was very different from the Qur’an known throughout the Muslim world. In a chapter of The New Black Gods, Edward E. Curtis IV has criticized religious-studies scholars who do not count these groups as Muslims: “If scholars have the right to make such judgments about the real Muslims versus the fake ones, they should be prepared to inform literally millions of Muslims around the world, from the Gayo to the Guyanese, that they are not real Muslims — since millions of Muslims do not practice many of the Islamic traditions supposedly essential to the religion of Islam.” He continues, “Orthodox Islam itself is not a static entity, and understanding how ‘outsiders’ shaped what today is considered mainstream Islamic history is essential to understanding how Islamic law and ethics developed.” Edward E. Curtis IV, “Debating the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple: Toward a New Cultural History,” The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2009), 83-84.
man,” and that a black scientist named Yakub had created the white race. It taught there was no afterlife. These teachings, while criticized as lacking Qur’anic grounding, contributed to an historical narrative that elevated the social status of African Americans forced to deal with the degradations of racist realities in the United States. After 1975, Wallace Mohammed would eliminate the NOI’s usage of the term Asiatic, encouraging his followers to embrace their American identities. And African-American Salafis would strive to eliminate regional Islamic traditions in favor of purportedly universal conceptions of the practices of the earliest Muslims. But for the early- and mid-twentieth-century African American Muslims, faced with Jim Crow segregation and northern racism in a Christian-majority country, Islam served as a connector to an international religion-based culture seemingly devoid of racism, as well as a communal identity predating the United States and thus challenging U.S. authority over African Americans’ personhood.

**African-Americans and Post-colonialism**

Wallace Mohammed became leader of the NOI in 1975. By that time, the NOI had for decades produced rhetoric imagining and seeking connections with the Muslim world abroad, much of which was emerging from European colonial rule. In 1957, Elijah Muhammad sent congratulations to the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference held in Sudan. (Signs around Khartoum, the host city, that welcomed foreign leaders read, “Down with U.S. Imperialism and its Puppet Israel.”). Nasser returned the favor the following year, extending greetings to the NOI on its
annual “Savior’s Day” celebration. \(^{88}\) And in 1959 Elijah Muhammad remarked that the NOI was “backed by five hundred million people, who are lifting their voices to Allah five times a day.”\(^{89}\)

The NOI’s members were not alone among black Americans in drawing these connections and transnational ideological and religious alliances. Black activists and black artists, across religious lines, had long challenged the narratives of American exceptionalism, that is, the idea that the United States holds a privileged and perhaps providentially approved place in the world as a purveyor of democratic ideals. They also opposed the notion of U.S. leadership of the “free world,” often voicing solidarity with forces in the Muslim Third World allied against U.S. foreign-policy goals and imperialism in general.\(^{90}\) In 1887, the writer and diplomat Edward Wilmot Blyden portrayed Christianity, the religion of the West, in a negative light, arguing that Islam was better for black people in that it had historically treated new converts as equals, while black converts to Christianity remained in their previous social state.\(^{91}\) In the 1910s and 1920s, Marcus Garvey would call for racial pride and solidarity among black people around the world, encouraging them to “stand… together as one man.” Endorsing a pan-Africanism that the sociologist E. David Cronon would call “a massive dose of adrenalin” to future Black Nationalist movements, Garvey urged black people to move to Africa and live under “a government of our own, strong enough to lend protection to the members of our race scattered all over the world.”\(^{92}\)

In 1920, the journalist and activist Hubert Harrison called on African-Americans to support


\(^{90}\) Daulatzai focuses mostly on the Cold War, though as Gilroy notes, this sentiment was apparent earlier as well. For example, Hubert Harrison, a journalist and activist, titled a book chapter “Our International Consciousness,” in which he called on African-Americans to support decolonization struggles in India, Africa, Ireland, and Egypt.


decolonization struggles in India, Africa, Ireland, and Egypt, writing in *When Africa Awakes*, in a chapter notably titled “Our International Consciousness.” In 1946, W.E.B. Du Bois appealed to the United Nations for protection of African Americans, asserting that the “color caste system” in the United States has “repeatedly led the greatest modern attempt at democratic government to deny its political ideals, to falsify its philanthropic assertions, and to make its religion a vast hypocrisy.” These connections to the Muslim International strengthened with the Bandung Conference of 1955, in which representatives of twenty-nine non-aligned Asian and African countries denounced Soviet and Western imperialist designs on them, as well as the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, in which Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt.

Bandung and the Suez crisis, in particular, marked what Melani McAlister called “the beginning of a larger transformation, which by the late 1960s would bring black Islam, Arab nationalism, and African American radicalism into an ideological alliance.” Among the prominent figures of this so-called Muslim International was Egypt’s Nasser, a rival of the Saudi regime in a positioning for leadership in the Arab Muslim world. Of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it was the former that seemed the natural preference for African-Americans; not only had Nasser stood his ground with the West in 1956, but he had exchanged supportive letters with Elijah Muhammad and visited Harlem (along with Fidel Castro) while in New York attending the

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93 Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’,” 1056.  
96 The prominence of Nasser -- a securalist who promulgated “Arab Socialism” -- in the “Muslim International” belies the role of religion in the alliance.
United Nations General Assembly in 1960. The House of Saud, while a nominal ally to African American Muslims, was also a strong ally of the U.S. government.

The most prominent, influential American spokesman for these positions would be the NOI’s Malcolm X, who in the 1950s and 1960s urged African-Americans to “unite” with Muslims in Asia and Africa. “You know you’ve got to unite with them,” he said, “because there are seven hundred million Muslims and we sure need to stop being the minority and become part of the majority.” They faced a common enemy, he said -- “the white man,” who had colonized and otherwise oppressed Asian and African people in Kenya, the Congo, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Burma, India, and Pakistan.

Malcolm X and his ideological allies also rejected the broader notion of American exceptionalism. During the Cold War, strains of American exceptionalism had bolstered public support in the United States for proactive military or CIA interventions in less powerful countries such as Iran, Guatemala, Korea and Vietnam, as long as they could be included into the fight against communism to bring about a perceived greater good of humankind. Opposition to American exceptionalism had aligned many African-American activists with dark-skinned peoples in countries overseas that were battling or emerging from colonialism, often in places where communism was preferred to capitalism, or where no widespread preference existed. In addition, the Nation of Islam’s alignment with Black Nationalist ideals challenged the goals not

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just of unrepentant racists but of the liberal integrationists of the Civil Rights Movement, which was viewed as deficient in protecting rights of African Americans.\(^99\)

Inside the United States, Malcolm X in 1964 urged African-Americans not to vote even for Democrats, on the grounds that white Democratic politicians who had solicited their votes had regularly ignored their needs once in office. Given that Democrats had won large majorities of black votes in the most recent presidential elections, and were poised to pass Civil Rights legislation over filibustering Republicans, this stance represented a bold rejection of the entire American political process. Indeed, Malcolm X would ridicule the notion that African Americans could ever view the U.S. government as their own and urged Muslims not to serve in the military. His rhetoric against American exceptionalism took no starker a turn than his call in 1965, a week before he was assassinated, for a United Nations investigation of the domestic abuses of African-Americans’ human rights. This of course echoed Du Bois’s attempt of two decades earlier. The United States, said Malcolm X, was incapable of resolving its own race problem, which he said was “no longer a Negro problem or an American problem but a human problem,

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\text{a problem that was so complex that it was impossible for Uncle Sam to solve it himself and therefore we want to get into a body or conference with people who are in such positions that they can help us get some kind of adjustment for this situation before it gets so explosive that no one can handle it.}^{100}\]

His ideological alignment with Nasser did not prevent Malcolm X – who by this time operated independently after having left the NOI – from nurturing a relationship with Saudi Arabia. Malcolm needed financial support, and the Saudis hoped to influence the Islamic


practices of Muslims around the world, including African-American Muslims.\textsuperscript{101} The kingdom, through the Muslim World League that it created and financed, provided his organization with fifteen scholarships for the Islamic University of Medina,\textsuperscript{102} and the MWL’s Secretary General, Surur al-Sabban, named Malcolm as an official representative for the MWL in the United States, with authority to open a religious center in New York.\textsuperscript{103} It also supplied him with an imam, Shaykh Ahmed Hassoun, for his Muslim organization, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. Malcolm viewed connections abroad as essential to the success of Black Nationalism and Islam alike; the former would connect African Americans with Africa, and the latter to “Africa, Arabia and Asia.”\textsuperscript{104}

The strength of these transnational ties notwithstanding, this counter-citizenship came with a price, at least when voiced publicly. The NOI had first gained widespread attention in 1959 after broadcast of a TV series titled “The Hate that Hate Produced,” which garnered negative publicity for the organization due to teachings that all white people were evil, as well as for ties of some black Americans to Arab nationalist groups abroad. More public figures, such as athletes, would face withering public criticism for voicing transnational solidarities that appeared to eclipse their U.S. citizenship. The heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali – an African-American Muslim – faced intense public criticism after publicly explaining, the day he won the championship, that his racial and religious identities mattered more to him than his

\textsuperscript{101} Malcolm X’s correspondence with Egyptian officials at the time demonstrates his awareness of the political risks of maintaining relationships with both Egyptian and Saudi officials. See Manning Marable, \textit{Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention} (United States: Viking, 2011), and Edward E. Curtis IV, “My Heart Is in Cairo: Malcolm X, the Arab Cold War, and the Making of Islamic Liberation Ethics,” \textit{Journal of American History} 102:3 (December 2015): 775-798.


\textsuperscript{104} Manning Marable, \textit{Malcolm X}, 311-312.
national one. “I’m not an American; I’m a black man,” he told reporters.\textsuperscript{105} Two years later, upon refusing to enlist in the U.S. Army, he said, “I’m a member of the Nation of Islam, and we don’t have any wars unless they’re called by Allah himself.”\textsuperscript{106} Some athletes have faced death threats for not standing during the U.S. national anthem or the singing of “God Bless America” during sports events. The best known protest of this sort occurred during the medal ceremonies of the 1968 Olympics, when sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in what was viewed as a Black Power salute during the playing of the U.S. national anthem; medal ceremonies are usually associated with national pride. The chairman of the International Olympic Committee ordered that Smith and Carlos be suspended from future Olympic events.

Wallace Mohammed and U.S. Society

Wallace Mohammed’s broad alliance with the Saudi kingdom -- a staunch ally of the United States and a regional rival to Egypt -- seemed a departure from the spirit of most black activism of the period. The Saudis, after all, were a monarchy, standing in opposition to the more populist Arab nationalism represented by Nasser that many black intellectuals had embraced. It is revealing, then, to examine and historicize Wallace Mohammed’s views about the United States and American democracy, as well as the basic contrasts between the rhetoric of Wallace Mohammed and that of Malcolm X. The men had been close allies during the latter’s tumultuous final years in and out of the Nation of Islam. Both men had increasingly aligned themselves with Sunni Islamic beliefs on divinity, prophets, race and the afterlife that contradicted the NOI’s theology, and had expressed disgust to one another that Elijah Muhammad had fathered children with women other than his wife, Clara Muhammad. Yet while Malcolm X frequently disparaged

\textsuperscript{105} Daulatzai, \textit{Black Star, Crescent Moon}, 122.
the authenticity of U.S. citizenship for African-Americans, Wallace Mohammed in 1975 urged members of his group to proudly identify as Americans and to participate as fully as possible in American public life.

Under Wallace Mohammed, then, the largest African-American Muslim organization was no longer instinctively positioned against U.S. government positions; rather, it would often broadly align its positions with U.S. foreign policy and urge members to self-identify as American, rather than, say, Asiatic or Moorish. Wallace Mohammed would encourage African-American Muslims to vote in elections and even to enlist in the military, saying that children “should not be discouraged from going into the [military] service,” where they could gain skills and education to help them in the domestic job market afterward.¹⁰⁷

Wallace Mohammed’s most striking early action in this regard came on July 3, 1977, before a crowd of hundreds for what he called “New World Patriotism Day.” At that event, he waved the American flag and praised the United States in the starkest terms. “Let me tell you something,” he said. “You might not like it, you might not like to hear it from me, you might say it sounds Uncle Tomish but America is the greatest land on the face of the Earth.” In the same speech he called for “genuine patriotism,” and after waving the flag at members he asked that they “not hav[e] any old emotional hang-ups with the American flag or the American government.”¹⁰⁸ Anticipating criticism for this, he defined the terms of this patriotism so it wouldn’t be wrongly regarded as love for all things American.

[S]ome of our people get the wrong idea and think that we are just emotional, sentimental lovers of America. Our emotions are deeper than that. You can’t come out of the Nation of Islam and fall into any sentimental romance or shallow involvement. You are looking for something solid if you’ve got your Muslim senses. Our patriotism is

not what some people think. Our patriotism is an acceptance of that which supports human existence. We see in the U.S. constitution something compatible with our religion and with the concept of man in our Holy Book. So we identify with the human spirit in the Constitution. We cherish it. We think that beautiful concept is responsible for the longevity of the United States and its democracy.”

This was an unforgettable moment for the attendees and one that, when publicized, resulted in greater distance between Wallace Mohammed’s organization and potential foreign benefactors. “When he picked that flag up, you could feel people’s breath intake, trying to learn how to deal with it,” recalled Agieb Bilal, assistant national secretary of the NOI from 1972 through the end of 1975 and a salaried consultant for Wallace Mohammed from 1978 to 1982. “…The Arab governments, the Muslim governments, they couldn’t deal with it, they said, ‘Why’d you pick up the flag? America is a kufar country, American hates Muslims, and you gonna raise the flag?’ They started calling him W.D., Wrong Direction Mohammed.”

A picture of him waving the flag adorned the cover of the newspaper, which Wallace Mohammed knew would be seen by government officials. Not long afterward he received a complimentary letter from President Jimmy Carter referring to the gesture, recalled Agieb Bilal. And, as this chapter will demonstrate, he was aware his gesture would draw unfavorable notice from immigrant Muslim leaders and Muslims overseas, who had wanted him to more strenuously oppose U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, most notably American support for Israel. But the flag-waving seemed to telegraph that such opposition would not be forthcoming. “He knew,” recalled Agieb Bilal, “in so doing [waving the flag], he was sending signals, not just to those who thought we should be their tools in America, but also sending signals of reconciliation to people in power in America; they didn’t know where Wallace was going when he took over the Nation of Islam.”

110 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, October 20, 2014.
Indeed, far from critiquing the idea of American exceptionalism, as many other black intellectual leaders had forcefully done, Wallace Mohammed used its rhetoric in his public statements, invoking a “divine hand” that had guided the country’s fate and progress from the end of slavery to the successes of civil rights legislation.

If you can’t see the divine hand on this young nation – and this is a young nation, only 201 years old tomorrow – and all of a sudden now everything has come out in the open. This is the beauty. This is what makes America so great now that America has survived the days that it existed as the pit of hell on this earth.111

Without denying the existence of socio-economic and political struggles facing African American communities, Wallace Mohammed expressed as his overarching goal the reconciliation of African American Muslims with American society, in contrast to the Nation of Islam’s previous promotion of racial separation. “He was able,” said Agieb Bilal, “to explain Qur’anically how being black, being American, and being Muslims were not at odds with each other.”

A telling example of this approach appeared in a series of bicentennial speeches given by Wallace Mohammed in 1976, entitled *The Birth of the American Spirit*. Historically, most public discourse on Independence Day in the United States is oriented toward praise of American conceptions of freedom and democracy, complete with references to the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution. For many black Americans, though, the spirit of these celebrations has long been steeped in hypocrisy. In 1852, in the most famous public denunciation of July Fourth celebrations, the former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass remarked that for slaves, July Fourth revealed “more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.” But one hundred twenty-four years later, in 1976,

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Wallace Mohammed stated that African-Americans should indeed celebrate the Fourth of July— not in a spirit of thanksgiving, but “in the spirit of hope.”

We are not ready to celebrate in the spirit of thanksgiving because we have not received enough from America to say, ‘Thank you.’ We will celebrate but we will celebrate in the spirit of hope. We congratulate the leaders of the nation for having recognized the signs of the time and for having responded well enough to survive. We have the hope that they will continue to recognize the signs of the time until they have given us a reason to celebrate the birth of America in the true spirit of thanksgiving.112

The thrust of this message to his followers invoked a narrative of progress toward racial equality in the United States, and urged African Americans to view themselves as stakeholders in the country. “America has become for me like a wife and a mother that leaves me with some bad memories,” he said on July 4, 1979. “But they have been too good to me, too long, to separate. We’ve invested too much in America.”113 His followers should vote, he said, and choose among candidates based on questions including: “How does this man treat Muslims in America? What is this man saying about Palestinian rights? What is the candidate’s ability to function with even hands in the Middle East? Does he appreciate the Arabs in Saudi Arabia and in the Emirates who are good friends of the country?”114

During the hostage crisis with Iran, he directly addressed the identity crisis felt by many Muslim-Americans, contending that their dual loyalties included strong feelings for both their Muslim and their American identities. “We are Muslims,” he said on April 27, 1980, “and Muslims feel that hurt of their fellow Muslims. We are Americans and Americans feel the hurt of their fellow Americans.” He even suggested a Cold War alliance between the United States and Muslim countries: “The American leadership knows that there is no room, no chance that

114 The gender-laden language that he used reflected the paternalistic mindset that was and remains prevalent among many religious leaders. Author’s interview with Imam W. Deen Mohammed June 18, A.M. Journal, 1984, 18.
Communism and al-Islam can live together and court each other. So it would seem that the leadership of the American people, the Western people, including Europe, would be trying to promote a coming together of the so-called Free World and many hundreds of millions of Muslims all over the world.”

The FBI had long noted Wallace Mohammed’s views in favorable terms. The U.S. government and white public remained concerned in the mid-1970s about the rhetoric of Black Power movements, from which Wallace Mohammed’s statements and overall direction seemed to offer relief. Sunni Muslims had been portrayed in media as “good Muslims,” practitioners of an egalitarian race-neutral Islam, in contrast to the NOI. In 1968, the FBI had expressed in internal correspondence the desire to either alter the radical philosophy of the NOI upon Elijah Muhammad’s death or to destroy the organization. Wallace Mohammed, the only possible successor to Elijah Muhammad about whom the bureau was enthusiastic due to his rejection of the NOI’s racial theories, was believed by agents to be “the only son of Elijah Muhammad who would have the necessary qualities to guide the NOI in such a manner as would eliminate its racist teachings.”

While Wallace Mohammed remained a critic of various U.S. government policies, especially its past treatment of African-Americans, he contended that he and other African-American Muslims should view themselves as full participants in American society. While his organization did not instinctively support U.S. government policies, neither did it instinctively oppose them, even when those policies ran counter to widespread opinions in the Muslim world.

In 1978, he supported the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, despite opposition to it by various Muslim groups and governments that it circumvented Palestinian concerns.118 In 1979, he volunteered to help secure the release of American hostages in Iran, and a company partly owned by his organization signed a $22 million contract with the U.S. Department of Defense to provide prepared meals to the Army. (At the time, it was the largest contract for services between the U.S. government and a minority-owned business).119 In 1980, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, he declared it sensible for Western democracies and the Islamic world to join together politically against communism due to its opposition to religion. The Muslim Journal even ran a classified advertisement in 1990 seeking applicants for “Intelligence jobs: CIA, US Customs, DEA, etc.” And in 1991, Wallace Mohammed would support both the U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf War and the decision by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to let American forces operate from a military base on the Arabian Peninsula, despite criticism within the Muslim world on both issues. He would even travel to Saudi Arabia intending to speak with U.S. troops who had converted to Islam while in the kingdom.120

In addition, he professed concern for the United States’ image in the Muslim world and its relationship with overseas Muslims. In 1979, he lamented that no Muslim-Americans were present for the state dinner honoring the King of Morocco on his visit to Washington. He said,

We are a large Islamic community here and we feel that when Islamic

118 While sympathizing with the plight of Palestinians, Wallace Mohammed also spoke of Jewish loss during the Holocaust. Imam W. Deen Muhammad, “The Middle East Situation is Confused,” Muslim Journal, August 9, 1985. And he would say that Egypt and Palestine were ill-equipped to war against countries with better armies. “WCIW President Wallace Deen Muhammad: Special Report on Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference,” Bilalian News, June 15, 1979, 16-17.


dignitaries come into this country, to Chicago, or wherever we are, our community should at least be invited. I think it’s the desire of several of the people in government, but it’s something that I think we ourselves haven’t pressed enough. When King Hassan or any other figure from the Islamic world comes, I would think the government would want to give them the best reception. The best reception would include a person or representative from a dignified American-Muslim community, and we have some of the best.  

Wallace Mohammed also issued religious rulings that accommodated the assimilation of Muslim-Americans into American society, hoping to distance himself from his father’s call for separation. In previous decades, NOI members were disciplined for even minor infractions of NOI rules. But Wallace Mohammed tended toward leniency when faced with members’ questions about the religious permissibility of various practices, such as displaying photographs of people at home, and eating non-halal food at friends’ houses. To both of these questions he responded in ways that permitted increased participation in American society. He approved the display of photographs in houses, saying it was a widespread practice in the Muslim world, and contended that even though it was technically forbidden by Islamic teachings, “there are many more serious things that we should be talking about.”  

As for non-halal food at friends’ houses, he said that while it is forbidden by Islam, “we have to understand that we live in a society where we are a very small minority, and we have relatives and friends. We can’t isolate ourselves to the extent that we don’t visit the homes of relatives and friends and don’t eat with them. We can’t do that.” He advised them to weigh the effect of rejecting non-halal food on friendships and that whenever they did eat it, they should remember to ask God for forgiveness.

Decades earlier, his father and Fard Muhammad had given African-Americans their “X” names, to distinguish from so-called “slave names” given to their ancestors by Christian slave

owners. Wallace Mohammed eliminated “X” names in favor of more identifiably Muslim names for his followers, wary of too much separation from mainstream American society. Strategically, in 1982 he announced in the pages of his newspaper that he would henceforth be referred to as “W. Deen Mohammed,” rather than the name he had been using, Warithudeen Mohammed, “because of the difficulty experienced by some non-Muslims in pronouncing his first name.”

This was a significant moment; here was the leader of the successor organization of the Nation of Islam, an organization that had placed the highest value on signification and identity, deciding to alter an essential aspect of his African-American-Muslim identity – his own name – so that non-Muslims in the United States would feel more comfortable addressing him. Indeed, the Muslim-American identity that he promoted placed a heavy emphasis on American culture, rather than on Arab cultural norms that many African-American Muslims sought to emulate. He criticized that tendency in some of his followers, arguing that, historically, Islam “didn’t seek to eradicate the cultural life of the people it came to.” And yet, he continued, “[s]ome of us have a tendency to go to extremes and try to emulate Arab personality or Pakistani personality.”

The departure over time was so striking that William L. Van Deburg, in *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, cited Wallace Mohammed’s post-1975 activity at the start of his conclusion as the quintessential example of the apparent end of the Black Power Movement. “The messenger’s spirit lived on in the Nation’s new leader, Wallace Muhammad,” Van Deburg wrote. “But it was impossible to exorcise the feeling that some great change was imminent. The Black Power torch ignited at the time of Malcolm X’s assassination seemed to be flickering as Elijah breathed his last.”

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others, including political scientist Dean Robinson, would note that cultural aspects of the Black Power Movement would survive the mid-1970s in a quite robust form. Still, from a political standpoint, Wallace Mohammed’s direction – as well as various post-1970 paths taken by top leaders of the Black Panther Party -- marked a departure.127

Wallace Mohammed maintained a stated interest in improving the relationship between his organization and American society for a full ten years after ascending to leadership. In May 1985, when announcing the name change of his newspaper from the A.M. Journal to the Muslim Journal, he wrote that “the purpose of the newspaper will be to serve the best interests of Muslims in the United States and throughout the world, but mainly in the United States, with the understanding that the paper’s position is one that allows us to win friends and make progress in the United States.” He added that he was not referring to the United States “as a government body, but we are talking about the peace-loving, freedom-loving people of these United States.” The newspaper would “advocate participatory government and democracy.”128

The NOI rhetoric of his father’s day was not left behind completely in the mid-1970s. Louis Farrakhan, who became so dissatisfied with Wallace Mohammed’s approach as leader that he left the organization and re-created the Nation of Islam, maintained the leftist critique of the U.S. government and American exceptionalism over the ensuing decades. The following exchange, from an episode of Sixty Minutes on CBS, illustrates this well. In the segment, the famed interviewer Mike Wallace is critical of Farrakhan for visiting with leaders of Nigeria, which Wallace asserted was perhaps “the most corrupt nation in the world.” Farrakhan noted Nigeria’s relative youth as a nation compared to the United States, which he said was far worse and much worthier of moral condemnation.

127 Ibid., 300.
Louis Farrakhan: “Thirty-five years old, that’s what that nation is. Now here’s America, two hundred twenty-six years old. You love democracy? But there in Africa, you’re trying to force people into a system of government that you just have accepted 30 years ago (when) black folk got the right to vote. You’re not in any moral position to tell anybody how corrupt they are… Yes there’s corruption there, yes there’s mismanagement of resources. Yes, there’s abuse. There’s abuse in every nation on earth, including this one. So let’s not play holy to moralize on them. Let’s help them.”

Mike Wallace: “I’m not moralizing, I asked you a quesiotn and I got an answer.”

Louis Farrakhan: “Why would you put it as the most corrupt regime in the world? That doesn’t make sense.”

Mike Wallace: “Can you think of one more corrupt?”

Louis Farrakhan: “Yeah, I’m living in one. I’m living in one. Yeah, you’ve done a hell of a thing on this earth so you should to be the one to talk. You should be quiet when it comes to moral condemnation. In my judgment.”

U.S. and Saudi Arabia: A Cold War Alliance

At least through the early 1980s, U.S-Saudi diplomacy was hardly concerned with Muslim-Americans’ religious preferences or habits. The alliance between the United States and the kingdom, dating to the 1930s, had first involved American oil companies operating in the Arabian Peninsula with the permission of King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. Later it would revolve around U.S. access to Saudi oil in return for American support for the ruling House of Saud. Indeed, Wallace Mohammed and other African-Americans generally operated independently of the U.S. government when interacting with Saudi religious leaders and institutions. For most of the 20th century, the two countries’ diplomats occupied themselves with issues of American access to petroleum and Cold War concerns; security for the House of Saud, which was engaged in the

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129 “Farrakhan Versus Mike Wallace on Nigeria,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qq4aQdaxBcM.
130 When I was conducting my research, diplomatic documents at the U.S. National Archives in College Park, Maryland, had been declassified only through the early 1980s.
aforementioned “Arab Cold War”; disputes between Arab nations and Israel, and among Arab governments; and the development of infrastructure and technology inside the kingdom.\(^{131}\)

Scholarly treatments of the relationship’s history merit review here. In 1933, just one year after King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz finished consolidating the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula under his rule, he granted a “concession” to Standard Oil of California (SOCAL), which transferred it to its branch, California-Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC).\(^{132}\) The concession allowed the company to explore the eastern part of the peninsula for oil and brought to the region a small number of American geologists and engineers, who throughout the decade would advise the Saudis to widen their borders to incorporate more oil reserves, and who impressed upon the new royals the long-term severity of their water problem. Later, the Americans would conduct extensive surveys through the desert to provide the new rulers with knowledge of their environmental resources and potential concerns in selected regions. Toby Jones observed that this scientific expertise had political ramifications, in that the timing of this American guidance came when Saudi sovereignty of the peninsula remained uncertain. The scientific nature of their work did not shield the Americans from charges that they effectively aided a king in the solidification of his realm.\(^{133}\) And after 1942, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz would receive U.S. government advice that reinforced the idea of a national model in which power flowed from the center to the


periphery, and in which peninsula’s periphery – especially its natural resources -- needed to be controlled by the center.\textsuperscript{134}

Looming over SOCAL’s early commercial efforts was British government interest in Saudi Arabia. In 1938, the private American company struck oil in the peninsula, and London was wary of losing influence to the Americans. It was the British who in previous decades had been ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s main financial backers, providing crucial if limited supplies of weapons and money during the king’s rise to power. Now, as Washington and London increasingly recognized the importance of access to the peninsula’s oil reserves, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz would play the countries’ aspirations off of each other, confident that each desired a stake in his future.

The Americans emerged the victors. After the king sought $6 million from CASOC, on top of $3.5 million it already had just provided, the oil company’s executives requested help from the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{135} President Roosevelt refused to directly subsidize CASOC, but the administration wanted to retain access to Saudi oil, and in 1942, at the height of the Second World War, he let Britain channel $10 million in U.S. aid (from the Lend-Lease act) to the king. The following year, worried that British use of this American money would solidify London’s own position with the king, Roosevelt declared the security of the kingdom an essential war interest, making Saudi Arabia itself directly eligible for Lend-Lease aid and eliminating confusion as to the funds’ origin.\textsuperscript{136}

A wartime meeting aboard the U.S.S. Quincy on February 14, 1945, between Roosevelt and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, improved the relationship further, and when President Harry Truman cancelled Lend-Lease aid for Great Britain shortly after the war ended in 1945, he allowed Saudi

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Vassiliev, The History of Saudi Arabia, 323-326
\textsuperscript{136} Davis, Contested Space, 61-62, 110.
Arabia to receive it for an entire extra year. The king preferred the softer American touch, proffered largely through U.S. private interests, to the British one, which came straight from the London government and which had manifested itself across the British Empire. Throughout the Cold War, successive American administrations sided with the anti-communist monarchy in return for secure access to oil.

The alliance was less steadfast than often portrayed. During the 1950s, each side would flirt with the other’s geopolitical opponents. The U.S. administration chafed over the Saudi award of a contract to the Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis to transport its oil, while the kingdom worried that the United States might ultimately side with Britain against Saudi claims over the Buraimi oases, in a disputed border territory in the eastern Arabian Peninsula. Later, the United States courted Nasser of Egypt, the chief proponent of Arab nationalism and regional opponent of the Saudis, while the kingdom courted the Soviet Union’s support and threatened to evict the United States from its airbase that the Saudis had allowed in Dhahran. Yet these difficult moments ran their respective courses and the U.S.-Saudi alliance was maintained, gaining strength in 1957 with the announcement of what became known as the “Eisenhower Doctrine,” which assured U.S. economic or military support to Middle Eastern countries

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138 In addition, British links to the Hashemites, rivals of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, may have been a factor in Saudi leanings toward the United States. Davis, *Contested Space*, 30-32, 108.
139 Regarding Buraimi, the United States struggled to manage its separate relationships with Saudi Arabia, ARAMCO, and Great Britain. Saudi Arabia favored resolving the issue with a plebiscite, while the British favored arbitration. ARAMCO wanted to retain exclusive rights to as much of the peninsula as possible. The Truman administration was wary of alienating the British, but the Eisenhower administration tended to side with the Saudis. Tore Peterson, *The Middle East Between the Great Powers: Anglo-American Conflict and Cooperation, 1952-7* (United States of America: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 36-47. Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 333, 345-348.
threatened by armed aggression that was deemed to be “controlled by international communism.”

Its oil-for-security alliance with a monarchy seemed problematic for the U.S. government’s Cold War attempts to influence non-aligned countries. U.S. policymakers attempted to pressure the House of Saud to accept democratic reforms, but the results were lackluster at best. Historians have deemphasized the importance of Crown Prince Faisal’s “Ten Point Program” of 1962, which promised significant political reform and stressed the propagation of Islam, while officially ending slavery in the kingdom. Some speculation exists, without proof, that it was President John F. Kennedy who urged Faisal to include the anti-slavery provision. In either event, Alexei Vassiliev argued in 2002 that the kingdom’s willingness to propose reforms, even if barely imposed, reflected its desire to eradicate internal opposition and appear in line with “the spirit of the age.”

As Robert Vitalis has demonstrated, unsavory aspects abounded in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, even leaving aside the American bargain to support a monarchy in return for access to oil. CASOC, renamed the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in 1944, built company housing in eastern Saudi Arabia for thousands of employees in a manner that, Vitalis argued, echoed the Jim Crow segregation practices then present in the American South. American employees of ARAMCO lived in luxurious homes in Dhahran and used top-quality facilities while the company’s Arab workers resided in unstable huts, earned meager wages that

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142 Ibid.
led to strikes, and faced discrimination when considered for management positions within ARAMCO.\textsuperscript{143}

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed increased strain in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The kingdom and other Arab exporters of petroleum began an embargo of countries that aided Israel in the war of June 1967, though the kingdom ended the embargo in September.\textsuperscript{144} Six years later, President Nixon’s decision to help Israel during the October 1973 war inflamed existing tensions between the kingdom and the United States, leading the Saudis to participate in an embargo of oil exports. The embargo lasted until the following spring, leading to the quadrupling of prices to twelve dollars a barrel. Yet the U.S.-Saudi relationship recovered quickly. The two countries in 1974 formed a Joint Economic Commission that met annually to improve the kingdom’s infrastructure, and American experts traveled to the kingdom for projects involving water desalination, electrical power, agricultural development, transportation planning, and government administration.\textsuperscript{145} Weapons sales from the United States to Saudi Arabia figured into the relationship as well; having totaled $1.2 billion from fiscal years 1950 to 1973, in fiscal year 1974 alone they totaled $950 million and included fourteen C-130 military transport aircraft, among other materials to expand Saudi Arabia’s Royal Navy and National Guard.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{143} This history of labor in the international oil economy, Vitalis argues, merits consideration when evaluating the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the impact of capitalist oil companies, which he argued were “hardly the agents of the changes referenced by ideas about post-imperialism.” Robert Vitalis, America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier (New York: Verso, 2009), 26.
\textsuperscript{144} As part of the Khartoum Resolutions, which refused “peace” with Israel, “recognition” of Israel, and “negotiations” with Israel, the king of Saudi Arabia and seven other Arab heads of state also agreed to help finance the redevelopment of Egypt and Jordan.
\textsuperscript{145} “Summary Minutes of the First Session of the United States-Saudi Arabian Joint Committee,” February 26-27, 1975, U.S. Department of Treasury Box 56-861-1, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland; and “Industrialization and Related Projects,” May 3-4, 1977, U.S. Department of Treasury Box 56-861-1, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.
\textsuperscript{146} “U.S. Military Programs in Saudi Arabia,” May 1974, U.S Department of Treasury Box 56-861-1, Department of State Briefing Paper, Briefing Book Prepared for President’s Trip to Saudi Arabia June 1974, Briefing Book Energy 1974, Folder O, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.
The countries became even more intertwined economically throughout the 1970s with the increase in U.S. petroleum imports and the transfer of control of ARAMCO to the kingdom. In 1976, Saudi Arabia surpassed Canada and Venezuela as the largest exporter of oil to the United States; two years earlier the United States had imported 461,000 barrels of oil a day from Saudi Arabia, but in 1976 the daily figure was 1.2 million barrels; it has remained between 1 million and 1.78 million barrels a day in most of the ensuing years.\textsuperscript{147} The relationship with the Saudis was deemed so precious that in 1975, when King Khaled visited the United States at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, for a medical checkup, and the Saudi ambassador requested a visit for him with President Gerald Ford, officials of the U.S. State Department and National Security Council allowed it. The reasoning was put forth in a National Security Council memo: “Given fact of King’s presence in US and importance of US-Saudi relations, Secretary and White House agree that King should be received in fitting manner…”\textsuperscript{148}

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 would lead to a test of the legacy of the Eisenhower Doctrine, leading to a U.S. response not against a Soviet threat, but an Iraqi one. The United States, with its obvious interest in Saudi oil, accepted the kingdom’s carefully arranged invitation to open an airbase in the eastern portion of the Arabian Peninsula. This issue, unlike previous matters of diplomacy between the two countries, would directly affect American Muslims. The U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, while roundly criticized in much of the Muslim world, was given religious sanction within the kingdom by the royal family’s favored shaykhs, chief among them ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bin Baz, the future grand mufti. These shaykhs were revered by


quietist Salafis -- a large subset of Salafis that included African Americans -- around the world. In addition, Wallace Mohammed publicly supported the Saudi decision, even as other American Muslim groups voiced opposition. African American Salafis, still fledgling as a group when this occurred, did not issue pronouncements but have regarded the decision favorably; this is not surprising given their support for the Saudi royal family and their suspicion of nationalism, which they associated with Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

**African American Salafis**

The American-Muslim student-travelers who are profiled in Zareena Grewal’s book had determined that the Muslim world overseas held the best opportunities for religious education. The rest of this chapter examines the transnational component of a select group of Muslim student-travelers – African American Muslims who won years-long scholarships to study Islam in Saudi Arabia. Their experiences in the kingdom and then upon their return to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s would result in a self-identifying Salafi movement among African Americans, one very closely tied to Islamic intellectual networks largely based in the kingdom.

Like other Islamic movements among African Americans, the Salafi movement was an urban one, formed amid the periods of racial and social conflicts that characterized large portions of U.S. history in the 20th century. Yet the Salafi movement would prove less overtly political on the types of issues that had motivated the Nation of Islam. Indeed, the rhetoric and spirit of the Salafi movement was animated less by the “Muslim International” than by the Islamic Revival of the mid-20th century.
Islam, like other religions, has witnessed many calls for reform and religious renewal during its history. In the 1920s, with many Muslim-majority countries occupied or otherwise dominated by European countries, a number of Islamic leaders began calling for religious revival. Among the most prominent voices was Hasan al-Banna of Egypt, who in 1928 founded the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood taught that Islam should dictate not just people’s spiritual lives but also public life and government policy. These ideas, spread by disciples of al-Banna, gained footholds with Muslims in other countries. They also met with fierce resistance from governments supportive of Arab nationalism that for numerous reasons opposed the use of Islamic law to dictate policy. In particular, the government of Egypt, blaming Brotherhood members for assassination plots, prosecuted, imprisoned and on occasion executed Brotherhood members. Because of this, many members fled to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a regional rival of Nasser, in the late 1950s and 1960s, taking the Brotherhood’s ideas about Islamic government with them. The Brotherhood would spread its Islamist ideas to other countries as well, including the United States, through members who were immigrants. The African-American Muslim leader Talib Dawud, a jazz musician and Philadelphia resident, became associated with an Egyptian immigrant named Mahmoud Alwan, who introduced him to the Brotherhood’s ideals. Dawud, an immigrant from Antigua who was not a member of the Nation of Islam, engaged in Islamic missionary work around the country and was a public opponent of the NOI, which he criticized as heretical. Shaykh Daoud Ahmad Faisal, founder of a mosque in New York City called the Islamic Mission of America, was another non-NOI African American Muslim leader influenced by Muslim Brotherhood ideals. A splinter group, called Dar al-Islam, attempted to govern its community according to Islamic law; Dar al-Islam followed the teachings of South
Asian Islamist Abul A’la Mawdudi, who called on Muslims and Muslim-majority countries to accept governance by Islamic law.\textsuperscript{150}

The aforementioned conflict between Nasser and the House of Saud would in retrospect play an essential role in the development of the Salafi movement among African Americans during the 1980s and 1990s. In one manifestation of what the political scientist Malcolm Kerr called the Arab Cold War, the kingdom, always concerned about Nasser’s growing influence in the region, reacted to his nationalization of al-Azhar University in Cairo by bolstering its own Islamic university system. In 1961, the royal family created the Islamic University of Medina (IUM), which would become a vital component in the growth of the Salafi movement. In ensuing decades, thousands of Muslims from around the world would come to study there. Usually given Saudi-funded scholarships, they were expected to return to their homelands with the ability to lead Salafi communities.

While officially a Saudi endeavor, the university had transnational components as well. The aforementioned revivalist Abul A’la Mawdudi, of Pakistan, held advisory roles designing its curricula,\textsuperscript{151} and the faculty included Muslim Brotherhood members exiled from Egypt. In its early years the faculty also included the highly esteemed Shaykh Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d.1999), a native of Albania and a staunch quietist who ranked high among the best-respected Salafi scholars in the world. After he left the university, he lived in Jordan and Lebanon, inspiring Salafi movements there while maintaining his relationship with the Saudi shaykh who had

\textsuperscript{150} GhaneaBassiri, \textit{A History of Islam in America}, 253.
invited him to the university in the first place, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bin Baz.\footnote{Stephane Lacroix, “Between Revolution and Apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his Impact on the Shaping of Contemporary Salafism,” in \textit{Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement}, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 58-80.} During the 1990s, African-American Salafis, while facing communal disputes involving local leadership, would invoke the words of Shaykh Albani, Shaykh Bin Baz and other Salafi scholars as evidence for their respective sides. In the twenty-first century, Internet chat rooms and devoted web sites would spread these scholars’ words far and wide, around the globe, while making sacred texts easily available to anyone with an internet connection, but during the 1990s it was cassette recordings of lectures that helped internationalize this discourse.\footnote{Carmen Becker, “Following the Salafi manhaj in computer-mediated environments: Linking everyday life to the Quran and the Sunna,” in \textit{The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam}, eds. Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort and Joas Wagemakers (Boston: Brill, 2011), 421-441.}

**Conclusion**

The relationships between African American Muslim organizations and Saudi Arabia from 1975 to 2000 marked a departure from the spirit of the “Muslim International” that had animated the political and religious imaginations of previous generations of African American Muslims. After the death of Elijah Muhammad, his son Wallace would lead the largest African-American Muslim organization toward more conventional Sunni Islamic norms and, in the process, withdraw his organization from political alliances that were broadly opposed to U.S. government policy. His general alliance with Saudi Islamic leaders, while more religious than overtly political in nature, was well suited for this. Meanwhile, a fledgling Salafi movement embraced an ostensible apoliticism that was linked to the Saudi royal family via the kingdom’s university system. As future chapters demonstrate, Wallace Mohammed’s movement would resist the religious direction from Saudi Arabia as it related to theology, rituals, dress and
language, while Salafis would broadly embrace their relationships with quietist Saudis. Yet the transnational politics of both groups would involve stances toward the U.S. government and Saudi Arabia that were markedly different from those of the Nation of Islam prior to 1975.
Chapter Two: The Transition of 1975

We are not today what we were yesterday, not shall we be tomorrow what we are today. This is the success of the Nation of Islam. Nobody has been able to write about us without his writings becoming stale within a few years.

-- Minister Louis Farrakhan, October 1975

The ascension of Wallace Mohammed to the leadership of the Nation of Islam (NOI) on February 26, 1975, ranks high among the landmarks of twentieth-century Muslim-American history. The NOI, both the largest African-American and Muslim-American organization alike, had previously adhered to a cosmology that distinguished it from other Muslim groups relating to beliefs about God, prophets, race and the afterlife. Wallace Mohammed, however, would quickly move to erase these distinctions. The group’s transition toward more conventional Islamic norms has been called the largest mass conversion of Muslims in the United States, where, admittedly, the bar was low. Still, regardless of whether it constituted a “conversion”

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2 In contradistinction to more conventional readings of the Qur’an, the NOI taught that Allah had appeared on earth in the twentieth-century as a human, in the form of Master Fard Muhammad, the NOI’s founder. It also taught that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet; that the white race had been created by an evil black scientist; and that there was no afterlife.
3 One such example is in Diana Hayes, Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African-American Spirituality (USA: Orbis Books, 2012), 212n.
according to common usage of the term – that is, the change from one religion, belief or viewpoint to another -- what happened to this organization of tens of thousands of Muslims, if not hundreds of thousands, was unusual in Islamic history.

This chapter demonstrates the level of concern existing within Wallace Mohammed’s organization, from the very start, that Muslims from other countries might impinge on the NOI’s autonomy. This concern would never dissipate. The chapter begins by reviewing the religious background of the NOI during the years preceding the transition, exploring gradual shifts in its language that hinted at the coming theological changes. Next, it describes and interprets events on the days of and after Elijah Muhammad’s death. The bulk of the chapter then examines internal discourse within the organization, its relationship to Sunni Muslims from other countries, and changes implemented by Wallace Mohammed relating to rituals, theology, identity, and Muslim family life.

The story of this transition has been told before, though either without the sources used in this chapter or with sparing use of them. Most prior accounts exist in biographies of Elijah Muhammad or Louis Farrakhan, other NOI leaders;\(^4\) in journal articles or book chapters;\(^5\) in monographs offering broader histories of Islam in America;\(^6\) a dissertation;\(^7\) or, in one case, a

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\(^6\) See, for example, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Edward Curtis, Muslims in America: A Short History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

short monograph specifically on the transition. This chapter benefits from the existence of these works, while drawing on previously unused documents from the Nation of Islam collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture – most notably, eight “Ministers’ Kits” that were distributed to NOI ministers around the country from the group’s Chicago headquarters. These allow for the most systematic examination yet of the NOI’s internal discourse during the year Wallace Mohammed became leader, as it related to Islamic rituals, theology, gender roles, and marriage. This chapter also benefits from recordings of important NOI meetings and gatherings in 1975, as well as from numerous interviews with people who experienced the transition in person as high-ranking NOI officials, notable among them Agieb Bilal, the NOI’s Assistant National Secretary at the time.

Existing accounts of the transition also tend to focus on the differences and tensions among Wallace Mohammed’s organization and NOI members such as Louis Farrakhan, who bristled at the substance of the changes and found them disrespectful to Elijah Muhammad, who was Wallace Mohammed’s father and predecessor as NOI leader. Yet tensions with Muslims from overseas, who claimed they were more authentically Islamic, played significant roles in the transition as well, as did Wallace Mohammed’s administrative changes, which upset many of the NOI ministers who remained with him. My approach is to examine the transition primarily through the NOI’s relationships with Muslims from abroad. I argue this allows for a more thorough investigation of the organization after 1975, because questions over acceptance and resistance of religious guidance from abroad would linger for decades, while the rift with his father’s loyalists was resolved early in his tenure.

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9 The Honorable Elijah Muhammad served as the NOI’s leader from 1934 until his death in 1975.
Changes in the works

Before further exploration of the transition, it is important to examine the religious nature of the organization that was about to be transformed. By 1975, though it had not officially changed its beliefs, the NOI had already lessened its emphasis on some of its earliest teachings and cosmologies that were first introduced in the 1930s. And even as NOI leaders distanced themselves from many “orthodox” Islamic practices, NOI members from 1960 to 1975 actually increased their collective awareness of these more mainstream Islamic rituals, beliefs, ethics and symbols. One reason is that other Muslims’ criticisms of the NOI’s cosmology had led NOI members to increase their familiarity with the Qur’an. (Unbowed, Elijah Muhammad contended that Muslims abroad could not be expected to understand his interpretations because they, unlike African-Americans, had never been brainwashed and otherwise victimized by American slave owners.)

The transition of 1975, then, dramatic as it was, did not introduce ideas that NOI members had not heard before. Signs of a slight but definite organizational shift had already been evident. Elijah Muhammad, since at least the late 1950s, had hesitated to propagate the aforementioned Yakub narrative of the creation of the white race, aware that this and other NOI teachings had drawn criticism from Muslims overseas. On a personal level, Elijah Muhammad’s faith was probably thinning in the truth of the cosmology that Fard had taught him. In searching for early signs of a transition, we may ask when Elijah Muhammad may have begun to doubt the truth of what Fard had told him. One answer, from Wallace Mohammed, suggests the late 1950s;

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it comes from a story about Elijah Muhammad and a new, secret Qur’an supposedly meant for the future. Wallace reported that Fard had told Elijah that the Qur’an being used in the 1930s would someday be updated. Fard then gave Elijah a copy of this supposedly new Qur’an, which had a green cover, telling him to keep it secret. One day, apparently in the late 1950s, Elijah Muhammad asked Wallace, his seventh child, and Akbar Muhammad, his eighth child, both of whom could read Arabic, to scan this green Qur’an and compare it to a regular one. The two sons quickly saw the books were identical. There was no update, despite what Fard had reportedly told Elijah. Fard had relied, it would appear, on Elijah Muhammad’s lack of facility with Arabic.13

Elijah Muhammad likely became more disillusioned with Fard’s cosmology when he first traveled to the Middle East in 1959. Fard had told him in the 1930s that the streets of Mecca were paved with gold, and that Muslims there didn’t discriminate against people with darker-colored skin.14 What Elijah Muhammad saw there, however, was terrible poverty, and he learned about contemporary slavery in Saudi Arabia, which did not end until 1962. On that trip he was confronted by Sunni Muslims about the NOI’s theology, as he had been previously in the United States. In the years after his return he allowed his “temples” to be called “mosques.” He let NOI Muslims choose to align their Ramadan fasts with the rest of the Muslim world -- that is, according to the lunar calendar -- rather than in December of each year according to longstanding NOI practice.

Still, Elijah Muhammad persisted in his controversial core teachings and his defiance of Sunni authority. “I will say that neither Jeddah nor Mecca have sent me!” he wrote to his

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13 Berg, “Mythmaking in the African-American Muslim Context,” 696-697. Berg questioned whether this story, which is well known among members of the organization, actually happened or was invented by Wallace as justification for his new direction.
14 “Self-Government in the New World,” Bilalian News, March 19; Cited in Mattias Gardell, In the Name of Elijah Muhammad, 106. (“Elijah Muhammad: Our Savior Has Arrived,” Chicago. Muhammad’s Temple of Islam No. 2.)
followers in an open letter. “I am sent from Allah and not from the Secretary General of the Muslim (World) League! There is no Muslim in Arabia that has the authority to stop me from delivering this message.”

He continued to allow NOI members to view him as a prophet, and his newspaper continued printing that God had appeared in the human form of Fard Muhammad in the early 20th century. Critically, during the 1960s, Elijah suspended people close to him from the NOI, including two of his sons, Wallace and Akbar, and a grandson, Hasan Sharif, after they disavowed Fard’s divinity in favor of more conventional Sunni Islamic beliefs.

Wallace Mohammed had studied Sunni Islam the previous decade in Chicago, but while in prison for draft evasion from 1961 to 1963 he had read the Qur’an and other books about Sunni Islam more closely and concluded that Fard had invented the NOI’s cosmology. While he would later call the disagreements with his father part of a divine plan to bring more African-Americans to Sunni Islam, the disagreement was unmistakably bitter at the time. Wallace Mohammed told the Chicago Daily Defender that “officers” in the NOI had threatened to beat and kill him, leading him to seek protection from the FBI and police.

Hasan Sharif said someone even threw a brick through his apartment window, nearly hitting his sleeping child. And Elijah Muhammad used his newspaper, which was extremely well-read within the NOI, to disparage them.

It was after leaving prison in 1963 that Wallace Mohammed had broken with his father, over his father’s relationships with women other than his wife, and his own refusal to say that he believed Fard was God. Hasan Sharif, one of Elijah Muhammad’s grandsons and Wallace

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15 “Mr. Muhammad Answers Critics: Authority from Allah, None Other,” Muhammad Speaks, August 2, 1963, 3, 4; Claude Clegg, An Original Man, 183.
16 Clegg, An Original Man, 222-225. Another factor in the disavowals and suspensions, at least for Wallace Mohammed, seems to have been Elijah Muhammad’s paternity to children with women other than his wife Clara. In addition, Elijah Muhammad suspended Malcolm X from speaking duties after comments he made surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy.
18 Author’s interview with Hasan Sharif, telephone, September 10, 2014.
19 His three-year prison sentence had been for draft evasion. Clegg, An Original Man, 181.
Mohammed’s closest nephews, who was suspended at the same time Wallace was, remembered when Wallace first conveyed to him his disbelief in Fard. It was in 1963, shortly after Wallace’s release from prison and, in retrospect, shortly before they both were suspended from the NOI.

We were coming out of the drug store on 79th street, a couple of blocks from our clothing store and he said “Hasan,” he said, “If Fard ate food, he went to the bathroom just like me and you do. He had to wash his body just like you and me do. He wasn’t god. He ain’t god” … He said, “Let me tell you something. If Fard was standing in front of me right now, Hasan I’d grab that dude in his collar and I’d snatch him out of his shoes, God as my witness.” When he said it, I instinctively looked up to the sky. I knew a lightning bolt was going to hit Uncle Wallace and me too for sitting here listening to him.20

Throughout his time as an NOI minister, when he was not suspended, Wallace Mohammed had distinguished himself among other NOI ministers by his extensive usage of the Qur’an during sermons, and as a teaching tool. The contrast between his approach and that of other NOI ministers was evident during his appearance at the main Newark mosque in 1973. As W. Deen Shareef, then the temple’s assistant secretary, remembers it, Wallace Mohammed ascended a podium in the temple’s balcony to speak, and asked if anyone there had a Qur’an he could use.

There was no Qur’an on the podium. Now if you know about the temple, most of the ministers didn’t teach from the Qur’an. So he says, “Is there a Qur’an?” And none of the ministers knew where there was a Qur’an… I said, “I know where there’s a Qur’an.” I went downstairs, and of course in the larger podium… under all this paperwork, all these papers, was the Qur’an. So I took the Qur’an from the podium, and brought it upstairs and handed it to the Imam [Wallace Mohammed]. And he began to teach from it. And that was the first time I saw anyone… teach directly from the Qur’an.21

Elijah Muhammad did not teach from the Qur’an as frequently as his son did. But in 1974, when he was seventy-six years old, two more developments occurred that demonstrated further

20 Author’s interview with Hasan Sharif, telephone, September 10, 2014.
21 Author’s interview with Imam W. Deen Shareef, Newark, New Jersey, January 22, 2016.
movement in Elijah Muhammad’s thinking. In late February, at that year’s Saviour’s Day ceremony, two Turkish scientists sat on the dais as Elijah Muhammad praised their work, saying that they and other accomplished white people deserved respect. Later in 1974, during Ramadan, which started in mid-September that year, Elijah Muhammad came perhaps the closest he would ever come, even semi-publicly, to authorizing Wallace’s different approach. This occurred at a dinner meeting of dozens of high-ranking NOI officials. Wallace had recently regained status as an NOI minister after returning from his final suspension, but detractors within the organization had caught him on tape, preaching as he had before. They brought the tape to Elijah Muhammad’s Chicago home to play it for him. Wallace was present. There, in Elijah’s massive dining room, at a large oval table that sat forty people, the leader oversaw what was in essence a court hearing, as he typically did for NOI members accused of violating the organization’s rules. But the NOI officials, so confident they had “caught” Wallace on tape, were to be disappointed in Elijah’s ruling. As Wallace would recount in multiple speeches over the years, and as someone else who was present – one of Elijah Muhammad’s granddaughters, Halimah Muhammad, who worked in the home as a food-server to guests – related in an interview, Elijah on that day “ruled” in favor of his son’s outlook. Halimah Muhammad recounted that Elijah Muhammad was extremely ill at the time, his face extremely pale, but that
toward the end of the [recorded] lecture [of Wallace], I noticed my grandfather’s face began to get color in it. He began to smile… You could see life getting back into him. He looked happy. And when he was finished, he left his seat and clapped his hands repeatedly, and he said, “My son got it! I wish I was the man that my son is.’ And then he said, “I see the paradise.” He said, ‘Son, you can take that truth all over the world.’

22 Author’s interview with Halimah Muhammad, telephone, August 21, 2014. Here is Wallace Mohammed’s version of the event, as told to male members of the Harlem mosque in January 1975: “So my father’s listening to this tape. He said, he said ‘I’m happy over my son’… And he looked at me, and he looked at them, he said, ‘I’m proud of my son.’ Then he looked at me, and he said, ‘in whom I’m well pleased’… He gave me those words, let me know that ‘you, son are part of a divine thing.’… He told me, he said, ‘Together son, we can do the whole job.’ Did he say that,
After gaining his father’s support for his teachings, Wallace Mohammed made speaking appearances at NOI mosques over the next few months – in retrospect, the last months of Elijah Muhammad’s life. In these speeches he left no doubt that he would eventually be the national leader. He said as much in explicit terms at a Fruit of Islam (FOI) meeting at the Harlem mosque on January 19, 1975, warning Minister Louis Farrakhan, who was present as leader of the temple, to support him when he eventually became leader or risk losing his job.23

The responsibility is going to fall upon me one of these days, and when it does, the Brother (Farrakhan) will have his position for as long as he lives up to the requirements and demands. But if falls victim I will sit him down and nothing will change my order, nothing at all. It’ll be just like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s order, and in fact it will be his order! Brother Secretary is looking at me, saying, ‘He’s stepping out here, he never said that before,’ but it’s fine for us to know the truth. It’s bad just to go all wondering what will happen. Don’t wonder any more.24

Also at the meeting, Wallace said it was henceforth futile for his opponents in New York to complain about him to NOI headquarters in Chicago: “Don’t say, ‘Well, I’m going to act on this [by reporting him], I’m gonna see what happens to him when he gets back to Chicago, we gonna take this back to Chicago’… You lookin’ at Chicago!”25

Earlier in this January meeting, Wallace had offered a reinterpretation of a core NOI teaching about Fard and Elijah. While the NOI had viewed Fard as both savior and God, Wallace Mohammed said it was Elijah who should be viewed as the savior – not Fard -- due to

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22 Brother Secretary?22 That ‘Together, son, we can take care the whole thing.’ … Now if he respects me and honors me enough to tell me to ‘Come in, son and be my partner,’ do you think anything short of a bullet in my head will stop me?’ “Wallace Mohammed address to Fruit of Islam at Temple No. 7,” January 19, 1975, CD, wdmpublications.com.

23 The Fruit of Islam was a hierarchical paramilitary men’s organization within the Nation of Islam. Men were trained in military protocols and considered themselves soldiers fighting for the causes of Islam, and for black people. They also sold the NOI’s newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 136-138.


25 Ibid.
Elijah’s successes in bringing black people to Islam.\textsuperscript{26} And Wallace’s use of the word “savior” for his father did not carry the same divine connotation present in previous NOI parlance; Fard, the honoree of the NOI’s annual Saviour’s Day celebration, was believed to have been God, and Wallace Muhammad was not claiming that about his father.\textsuperscript{27}

Indeed, Wallace seemed to stress that it had been his father’s perception that Fard was God, as opposed to historical reality. It is noteworthy that this contention echoed an argument Wallace made to his mother in the 1960s, while he was banned from the NOI for refusing to acknowledge Fard’s divinity. As he related later when telling the story, his mother was trying to persuade him to apologize to his father, who wanted him to attest to Fard’s divinity. But his mother conceded during this disagreement that Fard himself had never explicitly said he was God in the first place; rather, Elijah Muhammad had discerned Fard’s divinity. Later, in discussing this topic, Wallace would present his conversation with his mother as reinforcement for his disbelief in Fard during a tense time in his life. Yet at this January 1975 meeting, while speaking to the Fruit of Islam at the NOI’s New York mosque, Wallace mentioned Elijah Muhammad’s vision of Fard as reason to praise his father:

\begin{quote}
We have a man coming [Fard] and another man [Elijah Muhammad] seeing in that man the coming of God. We have thousands of people who’ve witnessed the physical presence of that man, just like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad did. But they didn’t see God coming in that man. Go back and read the old writings, the old history of the coming of Master WD Farad and his teachings in Detroit, Michigan. And listen to what those people say that saw him and met him. They say they met a professor. They say they met a prophet. They say they met a teacher. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad say, ‘I met God.’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} “Wallace Mohammed Address to Fruit of Islam at Temple No. 7, January 19, 1975,” wdmpublications.com. He said, “I don’t want you thinking that I am getting away from something. If I don’t say the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s name as often as you hear it coming from the mouth of the ministers, then don’t worry. Just listen. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad is my spiritual father. He’s my savior as he is your savior. ‘Oh, what is this man talking about? The savior is Master WF Fard.’ I’ve heard that all my life. If you want to tell me that, you’re not telling me anything new. But I’m talking about the savior Elijah Muhammad.’”

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. Wallace Mohammed said Fard should be viewed as savior of the white race: “He saved the white world by coming in their image and doing a job that makes up for the job that they did against us.”
He was able to see something that they weren’t able to see!\(^{28}\)

While Wallace Mohammed was eager to eschew old NOI teachings, he did not want to be viewed as sacrificing the NOI’s autonomy to the Muslim groups his father had long derided as “orthodox.” This was a difficult line to toe. Wallace had realized as early as the 1950s that core NOI beliefs about Fard could not be supported in the Qur’an. Yet he knew that to vociferously argue against them now, in 1975, as he had during his earlier suspensions, would alienate the people he hoped to lead, many of whom believed NOI teachings so fully that they saw visions of Fard in their minds while praying. In an attempt to turn orthodox criticism of the NOI on its head, Wallace Mohammed echoed his father’s use of a dichotomy of “New Islam” vs. “Old Islam,”\(^{29}\) which claimed that it was the NOI that had the “new” Islam, while “so-called Orthodox” Muslims still preferred the “old.”\(^{30}\)

We don’t have any strange Islam. We have a new, fresh, up-to-date interpretation of old Islam. And this new fresh, up-to-date interpretation is called New Islam. When we say new, we don’t mean another one. We mean one that’s made so fresh again, so attractive to the present-day life, that when we look at it, we see a new garment!

“Old man, you’re wearing a new suit there!” The old man says “No, this is the same old suit. What I did was, I broke it down, into threads again, and I weaved the suit all over.” “Say man, why did you go through all that trouble with that old garment?” “I said I discovered this old garment is better than anything they could put out new. And all it needs is just (to be) broken down and thread again and it’s a fresh new garment.” That’s what we have…\(^{31}\)

Louis Farrakhan, for his part, praised Wallace Mohammed in effusive terms at that January 1975 meeting, saying he was willing to spend the rest of his life telling others to follow

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Just as NOI rhetoric had long used the adjectival-phrase “so-called” before the words Negro and Caucasian to question the worth of these common racial classifications, Wallace Mohammed used it before the word “orthodox” to question the term’s worth as an Islamic standard against which the NOI was often measured.
\(^{31}\) “Wallace Mohammed address to Fruit of Islam at Temple No. 7.”
him, “because he has what it will take to bring about that which Messenger (Elijah) Muhammad envisioned for us.”32 But a few days later, when the Harlem mosque hosted another, smaller meeting for Wallace Mohammed, Farrakhan seemed more concerned, recalled Siraj Wahhaj, then the NOI’s lead Brooklyn minister. At both meetings, the speaker and audience interacted in the “call-and-response” manner familiar to African-American churches. At the first meeting, Farrakhan’s interjections were completely positive.33 Yet at the second, smaller one, Wahhaj recalled that Farrakhan, as if responding to Wallace but also talking to himself out loud, said the following: “Just don’t change things.”34

**Day of the Transition**

In the years to come, Siraj Wahhaj would become a national figure in African-American-Muslim communal life. But on February 26, 1975, he was a twenty-four-year-old soldier in the Fruit of Islam, and he was distressed by the news of Elijah Muhammad’s death the previous day. From his assigned security post at Chicago’s International Amphitheatre, three rows from the rostrum, Wahhaj could survey the scene of mass emotional devastation laid out before him: twenty thousand of his fellow African-American Muslims, men and women seated separately, in shocked mourning over their leader’s death.35

Yet this was not a funeral gathering, and the mourning was mixed with moments of elation. It was Saviour’s Day, the Nation of Islam’s annual and jubilant celebration of the group’s founder, Fard Muhammad, who the group taught had appeared as God in human form in the 1930s. The death of Elijah Muhammad the day before had imbued the event with grief and

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Author’s interview with Siraj Wahhaj, Brooklyn, New York, July 22, 2014.
35 Author’s interview with Siraj Wahhaj, Brooklyn, New York, July 22, 2014.
uncertainty, but it was not without enthusiasm over the naming of a successor. And for Wahhaj and for many others present, anxiety loomed over what might come next for the organization. After all, Elijah Muhammad’s successor, his son Wallace Mohammed, seemed cast from a very different mold. While the father had taught a unique form of Islam with controversial views on God and race – views widely rejected by most Muslims outside the NOI as lacking Qur’anic grounding -- the son had long demonstrated affinity for more conventional Sunni Islamic norms that were prevalent across the Muslim world. This was an affinity that many of his father’s long-time believers found troubling. Indeed, since 1964, Wallace Mohammed’s refusal to accept Fard Muhammad’s divinity had led to his suspension from the NOI at least three times.\(^\text{36}\)

Several years later, Siraj Wahhaj would break from Wallace Mohammed’s organization and eventually gain enough stature to be selected, in 1991, as the first Muslim to lead the U.S. House of Representatives in prayer before a Congressional session.\(^\text{37}\) (One year after that, in 1992, Wallace Mohammed would break the same milestone in the U.S. Senate chamber.\(^\text{38}\)) But on this day in 1975, as the event’s speechmaking neared its mid-point, Wahhaj was just one of many people in the arena who didn’t yet know whether they would stay with Wallace Mohammed or leave the NOI. Speaker after speaker had risen to eulogize the deceased leader and pledge loyalty to his son, but Wahhaj, as he recalled years later, remained non-committal for much of the event, waiting to hear his own regional NOI leader address the audience.\(^\text{39}\) That regional leader was Minister Louis Farrakhan, who led the NOI’s main New York mosque, and who himself would leave the NOI a few years later. During the previous decade, Minister Farrakhan had risen to high ranks within the NOI, spreading its message on speaking tours to

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36 The exact number of suspensions is a matter of historical uncertainty.
38 Ibid.
college campuses across the country. Farrakhan, unlike Wallace Mohammed, had always stayed loyal to Elijah Muhammad’s core teachings. If Farrakhan on this day would pledge his loyalty to Wallace Mohammed as the new leader, in a manner that seemed genuine, then Wahhaj would stay.  

Farrakhan’s moment on the rostrum was infused with drama for other reasons as well. For years, especially during the periods when Wallace Mohammed was suspended from the NOI, it was Farrakhan who had been most rumored as the successor to Elijah Muhammad. And so, on February 26, 1975, Farrakhan approached the lectern not unlike a political candidate who had failed to win the primary and now had to endorse an opponent at the party convention – that is, as a man who had not gotten what he had wanted, who had been denied it in the most public manner possible, and who was now effectively being called to anoint his old competitor.

Wahhaj and others watched anxiously, but Farrakhan’s tone left no doubt. He threw his full support to Wallace Mohammed. After urging his audience to exude joy that day rather than mire themselves in grief over Elijah Muhammad’s passing, he cited Wallace’s appointment as an example of divine intervention, perhaps a reference to Fard’s legendary prediction – made before Wallace Mohammed was born in 1933 -- that he would succeed his father. Cheering intensified throughout the amphitheater as Farrakhan, his words primarily a eulogy for Elijah Muhammad, interpreted the deceased leader’s life and death as having been “the will of God.” The crowd’s approval then climaxed in a roar when he also cited Wallace as the will of God, in a passage replete with dramatic pauses (after the italicized words below), all delivered in Farrakhan’s distinctive, deliberate cadence that had contributed to his status as the NOI’s most popular orator over the previous decade: “His [Elijah Muhammad’s] life was the will of God, his mission was

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40 Ibid.
the will of God, his passing is the will of god, his son is the will of God, and we are the will of God this afternoon!"^41

When Wallace Mohammed himself stepped to the lectern minutes later, surrounded by FOI guards, his nearly hour-long speech did not stray from conventional NOI theology; indeed, he mentioned three separate times that Fard Muhammad had been God in human form.^42 Still, some of what he said could be construed, in retrospect, as hints to the crowd that change was in the works. He did not refer to white people as “devils” as his father and NOI ministers had done in the past. And he implicitly laid the foundation for a new interpretation of NOI teachings, stemmed in the contention that Elijah Muhammad had long intended for Wallace to institute major reforms as part of a divine plan to lead African-Americans to Islam. This line of reasoning would be critical to his new path. He insinuated that his father had approved his future course, so that if he appeared to diverge from his father’s path, it was only because few people besides him knew what his father truly wanted for the organization.^43 He said, “The honorable Elijah Muhammad didn’t train but a few here. He kept his head to the many and revealed it only to the few… But there was another walking with him, learning how to walk his walk when the time demanded it.^44 After his speech, FOI members lifted Wallace Mohammed on their shoulders to raucous cheers.^45

Most in the arena did not know that during the previous evening, February 25, 1975, on the very night that his father died, Wallace Mohammed had firmly asserted his authority as

^42 Curtis has noted that Wallace Mohammed’s mentions of Fard in his speech were linked to Elijah Muhammad’s visions of him as God, a departure from typical NOI parlance on the subject. Curtis, Islam in Black America, 113. Still, Wallace Mohammed said, without qualification, that Fard was God. “History Speaks: 1975 Saviour’s Day Address,” DVD F10, wdmpublications.com.
^44 Ibid.
^45 Ibid.
leader to the NOI’s ministers and top officials – almost all of whom were already in town for
Saviour’s Day – and had informed them of major changes to come.⁴⁶ Assembled in the basement
of the main Chicago mosque, known as Temple No. 2, the ministers listened that night as
Wallace Mohammed notified them that, as their leader, he planned to place more emphasis on
Qur’anic teachings than the NOI had in the past, and that they should not teach anything that
lacked clear backing in the Qur’an. The significance of this is that several NOI beliefs had lacked
Qur’anic grounding, and not just the teaching that Fard Muhammad was God; also, for example,
the teaching that Elijah Muhammad had been the final prophet sent by God; that there was no
afterlife; that polygyny was not allowed; and that the white race was as a race of devils created
by an evil black scientist named Yakub six thousand years earlier. In fact, Wallace Mohammed
told the ministers assembled before him that they themselves needed to learn more about the
Qur’an.⁴⁷ In his words that night, according to a partial transcript distributed two weeks later to
NOI ministers around the country, he said that

We must now begin to teach the Holy Qur’an. We must take it
now off the wall and put it on the rostrum. But you can’t do this
at once. You have to be taught how to do this… So now we have
to begin to condition ourselves to accept the teachings of the Holy
Qur’an…⁴⁸

The new leader clearly realized he was walking a fine line and that he risked alienating
many of his ministers who believed -- or who at least propagated -- the traditional NOI teachings.
Indeed, many would view the changes as a slap at his father’s legacy. Wallace Mohammed was
sensitive to this charge: “We are not making any sudden changes,” he insisted at this meeting.
“We want to be very clear. We are only coming now into a sudden realization of the gradual

⁴⁶ “Ministers Meeting, February 25, 1975,” Ministers Kit March 14, 1975, Nation of Islam Collection, Schomburg
Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 4 (23).
⁴⁸ Ibid.
change that has been made.” Yet it was clear that new changes were coming. He explicitly told the ministers not to publicly say the white man is the devil, and to not teach the Yakub history without his office’s permission, which he indicated he would not give.50

Significantly, Wallace Mohammed tried to alleviate the ministers’ concerns that he would surrender the NOI’s autonomy to foreign Muslims. In previous decades, many in the Arab world had bristled at the NOI’s religious teachings, and at its emphases on social and economic issues in African-American communities rather than on political issues facing the Muslim world overseas. While these differences with Muslims of foreign descent garnered less public attention than did his later disagreement with Louis Farrakhan, in essence Wallace Mohammed would have to fight difficult battles on two fronts. On one front, Farrakhan and others would contend that Wallace Mohammed was changing too much, too fast. On the other, Muslim leaders from abroad would insist that his pace of change was too slow. In years to come, his organization’s growing relationship with the Arab world would cause considerable internal tension as the new leader attempted to walk a fine line – seeking religious guidance (and hoping for money) from abroad, while striving to maintain autonomy over his group’s religious and political practices. Autonomy and masculinity had been central to the NOI’s mission, and members were loath to surrender power to outsiders, whatever their race. At the ministers’ meeting on the night his father died, Wallace Mohammed was insistent: “Don’t think any Arab is coming here to tell you anything,” he said. “If he comes here, he will have to come by me. I don’t care if he’s been reading the Holy Qur’an since the day Arabia became sandy. He’s not coming here to lead these sheep.”51

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 6 (25).
51 Ibid., 7 (26).
He realized, he said the night his father died, that it might seem tempting for the NOI to solicit money from oil-rich Arab nations. Yet he insisted that while “certainly we will accept gifts… we are not going out there as beggars.” Standing firm on principle was the best way to attract foreign money, he contended, invoking the memory of a $3 million loan his father had secured from Libyan ruler Muammar el-Qaddafi in 1972: “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad didn’t get a loan from Libya by obliging or by compromising. He got it by standing firm.” Muslims abroad, he predicted, would be so impressed with the NOI’s direction that the organization would soon be able to attract gifts “from all corners of the world” without much difficulty.

It was probably little surprise to Wallace Mohammed that the bulk of his message to the ministers that night, in the words of a top assistant, “went over like a lead balloon.” Many ministers did not trust him due to his long-held beliefs about Fard and his suspensions. Indeed, in years to come, large groups of his own ministers – that is, those who chose to stay with him -- would present as much of a challenge to his leadership as did Minister Farrakhan and Muslims from other countries. Still, on this night Wallace wielded his authority assertively, saying he would tolerate no discord and addressing what he realized was a view among them that he was asserting control too quickly: “You say, ‘Where did he get all this power?’ It has been given to

52 Ibid., 9 (28).
54 Ibid., 9 (28).
55 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, October 20, 2014.
me through my father.” Briefly noting his past suspensions from the NOI, he implied that his father had actually intended, all along, for him to institute major reforms, and that, the suspensions aside, his father had given him space to be himself because he “knew God was helping Him to prepare me and He didn’t want to do or say anything that would cause me to be confused.”

**New look at the transition**

The main primary source used for the remainder of this chapter, the aforementioned Ministers’ Kits, allows for the most systematic examination yet undertaken of the changes to the Nation of Islam after the death of Elijah Muhammad. While previous accounts of the 1975 transition do describe the litany of changes instituted by Wallace Mohammed following his father’s death, they neither interpret nor recount in detail the discourse accompanying these changes. This discourse, which is contained in the Ministers’ Kits, reveals how the NOI managed dilemmas regarding its ethnic and religious identities while reckoning with powerful critiques put forth by “orthodox” Muslims both overseas and in the United States.

The Ministers’ Kits consisted of eight thick packets, most of them between one hundred to two hundred pages, which were distributed from the NOI’s national Chicago headquarters eight times from March 1975 to January 1976 to ministers around the country. They were not meant for anyone else’s eyes. Each packet contained a few selected articles from the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper and, more importantly, transcripts of Wallace Mohammed’s speeches at public gatherings and private meetings. They were designed as resources to help ministers defend Wallace Mohammed’s new approach. On June 2, he told his ministers,

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There’s nobody out there with whom you are unable to talk, brother. If you don’t recall the answer right off, tell him, ‘Just a minute, it’s in this Ministers Kit.’ Open the Ministers Kit on him and just read any page. When you finish, say, ‘Mister, do you know who that was talking? That’s not your teacher. That’s the man who came to teach your teacher.’

Taken together, the packets portray a savvy leader determined to change the NOI’s religious language, one attempting to mark new ground for African-American Muslims within the international Islamic world. They simultaneously demonstrate his concern with moving closer to conventional Sunni Islamic norms and his steadfast refusal to acknowledge superior Islamic status for Arabs and other “so-called Orthodox Muslims.” While conceding that his ministers needed to learn more about the Qur’an, and that Arab Muslims could help them with their knowledge of Arabic, he claimed repeatedly that African Americans should not view themselves as religiously inferior to other Muslims who, he said, had serious deficiencies as Muslims. As an example of these shortcomings, he said that other Muslims, had they been properly inspired by the Qur’an, would have tried to aid enslaved African-Americans during previous centuries. And he used early Islamic history to this purpose, contrasting Arab Meccans who persecuted the prophet Muhammad and drove him from Mecca, to an Abyssinian ruler – an African -- who graciously supported the earliest Muslims.

The overarching goal of the Ministers’ Kits, and of Wallace Mohammed’s early leadership, was to bring NOI beliefs closer to those of conventional Sunni Islamic ones without alienating his father’s old followers. This entailed the sometimes-delicate elimination or altering of language that in previous decades had become second nature to NOI ministers and members -- language about Yakub, white people being devils, the afterlife, and Elijah Muhammad having been a prophet. It also entailed urging ministers to use the Qur’an more, and a careful

reinterpretation of the NOI’s cosmology as allegory rather than as historical fact. Wallace Mohammed argued that Allah had always intended for Muslims to eventually learn what he was teaching in 1975. He said that Fard and Elijah Muhammad, far from being frauds, had been introducing Islam to African-Americans in ways aligned with Allah’s plan to make Islam palatable to them one step at a time, even if their teachings appeared fraudulent with hindsight.

**Speaking of Change**

While change seemed ubiquitous within the NOI, it was central to Wallace Mohammad’s stance that it was not a human-inspired change. Rather, he argued, it was a divinely inspired evolution of African-Americans’ understandings of Islam. On April 5, 1975, just six weeks into his leadership, he developed this approach with his followers at a business meeting.

> You are seeing many things and you are hearing many things that may appear to some of you to be big changes. You see those things as changes because you can’t see the whole thing. If you could see the whole thing, you would see everything that has happened since the Manifestation of Allah in the person of the Great Master W.F. [Fard] Muhammad as a continuous event, step by step, to get us where we have to go."

> …You are going to see changes now, but don’t think that these changes are *my* changes. They are not *my* changes, they are *Allah’s* changes.

The divine plan was to bring them to Islamic maturity. In previous decades, Wallace Elijah Muhammad often said, the NOI had been a “baby nation” whose members were fed the only version of Islam they could have handled, one designed for their needs in black America. Even in 1975, many members were still “children, mentally,” he averred, but now they were ready to become adults – that is, ready for Islam according to his teachings rather than his

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60 “The Changes You See,” Ministers Kit May 1, 1975, 90, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
father’s.\textsuperscript{61} On July 15, 1975, in a private speech to his ministers, Wallace Mohammed outlined his and their challenge, in the context of his recent hire of a psychologist, Na’im Akbar, who was helping him adjust the NOI’s religious language without alienating long-time believers.

When I use the word ‘child,’ I am not making a chronological reference to speaking relative to physical years. I mean a child mentally. Many of us still are children mentally, and a man [Na’im Akbar] on a high plane of knowledge has to have patience, translate his language and pick up your topic in order to reach you. He has to have the patience to say to you in a big, long paragraph what he could express in one sentence.\textsuperscript{62}

Among the biggest changes to NOI theology under Wallace Mohammed was the removal of Fard’s divine status from the organization’s cosmology. While the new leader would occasionally refer to Fard as having been the manifestation of God, as he said three times in his 1975 Saviour’s Day address, more often he would say God had never appeared as a human, instead referring to Fard as an “angel” who helped save African-Americans. On April 1, he told the ministers

\begin{quote}
Allah is not flesh and blood... Brother Ministers, if we have been in the habit of thinking about an Allah that we could weigh on a scale and come up with some kind of weight, or one that we could measure and say he’s five feet tall or 6 feet tall, let’s get away from that. There’s no such Allah in existence. There never was and there never will be. Am I saying that Allah is not flesh and blood? Yes sir, that’s exactly what I am saying to you.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

Another important change in mindset involved conceptions of an afterlife. Elijah Muhammad had taught that heaven and hell were here on earth, and that there was no afterlife to aspire to. Wallace Mohammed, on the other hand, taught a version of the afterlife that was aligned to more conventional Islamic teachings. Here, in answer to a question in speech to Fruit of Islam members on October 4, 1975, he criticized the idea that there is no afterlife in answer to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61]“Ministers Meeting, July 15, 1975,” Ministers Kit October 1, 1975, 30, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
\item[62]Ibid.
\item[63]“Ministers Meeting, April 1, 1975,” Ministers Kit, May 1, 1975, 26, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
\end{footnotes}
a question:

If you mean will there be any existence after this physical death, certainly there will. In saying that physical death is the end, you’re making death more powerful than life. You’re making decay more powerful than regeneration. If you say that death ends it all, you’re saying that the God that came before there was a physical world is inferior to the natural law of the creation that he made; [that] man has to die now and there’s no chance for him.64

Also noteworthy was Wallace Mohammed’s approach to NOI discourse on “devils,” for its cautious way around previous NOI teachings. While Fard and Elijah Muhammad had taught that the white race was a race of devils, Wallace Mohammed taught that any individual, of any race, could be devilish. And while he often singled out white behavior as influenced by the devil, he said this was not purely a function of the person’s race. The Qur’an, he said, did not categorize any race as superior or inferior. “I would like to say that the devil is no mystery,” he told his ministers on July 1, 1975. “Anyone can become a devil if he gives himself to the physical body and neglects the cultivation of his higher development.”65 He sought validation from the Bible, citing the passage in the Book of Mark (8:33) in which Jesus refers to his disciple Peter as Satan. “This did not mean that the man himself was a devil,” Wallace Mohammed said, “but at that time he was giving himself to the particular forces of the physical body that bring about the growth of devil in the person.”66 And on April 1, he preached that the devil to be most feared is not a physical entity.

Some have thought that the devil was the spook or something that’s standing somewhere behind you waiting to interfere with your good thoughts, your good deeds, or your good works. The devil that we seek refuge from is that devil that rises up in the hearts of people as a germ and then affects the mind and causes

65 “Be Fruitful and Multiply,” Date unknown, Ministers Kit July 1, 1975, 10, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
66 Ibid., 7.
the individual to become a living devil.\(^{67}\)

One culmination of his new lessons about the devil was a popular teaching that “man means mind,” and that “woman means womb of mind.” This teaching tried to sever a person’s core identity from their physical traits, a connection the NOI had previously fostered with regard to race, and instead to link identity to mental characteristics. In spring of 1975 he told his followers that “words make people. People are the product of words. A human being doesn’t start to form in the flesh body until words reach the ear or the eye or affect the senses in some way… God made nothing outside of you that is superior to what is in your mind.”\(^{68}\)

Shifts in the NOI’s language were only part of the transition. Also necessary to consider here are the NOI’s administrative changes during this period, many of which would come to influence its growing alignment with the Sunni Islamic world. The old NOI leadership had suffered from an often-corrupt administrative culture in which many ministers and other leaders accepted startlingly high salaries, made possible through steadily applied pressure on members to donate money. These members were often penalized for various infractions through harsh suspensions or physical beatings. Wallace Mohammed’s reforms would rein the ministers in, but it was not easy. Indeed, his biggest challenge over time may have been dealing with ministers who disliked his changes but stayed with him anyway for the benefits of being affiliated with his nationally known organization.

The poor and increasingly middle-class African-American populations that comprised the NOI had given large amounts of money to the organization. In the early-to-mid-1970s, each member had to donate $125 on every Saviour’s Day (about $609 in 2016 dollars) and, at major mosques, $8.30 a week (about $50 in 2016 dollars), not including money from mandated sales of

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\(^{67}\) “Ministers Meeting, April 1, 1975,” Ministers Kit, May 1, 1975, 9.

\(^{68}\) “Man,” Date unknown, Ministers Kit April 1, 1975, 90-93, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*. As a result, ministers and other leaders at major mosques made very high salaries, and their lifestyles reflected this. “As (Imam Mohammed) and his father said, they were living deliciously,” said Agieb Bilal, assistant national secretary of the NOI from 1972 through the end of 1975 and a salaried consultant for Wallace Mohammed from 1978 to 1982. “There was no accountability. It was, ‘Do what you want to do.’ As long as you the messenger’s [Elijah Muhammad’s] ministers, you had carte blanche.”

Though his father and his father’s ministers had lived extremely well, on salaries and funds derived from contributions of NOI members, Wallace Mohammed would maintain a solidly middle-class lifestyle. Elijah Muhammad had contended that his residence in a stately mansion and purchases of fancy cars bolstered members’ views of the NOI, but Wallace Mohammed preferred surroundings that NOI members could more easily identify with. As he related during the spring to NOI “laborers” – ministers, captains, lieutenants and secretaries -- he rejected a request by NOI officials that he purchase a luxury car.

I was invited to get a big, long, fine club car that makes people notice you that don’t have any sense. I told them, ‘no.’ I am not used to that kind of car and I don’t want to get used to that kind of car. I asked them to get me a car in the medium price range. I want a car that all the followers can identify with. If I get one too cheap, the wealthier followers won’t be able to identify with me. If I get one in the middle, I’ll be representing all of the followers.

If his personal example to eschew the finer things wasn’t enough incentive for his ministers, on April 1, 1975, he threatened to remove them from their jobs if they didn’t comply within ninety days. “Those who commit shameful violations against Islamic moderation,

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70 Ibid.
71 “Instructions to the Laborers,” Date Unknown, Ministers Kit May 1, 1975, 92, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
religious morals and principles by showing themselves as Hollywood made super-flies,” he said, “will have to conform or they will have to get out of the position in the NOI.” He also summarily removed major sources of their funding by forbidding the types of mandatory collections that marked temple life in previous years. For example, in the past, the $125-per-person gifts showered upon Chicago headquarters for Saviour’s Day would allow ministers of major temples to leave the city after the event with gift checks from Elijah Muhammad in the low five figures. 

But Wallace Mohammed quickly eliminated this tradition. Going forward, he told his ministers on August 26, 1975, the “Saviour’s Day gift is not to be set. There will be no set amount that a believer will have to give. You’re not to push Saviour’s Day as we have in the past.” And, referring to other collections, he said, on June 15, 1975, that “there will be no forced or set amount placed on members.” These changes probably cost his ministers tens of thousands of dollars a year in take-home pay that they were used to receiving.

That wasn’t the only way Wallace Mohammed changed the NOI’s administrative structure. He increased the roles for women in mosques, allowing them to be called ministers (but not imams, the term he began using for his male leaders, who were previously called ministers). He appointed women to senior administrative positions. He also stopped mandating that members sell the Muhammad Speaks newspaper, a long-time source of revenue for temples and of weekly angst for many members who struggled to sell their quota. And he cracked down on high-ranking temple members who drew salaries without doing much work, saying, “If you’re going to get the donations and we’re going to take care of you and your family, then you’re going to work so hard that we’re going to see some sweat on your brow…. Playing time is

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72 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, October 12, 2004.
74 “McCormick Place, June 15, 1975,” Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 119, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
over.” On August 29, 1975, he informed all paid temple officials that they would undergo biannual reviews. He also ordered his ministers to reduce the amount of discipline imposed on members and at one point urged rank-and-file members – half-jokingly -- to purchase actual weapons to wield against overly harsh temple officials.

**Toward Arabic and Sunnism**

He also directed ministers to learn Arabic, or at least to try. It was okay if all they could manage was a few lines. “When you speak to the people,” he said, “I don’t care if you only know one line, say that one line with authority.” His detailed instructions on the Five Pillars of Islam, on ablution (washing before prayer) and on prayer itself increased the NOI’s alignment with more conventional Sunni norms, while making allowances for his ministers’ lack of abilities in Arabic.

Place your head between the hands, with your forehead and your nose touching the floor. In this position, say ‘Subha Allah’ twice which means ‘Highly glorified is my Lord, the Most High.’ … For the second Rakat, you repeat it just as you did the first. If you know other verses to say from the Holy Qur’an, it is good that you repeat some of them, but if you don’t know any more that’s alright.

He told them that in their prayers they should include people of other religions, including Buddhists, Christians and Jews, who he said “recognize the Supreme Being and are trying to live righteously.” As “righteous servants of Allah,” they deserved to be included in prayers, he said. Another directive was they read one-thirtieth of the Qur’an each day of the holy month of Ramadan. While this was a common Ramadan practice across the Muslim world, it was new to

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75 “Instructions to the Laborers,” Ministers Kit May 1, 1975, 92.
76 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, October 20, 2014.
77 “Ministers Meeting, June 2, 1975,” Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 177, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
79 Ibid., 52.
the NOI. The ministers’ top priority in learning the Qur’an, he instructed, should be the opening chapter, known as *al-Fatiha*, which they could listen to on tapes from his national radio broadcasts.

All the ministers are to learn the opening prayer, *Al-Fatiha*, in both English and Arabic. All ministers should be regular readers of the Holy Qur’an and Bible. If you don’t do these things, you will be behind time. ⁸⁰

At various points in these first months he taught and explained to them words from other important religious Arabic phrases, such as the *Basmala*, which appears at the start of most chapters of the Qur’an and is uttered by Muslims before they pray: “*Bismallah al-Rahim al-Rahmeen*…” It is usually translated into English as, “In the name of God, the most beneficent, the most merciful…” Wallace Mohammed, however, would contest this common translation, declaring it hubris to declare anything “in the name” of Allah. Noting that *bih*, the first syllable of *bismillah*, can mean “with” in addition to “in,” he chose a different definition. “*Bismillah* means *with* God, or Allah,” he said, on September 2. “We go with God, keeping him before us and on our mind. We proceed ‘with’ the name of Allah…” ⁸¹

At least some imams viewed Wallace Mohammed’s Qur’anic emphasis as license to marry second wives. (Previously, under Elijah Muhammad’s leadership, the NOI had banned polygamy.) The Qur’an allows men to have as many as four wives although, as Wallace Mohammed would note in chastising these imams, the Qur’anic verses on marriage say a husband must treat all wives the same, and that equal treatment ultimately is not possible. ⁸²

We have a few misinformed, fat-brained ministers who are trying to bring ancient history and social behavior to modern day life. They read about Solomon and others and their many wives and concubines and try

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⁸⁰ “Ministers Meeting, April 1, 1975,” Ministers Kit, May 1, 1975, 23.
⁸² “McCormick Place, June 15, 1975,” Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 127.
to impose that on our poor sister. The Holy Qur’an is over 1,400 years old and even it says that monogamy is the peaceful way of life and that the man who takes more than one wife is taking on added problems and headaches. It says that as a Muslim man he should be compelled to deal justly and equally between his wives, but the Holy Qur’an says that you can’t do that.83

He also deemphasized race in a man’s selection of a woman to marry, saying that what mattered most was choosing a good Muslim. He said that while a male African-American should ideally seek to marry a female African-American Muslim, that if he could not find one who “would make you a decent wife,” he could choose a Muslim woman of a different race.84

A brother first should look for a good Muslim in a wife, so if a Caucasian comes into the temple and turns out to be a good Muslim, it’s better to have a good Muslim Caucasian than to have a devil so-called Negro… If you are unable to find a black woman but a white one with whom you can live, I will not put you out of the temple. I couldn’t dare put you out of the temple. It’s none of my business. You, and not I, know with what you can live.85

Marriage was not the only topic involving gender relations that Wallace Mohammed found the need to address in his first few months as leader. He also told NOI women that as long as they dressed “decently,” that they no longer had to wear uniforms to temple meetings, as they had previously. (In previous decades, he noted on May 9, 1975, the purpose of the NOI uniform had been “to leave the filthy, unclean, indecent dress of the world. We did that but now that the purpose has been served, we don’t all have to look like nuns, do we?”86) And as part of his general loosening of rules and discipline, he told NOI women not to overly concern themselves with covering all their hair under head scarves.87

83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 46.
85 Ibid., 47.
86 “Sisters Meeting, May 9, 1975, Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 285, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
87 “Temple No. 2 Holdback Meeting, 5-25-1975, Ministers Kit July 1, 1975, 11-12, Collection, SCRBC, New York. Later in his tenure, Wallace Mohammed would remove rules requiring women to have an escort at night if they left their homes, and having to stay home while pregnant.
Your hair should be covered when you come to the temple. If there is a little hair visible, it’s alright. But if you’re trying to show your hair, you’re wrong. If it’s not intentional, it’s alright. But if you’re just trying to have a little hair showing because you think it makes you prettier, you’re wrong. You don’t come to the temple to attract people, you come to attract righteousness.\(^88\)

Previously, Elijah Muhammad’s NOI had stressed the role of women as loyal, obedient wives and as mothers whose main priorities should be at home. Though husbands could be beaten by FOI members as punishment for abusing their wives, in general the NOI under Elijah Muhammad emphasized obedience to a husband, and men were urged to both “protect” and “control” their wives.\(^89\) Wallace Mohammed, without disavowing the NOI’s strong emphasis on women’s responsibilities to families and obedience to husbands, was known among his followers for sensitivity to women’s issues – partially due to a strong relationship with his mother, who he sided with after his father had children with other women. During his first months as leader he frequently dispelled common gender stereotypes in speeches to NOI members;\(^90\) in the next quotation, taken from a speech made June 15, 1975, he says women are capable and intelligent as men, and that their ability to bear children is the only thing keeping them from the most prominent leadership roles in society.

Scripture teaches us that the male is superior to the female because he has been free and has not been tied at home domestically carrying children for nine month periods. Nor has he had to stay with them until they reached the level where they could take care of themselves. This has been the way or practice of the society for thousands of years so because man performed hard work outside of the home this has made

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\(^88\) Ibid.


\(^90\) Wallace Mohammed often praised the role of his mother, Clara Muhammad, in introducing Elijah Muhammad to Fard in 1930 – an introduction without which Elijah Muhammad presumably would not have come to lead the NOI. He renamed the organization’s school system for her. Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 89
him more fit physically. It is because he also had the freedom to go out and find the wealth in distant land. Still if the woman had been put in his place with her same mind and human makeup and man had been burdened with the physiological problems of bearing and raising children, the woman and not the man would be the ruler in the world today.91

None of this is meant to imply that Wallace Mohammed’s views on gender approached the frontiers of late-twentieth-century feminist thought. As Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim note, Wallace Mohammed’s views were “affected by, but not guided by, ideals of women’s liberation in the larger culture.”92 True, he would allow women to be ministers and “instructresses,” but only after changing the title of the temple’s top leaders to imams, a role that remained restricted to men. He favored expanding women’s roles in society beyond his father’s preferences, but he also idealized a woman’s role in marriage as supporting her husband and carrying out his wishes, rather than the other way around. In the speech below, for example, he discusses different types of women for a man to marry.

Let’s consider a brother who has been raised in a home wherein the woman would say, ‘Honey, get somebody out here to board up the back door and I want one put on the side. I don’t want that door on the back anymore.’ The man would say, ‘Okay, baby, I’ll take care of it.’ Now, if a brother came up in that kind of house, he can get a sister that talks to him all of the time and doesn’t listen much and he’ll be happy.

However, if he came from the kind of house as from where I came, he will want a sister that says, ‘I think that the house will look better or it might be more convenient if we had the back door boarded and another door out on the side’ and waits for him to give the answer. If he says, ‘Well, OK we can get somebody to do it,’ she says, ‘Thank you honey,’ and if he says ‘No, I don’t think that it will work,’ she says, ‘Okay honey, I just was telling you I thought that it would work out better that way.’ Then she goes on with her little sad face and comes back the next day just as happy. She has forgotten all about it. Why? It is because she recognizes and accepts you as the last

91 “McCormick Place, June 15, 1975,” Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 102.
92 Gibson and Karim, Women of the Nation, 88.
word in the house. So when you are looking for women, look for someone with whom you can live.

**Relationships with Orthodox Muslims**

During his thirty-three years of leadership, Wallace Mohammed would forge and manage relationships with Saudi religious authorities and other Muslim religious leaders overseas that were alternately productive and tumultuous. In his first months of leadership, however, there were few concrete signs that the NOI could expect much help—financial or otherwise—from Muslims abroad as it navigated the transition toward more conventional Sunni Islamic norms.

Wallace Mohammed wasn’t exactly starting from scratch. Under his father’s leadership, the NOI had become a known entity in the Muslim world, for its political stances on American exceptionalism, post-colonialism, and U.S. superpower status. Elijah Muhammad had cultivated relationships with foreign leaders including Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser of Egypt and Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya. When Nasser met with Elijah Muhammad during the latter’s trip in 1959 across the Muslim world, the Egyptian president reportedly urged the NOI leader to leave the United States to help spread Islam in Africa, promising him a palace in Cairo. Elijah Muhammad even secured a coveted letter expressing religious brotherhood from Nasser, at the height of Nasser’s popularity, which Elijah Muhammad hoped would bolster his group’s status among non-NOI Muslims in the United States. That same year, 1959, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia allowed Elijah Muhammad to enter the holy city of Mecca, an allowance made only to people who are viewed as Muslims by the Saudis. And years later, in 1972, Qaddafi lent the NOI $3 million to purchase property for a mosque in Chicago.94

94 Ibid., 255-256.
Still, the relationship between the NOI and other Muslims remained strained over the NOI’s cosmology and racial theories. In the NOI’s early decades, Elijah Muhammad said, Fard had instructed him to bar Arabs from NOI meetings “because they didn’t understand what he was doing” and would only be confused, Wallace recalled. Yet the increasing petroleum-enriched wealth of selected Arab countries, along with the specter of their funding the NOI, was tantalizing to at least some NOI officials and members in the 1970s.\(^\text{95}\)

During his first months as leader, Wallace Mohammed voiced mixed feelings about the prospects of receiving money from oil-rich Arab countries to help fill NOI coffers. The Saudis in particular, in 1962, had made Islamic missionary work an official state goal, and would work to affect the contours of Islamic practices around the globe -- with a focus on people and communities that already were Muslim. Wallace Mohammed’s early contacts with the Muslim world clearly excited him, seeming to offer the prospect of massive financial help to the NOI. On September 8, 1975, he told his members that

> The world at large now is very interested in what we are doing. I talk with leaders and I’m blessed to have come into the office of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who labored for so many years to establish what we have today. The same dignitaries and men of high office in business and government now are seeking me as they formerly sought him. In fact, we are seeing even more visitors today and they are more anxious now than they were before to get with us, lend us their hand, and help us with their knowledge, resources and their dollars… We have not millions but billions that we can get if we show the world that we realize what we already have in our hands. These are not just words, brothers and sisters. I’m telling you what has been told to me by those who have billions so it’s up to you. There is no job more honorable or more glorious than the one that you have.\(^\text{96}\)

Other times, he presciently voiced caution over the burdens associated with such gifts, surmising that foreign Muslim associations and governments might want the NOI to alter its

\(^{95}\)“Ministers’ Meeting, February 25, 1975,” Ministers Kit March 14, 1975, 25, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.

\(^{96}\)“Education Workshop, September 8, 1975,” Ministers Kit October 1, 1975, 89-90, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
religious practices and political agendas in return for their money. On August 1, 1975, he warned of a *quid pro quo*.

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his staff were able … to get loans for the Nation, such as the 3 million dollars from Libya. Now although the loan was interest free, you should realize that this is no problem-free thing. Don’t think that you are without problems because people give you big money without writing out a commitment. When people make such a loan to you, they know that you are morally obligated. So there are strings attached.97

Another motive for Wallace Mohammed’s wariness, Bilal said, was a state of disorder that characterized the NOI’s finances at the time. Indeed, after Elijah Muhammad’s death the Internal Revenue Service informed the group it was preparing an investigation. The problem was, the NOI had been underpaying taxes on profits from its numerous businesses.98 “We have… Muslims abroad who want to give us money,” he told his ministers on Aug. 1, 1975, “but I don’t feel right accepting money to put into something where it goes right down the drain. Until we can keep this from happening, I’m not going to sign anything, accepting any money.”99

Indeed, the perceived motives and merits of potential funders would become near-constant sources of tension and friction. On June 22, 1975, Wallace Mohammed noted that the “Orthodox Islamic world” had financially supported the NOI more generously during his father’s reign than in the first months of his leadership. The lack of fresh donation was unexpected, given Wallace Mohammed’s stated intent to align with more conventional Sunni norms. “That showed you that a lot of support which they gave him was hypocrisy,” Wallace Mohammed said. “If they meant well for him, they would increase their support to me many times over but we don’t hear from them now and they are as quiet as church mice.”100

97 “Ministers’ Meeting, August 1, 1975,” Ministers Kit October 1, 1975, 50, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
98 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, August 20, 2014.
99 “Ministers Meeting 8/1/75,” Ministers Kit October 1, 1975, 49, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
100 “Spiritual Meeting, June 22, 1975,” Ministers’ Kit September 1, 1975, 76, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
The question of whether to solicit and accept foreign money touched on broader issues of identity that dominated the NOI’s group consciousness after February 25, 1975. The NOI was in the process of shedding the Black Nationalist identity that marked it in prior years, in favor of a religious philosophy that was far more acceptable to non-NOI Muslims in the United States and abroad. Still, Wallace Mohammed did not want to surrender autonomy to foreign Muslim religious leaders, some of whom had been trying to influence the NOI’s political and religious agendas. And he did not want to critique U.S. policy with his father’s severity; in fact, he encouraged his members to join the military. Nor did he want African-American Muslims to adapt to cultural practices, often associated with Islam, that were prevalent in Muslim-majority countries. “We in the Nation of Islam shouldn’t want to be integrated with orthodox Muslims,” he said. “We would like to associate with them and have some interchange, but we do not want to become them. We want to serve them as the sun serves the earth.”

True, NOI members knew relatively little Arabic and had limited experience studying the Qur’an. But Wallace Mohammed steadfastly maintained during these months that it was African-American Muslims, and not “so-called orthodox Muslims,” who laid claim to the best Islamic practices. “Our Islam is better than that of other Muslims,” he said on May 25, 1975. “We have heard the preaching of [other Muslims]. We have heard what they learn, we have weighed theirs with ours, and we say that we have the best.” Proof of this superiority, he said, lay in African-American Muslims’ abilities to gain substantial numbers of converts in the United States, which Muslims of foreign descent had failed to do, he said. While “so-called orthodox Muslims” had better facility with Arabic and more knowledge of the Qur’an, he claimed that “no matter how much they know, they’re only verbalizing. There is no real feeling in what they saw because it’s

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not really in their heart and soul.” While he said it was acceptable to spend time around Orthodox Muslims to improve one’s Arabic, for the purposes of reading the Qur’an, he stressed that African-American Muslims should not seek their advice on interpreting the Qur’an. “Each body or society of Islam must interpret the Holy Qur’an and come up with its own jurisprudence,” he said.

In addition, he urged NOI members to ignore “orthodox” Muslims -- whether individuals, representatives of national immigrant groups, or visiting members of foreign delegations -- who continued to criticize NOI beliefs and practices. “It’s pitiful,” Wallace Mohammed said. “I received something in the mail the other day from a so-called Orthodox Muslim. The man was trying to tell the public, ‘Don’t let the [NOI] Muslims or temple deceive you, they are just using a trick.’ If you run into some of them, just ignore them and don’t even waste your breath on them. We don’t help ourselves by arguing with them.”

A common criticism heard by Wallace Mohammed, from Muslims of foreign descent, was that he should use the Bible far less often in his sermons. His predecessor, Elijah Muhammad, would very often analyze biblical passages, and while Wallace Mohammed used the Bible less than his father had, he still referred to biblical passages regularly. For this he was unapologetic, saying that most NOI members had grown up viewing the Bible as sacred scripture and that he used it as a conversion tool. Given that the Qur’an represents a corrected form of the Bible, he said, echoing a basic Islamic teaching, “it should be my duty to put my book beside the

104 Ibid., 92-93.
105 “Ministers Meeting, 7/15/75,” October 1, 1975, 12, NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
uncorrected one and convince those that are not corrected that I have the corrected. How can I do this if I don’t compare the two?"107 He also stated,

There are some Orthodox Muslims who don’t understand the Holy Qur’an and they say that I should avoid using the Bible because it is a book that has been destroyed or cancelled out by the Holy Qur’an. In the Holy Qur’an, there is an appeal to the people of the Bible, for they are told to look in their book…It says ‘Ask the people of the book,’ meaning that you are being told something and if you don’t believe it, look in their book and you’ll find the verification there.”108

Attacking prevalent notions of Arab superiority in religious matters was a repeated goal. Arabs, as a group, were overly nationalistic and out to advance “Arabism,” he said. The prophet Muhammad, he said, “wasn’t an Arab in the sense that Arabs are” in that he did not care about a person’s race or nationality; instead, he cared if “you [were] a good, decent person in Islam.”109

He grouped rich Arabs with white people – a significant slight in an organization with the NOI’s history – in saying that “light-skinned, Caucasian rich Arabs”110 were upset that the prophet Muhammad favored black slaves over themselves. As for modern Arabs, he said, “Those quarreling, fighting Arabs don’t have enough universalism to get rid of tribalism among [them], and because of that they have been unable to establish leadership. Prophet Muhammad was the only Arab who rose above tribalism to universalism.”111

For those who still believed that contemporary Arabs were descended from the first Muslims, Wallace Mohammed briefly contended, in 1975, that the original Arabs had been Africans. Contemporary Arabs, on the other hand, had Caucasian blood from the migration of white people into the Middle East, a development that he said led Africans to move away, he

108 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
Wallace Mohammed does not seem to have made this historical case often. Justification for it bore similarities to the more elaborate cosmology laid out by his father and Fard, which had attacked the ideas behind white supremacy. (Given Wallace Mohammed’s long-term disbelief in previous NOI racial teachings, it is unlikely that he believed this race-mythology.) Now, Wallace Mohammed was attacking Arab supremacy in the Muslim world. He said, on October 4, 1975,

You may feel that the Holy Qur’an is a book filled with Arab prophets, and you may consider Arabs to be non-black or Caucasian- or Jew-like people, but this is not correct. The original Arabs were black people and the Caucasians came in and mixed up their blood with them just as they mixed blood with many other black people. Now there are mixed people in Arabia and most of them are very light-skinned. Our ancestors, the dark complexion, wooly-haired people, retreated or pulled back as the Caucasian people from Europe came into Arabia. These dark-skinned people went further away from the European, because they didn’t want that kind of contact with them.\textsuperscript{113}

Decades earlier, Fard and Elijah Muhammad had pronounced a special historical status for African-Americans – that of “original man” (known as the “Asiatic Black Man). Now, Wallace Mohammed was giving vaunted status to the race specifically within the annals of a more widely accepted Islamic history, saying Allah had “manifested the black Americans great worth in his plans” and that it was unsurprising that Allah would bless them “with a superior understanding.”\textsuperscript{114}

He’s able to take the least and bless them with a superior understanding… It was men such as Bilal, a black Ethiopian who was the first minister of Prophet Muhammad of Arabia, and slaves, who accepted the great truth that he [Muhammad] taught. When Prophet Muhammad started teaching, he was not accepted by the rich Arab leaders or the desert Arabs. It was the blacks and the slaves that accepted him as it always is these kinds of people who turn to the word of Almighty God because they have nobody else to whom they can turn…\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{112} “October 4, 1975, Fruit of Islam Meeting,” 47.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} “After Temple Meeting, August 31, 1975,” Ministers Kit October 1, 1975, 77.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
His contention that “so-called Orthodox Muslims” deserved no special reverence from African-Americans, and that his own group consisted of better Muslims, was multi-faceted. One contention was that African-Americans had shown greater loyalty, earlier, to the prophet Muhammad than Arabs had. Not only was the first muezzin\textsuperscript{116} for the prophet Muhammad believed to have been the former Ethiopian slave (Bilal), but the Meccans who in 620 CE rejected the prophet Muhammad and chased him from their city had been Arabs. It was the Abyssinian king, operating within the boundaries of present-day Ethiopia, who had supported the prophet Muhammad during his period of distress.\textsuperscript{117}

They [Arab Muslims] say they are the original owner and the ones who received Islam from the prophet Muhammad. They say that they have had it from the very beginning, but their history tells us that the Arabs were second to be converted; that black men and the poor slave were the first… It was Ethiopia, Africa, that first gave a haven to prophet Muhammad and their mission.\textsuperscript{118}

Not only did large groups of Arabs not accept the earliest Islamic teachings, Wallace Mohammed noted, but later generations of Arabs had not been able to maintain Islam’s position of strength across the centuries.

Don’t think… the Arabs were ‘the end’ in religion, because the Arabs received divine truth but they were too small to handle it. After it was put into their hands, the Caliph fell. They went into war and lost their glory and went down to almost nothing again. They still have their religion but they don’t have the power.

Another criticism of Arab and other “so-called Orthodox Muslims” put forth by Wallace Mohammed was a perceived overreliance on hadith to resolve religious issues, as opposed to the Qur’an. Hadith, reputed to be oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad, are widely used to help Muslims resolve specific religious issues on which the Qur’an – believed to be the actual word of

\textsuperscript{116} The muezzin is the crier who calls Muslims to prayer.

\textsuperscript{117} “After Temple Meeting, August 31, 1975,” Ministers Kit October 1, 1975, 79.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 78-79.
God as relayed to the prophet Muhammad -- might lack detailed guidelines. But the Qur’an is generally viewed as carrying more weight. Wallace Mohammed’s mosques did not emphasize the teaching of hadiths. “If you notice,” Wallace Mohammed said, “so-called Orthodox Muslims, they use the word ‘hadith’ more than they use the Holy Qur’an, but in their own hadith it is clearly stated that the Holy Qur’an is the authority and the hadith is only used as a support.”

Conclusion

The first ten months of Wallace Mohammed’s leadership witnessed significant, tactical movements away from old NOI teachings and toward more conventional Sunni Islamic norms, but with few if any rhetorical concessions toward Muslims from overseas. This represented a middle ground of sorts and was surely a difficult line to toe; the effort was doubtlessly eased by Wallace Mohammed’s membership in the NOI’s “royal family” and the belief within the NOI that Fard had slated him as the next leader before he was born.

The rhetoric of 1975 itself demonstrated how Wallace Mohammed attempted to define boundaries that were always clearer between his organization and the old NOI, than between his organization and Orthodox Muslims. As the sources from this chapter demonstrate, Wallace Mohammed was unwilling to grant a higher status to Islam as practiced abroad. In fact, he said in the quotation below, it was the NOI that should be spreading its views across the Muslim world overseas, rather than the other way around.

We know we have the best religion because nobody else’s religion has any attracting power over us. If they had something better, that superior power in their better religion would have enough strength to pull us away from this. But they can’t do it. We realize that Allah didn’t make this power we call the Nation of Islam grow in this part of the world just to stay to itself. He made

it to convince [other Muslims] who think they have the power that they don’t have the power and that the power is here with us, the NOI, in America.\textsuperscript{120}

There is no evidence that the NOI ever engaged in significant missionary efforts abroad to promote its brand of Islam, either before or after Wallace Mohammed’s leadership began. But over the ensuing decades, Wallace Mohammed’s organization would continue its tense relationship with “so-called Orthodox Muslims,” staying open to financial help from abroad but remaining ambivalent about acceding to political and religious requests from Muslim governments and organizations based overseas.

\textsuperscript{120} “Spiritual Meeting, May 25, 1975,” Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 216.
Chapter Three: Wallace Mohammed and the Saudis, 1975-1995

More than any other country, it was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that captured the imaginations of African-American Muslims in the Nation of Islam and its successor groups run by Wallace Mohammed.¹ Interactions with Saudis from 1975 to 1995 would confront African-American Muslims with questions about what kind of Muslims they wanted to be, and also about what kind they did not want to be. This was a period of transformation and identity conflicts for Wallace Mohammed’s organization, which in 1975 had distanced itself from its previous racial beliefs and cosmologies, hastening its movement toward more conventional Sunni beliefs on divinity, prophets, race and the afterlife. The Saudis offered guidance. The kingdom-financed Muslim World League organized training sessions for Wallace Mohammed’s imams on Islamic theology and jurisprudence, and paid for Saudi-educated shaykhs to work as Islamic Studies specialists in Wallace Mohammed’s mosques. In addition, it funded land accommodations for

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¹ By “its successor groups” I mean the NOI’s organizations that were managed by Wallace Mohammed and that he renamed. He changed group’s name from the Nation of Islam to the World Community of Islam in the West (1976), to the American Muslim Mission (1981), and to the American Society of Muslims (1985). He changed the newspaper’s name from Muhammad Speaks to the Bilalian News (1976), to the A.M. Journal (1982), and to the Muslim Journal (1985.)
hajj trips for hundreds of African-American Muslims and donated massive amounts of religious literature.

Wallace Mohammed’s organization, I argue, resisted much of the guidance associated with these Saudi-financed efforts. This contention of mine complicates the existing dominant narrative of Wallace Mohammed’s organization, which posits years of acceptance followed by resistance. I argue instead that tensions with Saudis and Sunni Muslims from other countries existed from the start and never let up. Through the decades, the leader managed his relationship with Saudi leaders within the scope of his organization’s religious and political agendas. The main guidance he did accept lay in MWL-sponsored education of his imams and ordinary followers, an acknowledgement of deficiencies in the organization’s capacity to teach the religion. While pushing his followers to immerse themselves in Sunni religious practices more than they had done previously, he pursued acceptance from Muslims overseas who had doubted his group’s Islamic authenticity due to its previous heterodox beliefs and practices. Yet he also strove to guard African-American autonomy as interpreters of Islamic law, displaying reluctance to sacrifice this to Muslims from overseas when they contested his decisions and spoke about non-Muslims in language his followers found offensive. And he encouraged his followers to be active in American society, stressing that he was not instinctively opposed to U.S. governmental activity as his father had been. While concerns of the Black Freedom movement never disappeared from his rhetoric, Wallace Mohammed broadly aligned his organization with U.S. geopolitical stances. Saudi Arabia, a petroleum-enriched monarchy, was a staunch ally of the United States.

An important geopolitical backdrop to Wallace Mohammed’s relationship with the Saudis was the broad change occurring in global Muslim politics -- both during and after the
Cold War. Muslim political entities in Asia and Africa had begun organizing in the name of Islam to oppose outside political domination, whether of the U.S., Soviet or European varieties. The establishment and existence of Israel, in a period of general decolonization, unified the Arab world in opposition, at least until Egypt signed the Camp David Accords in 1978. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Shi‘i Iran would influence and inspire political resistance to U.S. domination of the Middle East. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States allied with Muslims resisting the invasion. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the ensuing Desert Storm led Muslim Americans to take sides in disputes over the control of territory in Muslim-majority lands. By allying with the Saudis, Wallace Mohammed abandoned the traditional African-American and leftist critiques of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world.

This chapter argues that the twenty-year relationship between Wallace Mohammed’s organization and Saudi religious leaders was marked by tension throughout, slightly complicating the existing narrative that suggests two separate periods: of acceptance, at first, and resistance, afterward, to Saudi guidance. This chapter begins with an analysis of the relationship between foreign donors – actual and potential – to Wallace Mohammed’s movement, and the motives of donors and recipients alike. The next section examines Saudi efforts to influence African American understandings of Islam through the kingdom’s financing of training sessions for imams and of religious-studies specialists at Wallace Mohammed’s mosques. The section after that examines broad conflicts with immigrant Muslim groups. The following part charts and analyzes tensions between Wallace Mohammed and the imams in his own movement, showing that the Saudi embassy to the United States played a controversial role in their communal lives. Finally, I analyze four trips that Wallace Mohammed and his organization made to Saudi Arabia in 1990 and 1991, the latter two during the Persian Gulf War. I argue that tensions existed
throughout the relationship that preclude a neat historical narrative of acceptance and resistance of foreign guidance on religious matters and political matters.

**Money and Foreign-Policy Agendas**

The foreign courtship of African-American Muslims was not restricted to religious authorities and institutions from Saudi Arabia. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, who had met Elijah Muhammad when the latter traveled to Egypt in 1959, met with Wallace Mohammed in 1975 while in the United States for a United Nations meeting and presented him with twelve scholarships for followers to study at al-Azhar University in Cairo. And Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirates, was the source of a $1.25 million gift, the largest single donation given to Wallace Mohammed’s group during his thirty-three years of leadership. Sharjah’s ruler, Shaykh Sultan bin Mohamed al-Qasimi, apparently looked favorably on Wallace Mohammed’s changes and arrived at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport in May 1976 to the greetings of hundreds of Muslims from Wallace Mohammed’s mosques, including heavyweight boxer and international celebrity Muhammad Ali. Later, while visiting the NOI’s main mosque in Chicago, Shaykh Qasimi pledged significant financial assistance to the movement, remarking on its movement away from old NOI beliefs. “We have seen your growth and institutions and it is indeed a pleasure to see this growth,” he said. “The news about you was great, but when I came here and saw your institutions we know that what you have is greater than what we heard.” He would pledge $250,000 for the NOI’s school system and, separately, one million dollars for a

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4 Munir Um’rani and Salim Muwakkil, “‘Salaam’ from the East.”
new mosque to be named after Bilal, the African companion of the prophet Muhammad, which was expected to cost $16 million.

Hasan Sharif, Wallace Mohammed’s nephew and the NOI’s public relations specialist in 1976, recalled traveling with his uncle to the United Arab Emirates embassy in Washington, D.C., to pick up the one-million-dollar check, and then to a bank in Chicago to deposit it. “It was really kind of cool,” Sharif said, “because as he was filling out the form to deposit the money, he kind of looked at me and winked, like, ‘This is really cool, we’re getting ready to put a million dollars into the bank.’”

This was a massive amount of money for a once-flush national organization that had been receiving less money from its branch mosques since Wallace Mohammed decentralized it upon becoming leader. Yet Wallace Mohammed did not want the prospect of cash to alter his movement’s priorities. In the months after the Sharjian shaykh’s visit, it became apparent that raising the additional $15 million needed to build the mosque was not feasible. A new mosque ranked low as an NOI priority; the organization’s schools were its top financial concern, and just three years earlier it had purchased a massive building in Chicago which itself had seemed too large for its mosque needs. So Wallace Mohammed contacted Shaykh Sultan and offered to return the $1 million, as it seemed unlikely it would be used for its original purpose. The shaykh said Wallace Mohammed could use the money for the movement’s school system.

Such visits and praise by prominent Muslims abroad offered Wallace Mohammed’s organization a sense of Islamic legitimacy it had previously lacked, in the view of other Muslim groups, due to Elijah Muhammad’s teachings. The movement’s collective pride in these meetings with Muslims from abroad is evident from coverage in Wallace Mohammed’s

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5 Author’s interview with Hasan Sharif, telephone, September 4, 2014.
6 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, July 7, 2015.
newspapers, which portrayed Saudis and Muslim World League officials not only as financially
generous to the African-American Muslim community, but also as enthusiastic about Wallace
Mohammed’s transition to Sunnism, away from the NOI’s original theology.

In October 1977, prominent Saudis from the Islamic University of Medina stopped at one
of Wallace Mohammed’s mosques, in Washington D.C. There, the Saudi shaykh heading the
delegation, Abd al-Rahman al-Rawi, praised the religious practices of the African-American
Muslims assembled there. He specifically lauded Wallace Mohammed’s efforts and hinted that
the kingdom would provide financial assistance. “What we have seen,” al-Rawi said, “and what
we have heard from [I]mam W.D. Muhammad and others is a very good thing, and has given us
hope in a great future for al-Islam in the West…. He put upon us the responsibility of teaching
the real teachings of Islam here, so it’s our duty to help.”7 Financial assistance, Shaykh Rawi
said, might include scholarships for African American Muslims to study at the University.
“Those who graduate,” he said, referring to the university’s students from around the world, “go
to their countries and others to promote Al-Islam.”8

As leader, Wallace Muhammad began visiting Muslim leaders in Arab countries in 1976,
making ostensibly positive impressions with his movement away from his father’s teachings and
toward more conventional Sunni Islamic norms. “Real cooperation” between African American
Muslims and Arab countries, Shaykh Rawi said on that October 1977 day, “started with the visit
of (I)mam W.D. Muhammad to these countries, and they are making very good cooperation (on)
the propagation of Islam.”9

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7 The word “al” is the Arabic word for “the” and is often attached to Islam. Al-Islam simply means “the religion of
Islam.”
9 Ibid.
The newspaper often printed effusive praise for Wallace Mohammed by officials of the Muslim World League, a purported demonstration of his group’s Islamic authenticity. One article from 1977 included these compliments from the MWL’s Secretary-General:

The teachings of the Honorable Wallace Muhammad leave me with a very good feeling in my heart,” declared the head of the largest order for the propagation of Islam in the world. “The Honorable Wallace Muhammad is teaching the true teachings of Islam,” said Shaykh Muhammad Ali Al-Harakhan, Secretary-General of the Muslim World League, headquarters in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.10

The publication and tone of these and other articles seemed at least partially intended to nurture the budding international relationship. Indeed, the newspaper’s coverage often treated Saudi dignitaries as valued members of an extended family. It published flattering pictures of Khalil al-Khalil, an official in the Saudi embassy in the United States, at Muslim events across the United States in the early 1980s, and it covered the 1985 appearance of the Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, in Dallas, Texas, where he was meeting imams from the region at a museum exhibit on Saudi Arabia.11 An extremely wealthy Saudi named Mohammed al-Fassi, who had married into the royal family, also received coverage for a trip to Evanston, Illinois, where he donated $15,000 – a tiny portion, to be sure, of his vast fortune -- to a youth program. The A.M. Journal quoted a spokesman for al-Fassi who said the shaykh’s visit reflected Saudi concern for Americans: “[S]ince Shaykh Al-Fassi is a member of the Saudi Royal Family and a multi-billionaire, he believes that he has a responsibility to learn about the United States personally and at the same time give concrete evidence of the concern which the Government of Saudi Arabia has for the general welfare of the people of America.”12

The newspaper often published, in its entirety, official correspondence addressed to the movement from Saudi Arabia and the Muslim World League. One letter reprinted in full was directed toward a group of Wallace Mohammed’s followers who had recently traveled to the kingdom with their leader; written by Saudi prince (and future king) Salman ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, then governor of Riyadh, it read,

I was very happy to receive your correspondence of February 8, 1991 in which you mentioned your recent visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.... Your good feelings toward the Kingdom and your support we appreciate. I would like to thank you for your good relations and we extend our hands friendly to you.”

Political Agendas

The official praise notwithstanding, donations originating in Saudi Arabia for Wallace Mohammed’s organization totaled just a tiny portion of the many millions of dollars donated by Saudi-funded institutions and donors to Muslim-American groups during this period. To Wallace Mohammed, the disparity was easily explainable. It owed to his refusal to bend his organization’s foreign-policy stances to accommodate the political interests of Saudis or other Sunni groups regarding Palestinians, the Camp David Accords, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and other issues relating to the Muslim world overseas. “I know,” he told an interviewer for Playboy magazine in 1980, “that if I campaigned more vocally for the Palestinians, there’d be more substantial gifts. As a Moslem, I identify with their problems, but you don’t sacrifice your independence and the integrity of your movement for money.”

Actually, Wallace Mohammed publicly addressed the plight of Palestinians often, both in his speeches and in his newspaper. But his discourse tended to be less strident and more mindful

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13 “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior Riyadh District, The private office of the Ruler of Riyadh District, Prince Salman ibn Abdul Aziz, to the respected member delegation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia affiliation with Imam Warith Deen Mohammed;” Muslim Journal, 19 April 1991, 3.

of Israeli concerns than immigrant and foreign Muslim leaders wanted to hear from the leader of
the largest African-American-Muslim organization. For example, in 1985, under the headline
“The Middle East Situation is Confused,” he wrote of Palestinian loss and condemned Zionism
but also acknowledged Jewish losses in the Holocaust:

The Middle East situation is a very confused situation, and the biggest
trouble is coming from, I would say, hurt and bitterness in the Jews, and
hurt and bitterness in the displaced Palestinians – the Arabs who have
been uprooted and moved from their homes and put in camps or left at
the mercy of the world society, without a home, without a nation.

The Jews who were persecuted under Hitler, under the Nazis, and who
lost many millions of lives in a very horrible way carry that hurt. So we
have two very sensitive people, and they are carrying a great hurt and
great bitterness – both of them are carrying it.

I believe that what is happening is that there is a great blindness on both
sides. There is a blindness in the Jewish people, who are Zionist, strongly
Zionist, and strongly for occupying and dominating that territory [Palestine.]

Now, there is that same kind of blindness in the Palestinians, who respond
from sentiment, to a great extent, rather than from intelligent strategy.15

In 1979, upon returning to Chicago from the Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference in Fez,
Morocco -- a gathering at which he held “observer” status -- he told his newspaper’s reporter that
he disagreed with many of the Muslim leaders at the international meeting, who he characterized
as favoring “fiery Jihad.” Egyptians and Palestinians were ill-equipped for war against countries
with better armies, he said. He continued,

I don’t feel like a lot of the Muslims I met, who feel the situation is so
desperate, so urgent that all Muslims ought to jump up with one rallying
cry, in the spirit of jihad – I meant fiery Jihad. I don’t feel like that. I’m
inclined to approach this very serious situation in the spirit expressed by
the King of Morocco, King Hasan II. He prefers a peaceful approach rather
than an attempt to liberate oppressed Muslim communities with material
hardware. That’s not only a sober, religious attitude, I think it’s also a
practical position.16

Another instance in which Wallace Mohammed irritated immigrant and foreign Muslim leaders was his support for the Camp David Accords, implicitly acknowledging Israel’s right to exist. And he upset Saudi leaders in refusing to publicly oppose the Iranian Revolution, which installed a Shi’i Islamic government viewed as regional rivals to the Saudi royals, who are Sunnis. Indeed, while Wallace Mohammed criticized the taking of American hostages in 1979, in general he spoke in positive terms about Shi’ism and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Given the history of racism against African-Americans, he was reluctant to join forces to persecute another group – in this case, Shi’i.17

His father, of course, had critiqued virtually every U.S. government stance and policy, and representatives of Muslim countries originally expected Wallace Mohammed to do the same as the group moved toward more conventional Sunni norms. “When Imam [Mohammed] first came into office,” Agieb Bilal said, “our political posture was viewed as anti-American… The Saudis, their political people saw us as a fifth column in America that could be utilized for their political purposes, primarily vis-à-vis what they wanted to do over there. They thought we could be used to do that. Then they found out that Wallace Mohammed was an independent thinker.”18

The end result was, Wallace Mohammed in his thirty-three years as leader received less money from foreign governments than the $3 million that his father received in a single donation from Moammar Qaddafi in 1972.

To Wallace Mohammed and his followers, the declining assistance clearly demonstrated that the Saudis and others were less interested in helping African American Muslims develop as

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17 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, September 28, 2015.
18 Ibid.
an autonomous religious community than in using them as a “fifth column” of sorts, a tool to build political support in the United States for their own countries’ foreign-policy preferences.

When my Honorable father… was alive with us, you saw more open support coming from the Orthodox Islamic World. That shows you that a lot of the support which they gave Him was only hypocrisy. If they meant well for him, they would increase their support to me many times over but we don’t hear from them now and they are as quiet as church mice.19

Nevertheless, during the late 1970s, several oil-rich rich Persian Gulf nations including Saudi Arabia named Wallace Mohammed their “sole consultant and trustee” for the distribution of money to Muslim movements in the United States. Yet he does not appear to have distributed significant amounts of funds. The people who I interviewed had different recollections of what this meant; none of his relatives or close associates recall Muslims from overseas allowing him actual authority over foreign money.20 Muhammad Sadeeqi, an imam in Indiana, said Wallace Mohammed received annual payments of $100,000 for serving in this role but that the arrangement was discontinued when it was revealed that he donated portions of it to non-Muslim causes such as the Salvation Army.21 Wallace Mohammed, in an interview, said the annual amount had been $70,000.22

**Saudi-Funded Trainings and Imams**

Actual cash donations from Saudi Arabia or elsewhere, then, were relatively few, and had little effect on African-American-Muslim religious practices. More consequential was Saudi-

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19 “Spiritual Meeting -- 6-22-75,” Ministers Kit September 1, 1975, 76. NOI Collection, SCRBC, New York.
21 Author’s interview with Muhammad Siddeeq, telephone, January 28, 2015. Siddeeq became Wallace Mohammed’s father-in-law when his daughter, Khadijah Siddeeq married Wallace Mohammed. They were married on September 26, 2004, according to probate court records involving Wallace Mohammed’s estate.
financed religious education for Wallace Mohammed’s imams and followers. Wallace Mohammed’s aforementioned reluctance to alter his political agenda on other countries’ behalf, and the resulting unwillingness of foreign governments to shower cash on his movement had set a relatively low ceiling on donations. Yet while he remained intent on maintaining religious autonomy for African-American Muslims, Wallace Mohammed continued voicing hope that more foreign money – especially Saudi money – might reach his organization.

What he received, instead, was Saudi-financed mosque staffing, training programs for imams, and religious education for his followers. The Muslim World League paid for multiple efforts designed to alter African-American Muslims’ religious practices. (African-American Muslims were hardly the only such target for the MWL, which worked to influence Islamic religious practices on every inhabitable continent, as is discussed in Chapter Four.) The MWL hosted special training sessions in the United States for Wallace Mohammed’s imams on Islamic studies and funded salaries of Saudi-trained shaykhs to work at many of his movement’s mosques, where they taught Islamic Studies to regular believers. In addition, the MWL helped fund hajj trips for hundreds of African-American Muslims in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It also, as is discussed in Chapter Five, provided multi-year scholarships that allowed African-American Muslims – mostly from outside Wallace Mohammed’s movement – to study at religious universities in Saudi Arabia.

All of these activities and opportunities confronted African-American Muslims with vital questions about their religious practices and identity. Were they comfortable with Islam as taught by their own leader, Wallace Mohammed, and his imams? Had they instead developed more faith in Islam as taught by the Saudi-funded MWL? And how much, if at all, should racial identity and awareness count in their religious consciousness? The issue can be framed through
the general boundaries of what Edward E. Curtis IV has referred to as “universalistic and particularistic impulses” that have marked Islamic practices among African-Americans.23 “The tension exists,” Curtis writes, “between the idea, on the one hand, that a religious tradition is universally applicable to the experience of all human beings and the idea, on the other hand, that a religious tradition is applicable to the experience of one particular group of human beings” – in this case African-Americans.24 Prior to 1975, when Elijah Muhammad led the NOI, the organization can be said to have demonstrated particularistic impulses. Wallace Mohammed, though, would demonstrate that he highly valued both universalistic and particularistic approaches to Islam and would attempt to transcend the dichotomy.

In retrospect, the path was bound to be contentious. The NOI’s history had left many if not most of the group’s members with beliefs that were out of step with Sunni Islamic norms on race, prophethood, divinity and the afterlife, and even in the mid-to-late 1970s the group’s religious leaders, aside from Wallace Mohammed himself, possessed little knowledge of Arabic and minimal grounding in Qur’anic studies. Yet while Wallace Mohammed remained loath to sacrifice autonomy as a leader and as an interpreter of Islamic law in the United States, he actively sought help from Muslim leaders abroad – in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere -- to educate his followers. On April 22, 1977, at a MWL-sponsored “First Islamic Conference of North America” held in Newark, New Jersey, Wallace Mohammed, during his turn to speak, assured his three hundred listeners that his organization had left behind its heterodox ideas and was “now on... the Sunni path.” He expressed thanks in advance for foreign assistance: “We are blessed,” he said, “to have our brothers, our distinguished brothers of great repute and excellence come to the United States, from the holy city of Mecca from Arabia, to encourage us, to give us support,

23 Curtis, Islam in Black America, 15.
24 Ibid., 1.
to encourage us to unite, to encourage us to move forward in Islam and they are not people with weak support. They have the knowledge and they have the money. We are fortunate…”

Yet allowing Saudi-selected shaykhs to educate his followers, and even train his imams, represented a significant concession, an acknowledgement that his organization required assistance on a basic level. It constituted a reliance on outsiders to teach its own followers about the faith. In September of 1978, short house advertisements appeared several times in the *Bilalian News* noting that an “Imam Training Program for the World Community of al-Islam in the West is being sponsored by the Muslim World League, Rabita,” for interested imams. The main six-week training session would be held outside Chicago in Naperville, Illinois. Topics included “the basics of Islam, Islamic beliefs, prayers, rituals of Islam, something about Islamic history,” and basic Arabic. Approximately one hundred people attended, about half of them from Wallace Mohammed’s organization.

Wallace Mohammed’s apparent desire to remain in the good graces of the kingdom led him to make statements at odds with what he typically told his own followers and ministers in private. At the graduation ceremony for the MWL training, he addressed the “graduates” and referred to the training sessions as “the beginning of your learning Islam.” This was more than two years after he became leader of the organization and had himself led NOI imams in month-long training sessions with the Ministers Kits discussed in Chapter Two. Now he was letting the MWL train his teachers.

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27 Author’s interview with Muzammil Siddiqi, Garden Grove, California, May 11, 2015. Siddiqi was an instructor at the training sessions.
28 Ibid.
He even allowed those words – “the beginning of your learning Islam” -- to be published in his newspaper, which he knew was read closely by his followers. By submitting his imams to this training, he was demonstrating to the Muslim world overseas a willingness to take its lead on religious issues, with a hope that some combination of money and legitimacy among fellow Muslims-Americans would follow.

Siraj Wahhaj was among the imams from Wallace Mohammed’s organization who attended the MWL training session. In an interview in 2014, he recalled being deeply impressed with the teachings and the quality of the instructors at the MWL training sessions – men with well-known pedigrees from institutions for classical Islamic studies, including Shaykh Hussein Hamid Hassan of Egypt, Shaykh Jaafar Idris of Sudan, and Shaykh Muhammad Qutb, the brother of Sayyid Qutb and a consultant for the curriculum at the Islamic University of Medina in the 1960s. Wahhaj valued their lessons, but some other African-American imams there expressed frustration with the instructors. Wahhaj recalled, “I could see these members of the Nation of Islam were fighting the teachers: ‘Imam Mohammed says this!’ ‘Imam Mohammed says that!’ I said to myself,… ‘These are scholars. Listen to them. Learn something.’”

Wahhaj impressed MWL officials enough to be selected as one among five of the 100 assembled imams selected after the course to participate in further studies in Saudi Arabia for another two months. Accepting this invitation was difficult politically within Wallace Mohammed’s organization, which just three years into his leadership remained immersed in the transition. Wahhaj was an important leader, overseeing the main Brooklyn mosque. “I said,

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30 Author’s interview with Siraj Wahhaj, Brooklyn, New York, July 21, 2014. As is mentioned in Chapter Two, Wahhaj, a graduate of New York University, recalled that he had initially worried after Elijah Muhammad’s death in 1975 about the new leader’s intended direction but that Louis Farrakhan convinced him during his speech on Savior’s Day that year that the son was worth following.

31 Ibid.
‘Imam, I would love to go’... But I’m his imam, over one of his biggest mosques, and I said [to myself], it will be a test to me if he says no, but I’ll respect it. He gave me permission to go.”

Studying at King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz University in Mecca, Wahhaj took the long view: “I remember going with a sense of purpose that I’m coming back to the U.S. and I want to help establish this deen, this religion.” The tensions that followed his return to Wallace Mohammed’s movement in the United States, however, were reflective of the long-term conflict permeating the relationship between the largest African-American-Muslim organization and Saudi-financed religious institutions. Studying under the MWL officials in Naperville and then at King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz University had bolstered Wahhaj’s sentiment that Wallace Mohammed’s teachings were at odds with particular tenets of Sunni Islam, and he began to consider leaving the organization.

In addition, he recalled, some immigrant Muslims in the United States were pressuring him to leave, trapping him during his sermons with questions they knew would cause him problems. A particular source of tension was a position taken by Wallace Mohammed during the transition period that Jesus had a father; the Qur’an says he did not. As Wahhaj recalled,

Sunni Muslims… kind of trapped me. I’d be in a public speech. They’d ask me a question that they knew would contradict Wallace Mohammed. They said, ‘Imam Siraj, about Jesus, did Jesus have a father?’ Now I know what Wallace Mohammed was teaching, that Jesus had a father. I’d say no, he didn’t have a father. So now followers of WD Mohammed, I’m the imam, and they were looking, ‘Huh?’... That was disturbing to them. But it was truthful to myself.

Finally I told Imam Muhammad that, I wrote him, and told him that his community is now divided and I said I’m the cause of the division and that’s when I offered my resignation, sent to see him in Chicago. He said, ‘Imam, we can still have this difference.’ I said, ‘No, Imam, I can’t with full conviction, I can’t.’ And that’s when I resigned, in 1982.

32 Ibid.
Wahhaj was not the only imam to leave Wallace Mohammed’s organization on the belief it had not transitioned far enough toward Sunni Islamic norms. But his impact dwarfed that of others. A tape of Wahhaj criticizing Wallace Mohammed over his position on Jesus’s father and other issues circulated widely among Muslim leaders in the Middle East who had relationships with African-American Muslims, adding fuel to the belief of many foreign and immigrant Muslims that Wallace Mohammed, even in the late 1970s, remained overly beholden to his father’s views. Wahhaj’s words upset Wallace Mohammed’s followers. “It was putting doubt in people’s minds,” Agieb Bilal recalled. He continued,

Because the Saudis have… religious authority, unless you were hard-core followers of Imam [Wallace Mohammed], you were going to act like you were in a tennis match, and many people still do that today. They listen to imam, then they listen to somebody else, then they listen to imam and then they listen to someone else. And of course it creates nothing but confusion. All of a sudden, the Saudis are the modicum of Islamic legitimacy.35

In ensuing decades, Siraj Wahhaj and Wallace Mohammed would rebuild their relationship and make positive statements about each other in public. But in the years surrounding his departure, Wahhaj was suspected within Wallace Mohammed’s community of having received Saudi money to undercut Wallace Mohammed. Wahhaj said he never received money from the Saudis.36 For the purpose of this study, it’s unimportant whether he did or not; what’s relevant here is that his departure from Wallace Mohammed’s organization aligned with preconceived notions held by many that Islamic religious authority ultimately lay overseas.

In retrospect, Wallace Mohammed’s alliance with the Saudi-financed MWL seems a calculated risk. In moving the largest African-American Muslim organization toward Sunni Islam and seeking to gain acceptance by Muslims around the world, the relationship with foreign Islamic religious authorities and institutions would not have seemed problematic, given the

35 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, March 20, 2015.
possibility of donations. Yet his organization’s interaction with people better-versed in classical Islamic studies, and with political agendas in the Muslim world, presented myriad risks to his legitimacy as a religious authority in the United States.

**Foreign Imams in Residence**

The question of authority arose in another controversial manner during this period, through a second agreement between Wallace Mohammed and the MWL. The MWL in late 1977 sent six foreign shaykhs with training in classical Islamic studies to serve as specialists in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Wallace Mohammed’s mosques. These six shaykhs were sent to teach Wallace Mohammed’s followers, in contrast to the aforementioned training sessions that were designed for imams only. The new arrangement, like the previous one, risked tacitly acknowledging a need for outside help. The shaykhs’ main daily duties were to help teach Arabic and Islamic studies.

One of the first shaykhs, Muhammad Nur Abdallah, of Sudan, “did good work,” recalled Agieb Bilal. “He… was in the mosque every day, whenever you wanted him. He would answer questions, had classes, and was freely available.” His Islamic Studies classes at the mosque on Saturdays proved very popular, providing Muslims at Wallace Mohammed’s main Chicago mosque the opportunity to learn about the Qur’an and hadiths in more detail than they had before. “They came in droves,” Bilal said. “… He was a very patient teacher.”

The movement’s journal publicized the presence of these shaykhs, publishing a profile of Tajuddin bin Shuaib, then a 24-year-old native of Ghana who had studied at the Islamic University of Medina before being sent to Wallace Mohammed’s mosque. Besides teaching about the Qur’an and Islamic Studies, the article said he “frequently leads Islamic prayer services

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37 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, August 17, 2014.
and recently has been delivering a five-part lecture series on the Five Principles of Islam, belief in Allah, prayer, charity, fasting and Hajj.”

In many ways, then, these teachers were well-received. Not only did they provide valued instruction to the mosques, but their presence allowed Wallace Mohammed to devote more time to his national organization and less to religious teachings at the mosque. “People were happy,” Agieb Bilal said, “because they felt that it liberated the imam [Wallace Mohammed] and gave him more mobility, rather than having to sit up in Chicago worrying about teaching Islam day and night.”

Yet so many conflicts would arise between the MWL-funded shaykhs and Wallace Mohammed that the arrangements typically lasted either just months or a few years, at most. “There were problems with a lot of them because they thought they knew more than the Imam [Wallace Mohammed],” Bilal said. In 1983, Wallace Mohammed and the “Council of Imams” he had appointed to help him lead the organization announced they would no longer accept the MWL’s offers to fund foreign imams at Wallace Mohammed’s mosques, citing continued language and cultural barriers. An increase in the number of Wallace Mohammed’s followers who had studied the Qur’an and Arabic rendered the foreign help unnecessary, he said.

The foreign shaykhs clashed with Wallace Mohammed on a wide range of topics, from Ramadan observance to international politics to the religious language used to describe non-believers. Typical of the frictions was a disagreement in 1978 over the sighting of the crescent of the new moon to start the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The timing of Ramadan moon-sightings is important because observant Muslims are supposed to begin fasting the morning

39 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, August 17, 2014.
40 Ibid.
after the moon is seen in the sky; Muslims in North America have long debated whether to base the start of their Ramadan fasting on moon sightings in the Middle East or in North America, given that Middle East sightings are usually announced earlier, in authoritative fashion by leaders of individual Muslim-majority countries including Saudi Arabia. Wallace Mohammed preferred to wait for a sighting over North America, but in 1978 Muhammad Nur, working in the Chicago mosque, announced that Ramadan had begun after a sighting over Saudi Arabia. “He was going to start the people on the Ramadan prayer,” Bilal recalled. “…Imam [Wallace Mohammed] had to come and stop it. Imam overrode him.” The question of whether the Muslim world or North America should hold sway over the practice of Islam in North America had arisen again, and not for the last time.

While the MWL-funded shaykhs remained popular among Wallace Mohammed’s followers for their instruction on Arabic, the Qur’an and hadith, conflict surfaced over questions of politics, culture, and religious authority. The shaykhs wanted women to dress “Arab-style.” They spoke of Christians and Jews as “kufar” (unbelievers) in ways that many of the African-American Muslims found discomfiting; as Agieb Bilal put it, the shaykhs “didn’t understand our relationship with them [Christians and Jews]. You’re sitting there listening to these guys saying your mommy and daddy are unbelievers.”

In addition, the shaykhs devoted significant amounts of time to political problems affecting the Muslim world. “That wasn’t new to us,” Bilal said. “We knew [about world affairs] from the Muhammad Speaks newspaper. But we want to know how to pronounce the Arabic letters and you’re telling us about the PLO! We want to know how to pronounce the Arabic letters and you tell us how bad the Iranian Revolution is and trying to pump us up with anti-Shi’a

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42 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, August 17, 2014.
43 Ibid.; Author’s interview with Alfred Mohammed, New York, New York, February 17, 2013.
Another MWL-funded shaykh, Muhammad Alwan from Syria, would often attempt to correct Wallace Mohammed in public, recalled Plemon el-Amin, longtime imam of the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam and a close adviser to Wallace Mohammed in the 1980s and 1990s. While on hajj in 1977 with a large contingent from Wallace Mohammed’s mosques, Alwan at one point urged the attendees to donate money, only to be chastised by Wallace Mohammed that their people were poor and didn’t have money to give. Still, Wallace Mohammed appointed several of these shaykhs to leadership positions at his mosques in major cities, though the arrangements tended to be short-lived, either a few months or a few years.

Assistance from the MWL to help African-American Muslims make hajj also colored the relationship. Starting in 1977 the MWL offered to provide hajj accommodations in Saudi Arabia -- hotel rooms, food, transportation, and general guidance -- for hundreds of African-American Muslims a year. In 1977 alone, three hundred followers of Wallace Mohammed made hajj this way. The organization’s newspaper covered these trips in detail, likening the NOI’s treatment by the MWL to “the return of the Prodigal Son and the finding of the Lost Sheep in the Bible... Almost everything possible was done to make them have a successful hajj.”

The MWL on these hajj trips also arranged for Wallace Mohammed’s followers to meet with prominent political voices in the Muslim world, including Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization; General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, president of Pakistan; and Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the National Salvation Party in Turkey. “It was an attempt by the Saudis to indoctrinate us with Saudi-friendly leaders,” recalled Alfred Muhammad, imam of the Baltimore

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44 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, August 17, 2014.
45 Author’s interview with Plemon el-Amin, Atlanta, Georgia, September 19, 2014.
46 Of the MWL-financed imams, Shaykh Ahmed Rifai of Nigeria was appointed to the New York mosque of Wallace Mohammed; Shaykh Mohammed Nur of Sudan worked at the movement’s Chicago mosque; Shaykh Tajuidin Shuab of Ghana worked at the Los Angeles mosque; and Shaykh Muhammad Alwan of Syria worked at the Detroit mosque. Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, August 17, 2014.
mosque at the time and a member of the Council of Imams that managed the movement, who was on the trip. “… We had the insurgent leaders from all over the Muslim world give lectures to us… They were trying to impress us.”

An incident on the plane ride to Saudi Arabia offered another example of the longstanding tensions over authority. As the flight approached the airport in Jeddah, one of the Saudi-financed shaykhs, Ahmed Rifai of Nigeria, who taught at the movement’s New York mosque, approached Wallace Mohammed and said he wanted to instruct his followers over the plane’s speaker intercom about what would happen in the ensuing days. “Imam Mohammed wouldn’t let him do it,” recalled Imam Abdul Karim Hasan, who has led the organization’s main Los Angeles mosque since 1971. “He told him to get me… He said, ‘Whatever you want to say to the believers on the plane, you say to Imam Hasan. Imam Hasan will talk to the believers.’ The shaykh didn’t like that. What the Imam was doing was establishing among them the fact that we were going to be our own leader.”

In 1983, when the movement barred foreign imams from leading its mosques, it also stopped accepting the offers of land accommodations for hajj, reasoning that after multiple years of help, “our community now is at the point where all arrangements for the Hajj journey should be made by our community. Although we appreciate what has been done in the past, we now want to assume the responsibility for doing these things ourselves.”

48 Author’s interview with Alfred Mohammed, telephone, October 30, 2014. For an American organization, meeting with Arafat in the late 1970s was no small matter, as the PLO was designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government. In 1979, when chief U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young met with a PLO representative, the ensuing uproar led to his resignation.

49 Author’s interview with Imam Abdul Hasan Karim, Los Angeles, California, May 12, 2015.

Marriage, Dress and Family

As stated above, Wallace Mohammed resisted entreaties from Muslims abroad to more strictly regulate how women dressed. He told his female followers that as long as they dressed “decently,” they no longer had to wear uniforms to temple meetings as they had under Elijah Muhammad. He worried less about whether strands of women’s hair were showing. What was important, he said, was intent; as long as they were not trying to attract men at the mosque, displaying some hair was not a concern.\(^{51}\) His broader instruction was that women need not devote themselves entirely to domestic roles; unlike his father, he encouraged women’s pursuit of higher education, including graduate school. Elijah Muhammad had taught that women should devote themselves entirely to their husbands and children, and generally emphasized wifely obedience to a husband.\(^{52}\) Wallace Mohammed, without explicitly disavowing the NOI’s strong emphasis on women’s domestic responsibilities and obedience, had developed a reputation within the movement for having more sensitivity to women’s issues than his father had. This was believed partially due to a strong relationship with his mother, with whom Wallace Mohammed had sided after his father had children with other women.\(^{53}\)

His speeches often challenged stereotypical gender roles. He would urge husbands to help with housework, and he tended to encourage women to view themselves as intellectual beings. He changed the name of the organization’s women’s group from “Muslim Girls Training” to “Muslim Women’s Development Class.” He instituted rule changes that favored the independence of women in the organization, discontinuing NOI requirements that women needed

\(^{51}\) “Holdback Meeting,” May 25, 1975, Ministers Kit July 1, 1975, 11-12, Collection, SCRBC, New York. 
\(^{52}\) Gibson and Karim, Women of the Nation, xx

\(^{53}\) Wallace Mohammed has spoken of a strong relationship to his mother, Clara Muhammad, for whom he renamed schools in the organization, and whose side he took after his father’s marital infidelities to her. He often praised her role in introducing Elijah Muhammad to Fard in 1930 – an introduction without which Elijah Muhammad presumably would not have come to lead the NOI.
male escorts when traveling at night, and that they stay home while pregnant. In the late 1970s he would establish a Committee to Enhance the Role of Women In Society, known as CERWIS; in 1980, he named a woman to the Council of Imams, which managed his organization. A study of the experiences of women in his organization, published in 2014, concluded that women “readily describe the period of Imam Mohammed’s leadership favorably, evoking terms of liberation.” It quoted a woman named Shafeeqah Abdullah saying, “To use our own minds, to make decisions. It was true freedom.”

As noted, his views would not have met with approval of mainstream Western feminists. In 1990, he praised gender norms in Saudi Arabia with more enthusiasm than one might have expected. A Muslim Journal about his recent trip to the kingdom included praise – by him and the reporter -- for Saudi rules restricting women’s mobility.

We were happy to learn that the women of this Muslim nation lived in an honorable manner. No woman has to fight traffic jams and the many inconveniences of driving in the Kingdom (a luxury that is reserved only for the rich and famous women in America). Women also have their own banks, shopping centers and hospitals that are completely staffed and run by women. And most important, no women are seen immodestly dressed in public.

Imam Mohammed, commenting on the honorable state of women in Saudi Arabia, said, “This is the way it should be. Our women shouldn’t have to meet strange men out in public. We shouldn’t even have our women answer the door at our homes to strange men. If the man isn’t there, the person should come back later. But I think we’re doing alright with the treatment of women in our community. We even have a sister [Ayesha Mustafaa] as the Editor of our [Muslim Journal] newspaper.”

Against his record of more progressive statements, these ruminations seemed out of place, appearing to praise Saudi prohibitions on women driving and walking in public alone, and restrictions on gender-mixing. These laws are widely viewed as Saudi cultural traditions rather than purely Islamic ones, the type of traditions Wallace Mohammed would never seek for

54 Gibson and Karim, Women of the Nation, 103-104.
55 Gibson and Karim, Women of the Nation, 86.
Muslim-Americans. But, as we shall see later, on this trip he was trying to engineer a Saudi donation for his school system, and he was probably attempting to flatter his hosts.

**Conflict with Immigrant Muslims**

During this period, the MWL was also offering scholarships to African-Americans – both inside and outside Wallace Mohammed’s organization – who wanted to pursue degree programs at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, including the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) and King Saud University in Riyadh. The Saudis had founded the IUM in 1961 to teach Islamic Studies to foreigners, and in fact had offered twelve scholarships to Malcolm X’s organizations – the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the Organization for Afro-American Unity -- after he left the Nation of Islam in 1964. (It is worth noting that African American Muslims also studied at Islamic universities in other countries; for example, in 1977 the MWL included a member of Wallace Mohammed’s organization among five recipients of scholarships to University Umm Dumran in Sudan.\(^57\) And, as noted, Anwar Sadat of Egypt had previously offered scholarships to a dozen WCIW members, to al-Azhar University in Cairo, when he met with Wallace Mohammed in 1975.\(^58\))

In years and decades to come, the hundreds of Saudi scholarships that were given to African-Americans – most of them from outside Wallace Mohammed’s organization -- would help alter the practice of Islam by segments of African-American Muslims, especially a small but influential segment of African-American Muslims known as Salafis, who are discussed at length in Chapter Five. Yet even during the late 1970s and 1980s, the specter of African-Americans leaving the United States to study Islam overseas spurred efforts by Wallace Mohammed to

\(^{58}\) Marsh, *From Black Muslims to*, 96-97.
create institutions of Islamic learning in the United States. He wanted his organization to spearhead a domestic, intellectual Islamic movement that would prevent American Muslims from believing the best options for Islamic education were abroad. In 1977, an advertisement in the *Bilalian News* asked for volunteers for a proposed new *Journal of Bilalian Scholarship*, which would strive to “re-define the knowledge base of the society.” Wallace Mohammed in the early 1980s spoke of plans to formulate a *madhhab*, or Islamic school of thought, in the United States that would hold its own among the more established historic ones in the Muslim-majority world. And he worked to found a college whose primary goal would be training Muslim teachers for the movement’s “Clara Mohammed” school system. The “American Muslim Teacher’s College,” as it would be called, would also ground potential imams in religious education. In 1979, the Illinois Board of Higher Education approved the movement’s request to operate the college, planned for Chicago. The new college would “allow our schools to continue to thrive and to deliver an understanding of Islam that we felt was healthy,” recalled Clyde el-Amin, the movement’s Director of Education in the late 1970s. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had already donated money to build a library for the school, and Wallace Mohammed’s movement assumed more foreign money would help with the rest.

This effort to establish religious authority would not end well for the movement. A small organization of immigrant Muslims, backed by foreign money, submitted its own plan to the Illinois Board of Higher Education for the same kind of school, called the “American Islamic College.” Major donors included a Mecca-based group, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which consisted of foreign ministers of more than fifty Muslim countries, giving

61 Author’s interview with Clyde el-Amin, in Chicago, Illinois, June 10, 2014.
this venture more foreign support than Wallace Mohammed’s organization could gather. Plans for Wallace Mohammed’s teachers’ college stalled, while the immigrant-run American Islamic College opened in 1981 as a four-year institution offering a Bachelor’s degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies.62

This was just one way that, from Wallace Mohammed’s perspective, immigrant Muslims were constantly challenging his authority as a Muslim leader in the United States. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, officials in Wallace Mohammed’s movement were taken aback by several criticisms. Foreign and immigrant Muslims had challenged his use of his title “chief imam” and the organization’s use of the term “Bilalians” to describe members. (The term referred to Bilal, a valued companion of the prophet Muhammad who had been an African slave.) The tone of this “guidance” clearly upset Wallace Mohammed and his followers, who found it condescending, though they agreed to stop using the terms. In the following quotation, from 1982, Wallace Mohammed likened Muslims from abroad – “so-called Muslims,” he called them – to aspiring slave masters. He included Jews and Christians in his criticism, but clearly it was directed mostly at immigrant Muslims:

Open your eyes, brothers and sisters, and see that we got people on this earth today that greet us like they’re holy holies, in the church, in the synagogue, in the mosque, ... and their only intention is to keep you ignorant, keep you from coming into the knowledge that Allah gave for all of us. That’s their only intention... Let me repeat. They are Jews, they are Christians, and they are so-called Muslims. When they come among us, they don’t want to do nothing but give us the impressionable stuff that will give us an emotional attachment to faith. Just an emotional attachment to faith. They never want us to have the rational attachment. They never want us to see the real knowledge, because they fear that if we see that, we won’t have any use for them! That wasn’t the way of prophet Muhammad! What do they want, a camp of slaves? A society of new children? That they

can lord over as fathers and mothers? Is that what they want out of us? Get the hell out our society if that’s what you want of us! (cheering) You’ll never get that. You’ll never get that. Slave masters are finished for us.

…We gonna string some of you shaykhs upside down and chop them up in a billion pieces one of these days. I’m talking about those who come up among us hypocritically pretending to be good Muslims. And they have no intention but to charm us into following them blindly. And once we do that, they want to exploit us.63

Underlying much of the concern over autonomy was the sense by many African-American Muslims that Saudis and other Arabs respected them neither intellectually nor as religious equals, and that race played a factor in this condescension. Several of the African-American Muslims who I interviewed spoke of a “last straw” in the relationship, each of them citing a different incident that supposedly led Wallace Mohammed in the mid-to-late-1980s or early 1990s to distance the movement from the Saudis and the Muslim World League. Wallace Mohammed Jr., the leader’s son, and Alfred Muhammad, a member of the Council of Imams in the late 1970s, both cited an incident in which Saudi officials referred to Wallace Mohammed and his imams as “our little brothers.”64 Muhammad Siddeeq, an Indianapolis imam and an adviser to Wallace Mohammed, cited a different incident when a Saudi official, while chiding Wallace Mohammed for something, referred to him as “one of our sons.”65 And Plemon el-Amin, an Atlanta imam and adviser to Wallace Mohammed, recalled an evening in the 1980s when several of the movement’s imams were invited to a banquet at the Saudi embassy and were told to dress formally. They rented tuxedos and were the only attendees so clad. To their dismay, other attendees mistook them for servers and asked them for drinks!66 Imam Abdul Karim Hasan,


64 Author’s interview with Wallace Mohammed Jr., Chicago, June 2014, and author’s interview with Alfred Mohammed, New York, New York, February 17, 2013.

65 Author’s interview with Muhammad Siddeeq, telephone, January 28, 2015

66 Author’s interview with Plemon el-Amin, Atlanta, Georgia, September 19, 2014.
the longtime Los Angeles imam, recalled an incident in the early 1990s in the Saudi embassy after Saudi officials learned that Wallace Mohammed secured an upcoming meeting with President Bill Clinton. The Saudis invited Wallace Mohammed to their embassy in Washington D.C. and proceeded to instruct him on what to tell the president. Every time Wallace Mohammed interjected, he was cut off. Hasan recounted, from Wallace Mohammed’s retelling of the event:

“When they finished, he asked them, he said, ‘Are you finished?’ They said ‘Yes, we’re through.’ And he got up and walked out… He was an American. So why should he sit there and listen to someone try to tell him, who was not an American, what he should say to his president?”

It is difficult to know which, if any, of these incidents proved most pivotal toward the souring of a relationship that had never lacked for tension. They probably had cumulative effects. Collectively, the anecdotes suggest that the relationship suffered from what is charitably called a blindness toward African-American sensitivities regarding language, and interactions that were viewed as disrespectful and emasculating given the history of racism in the United States and, for that matter, in the Arab world; slavery was legal in Saudi Arabia until 1962, and when it had been more common across the Muslim world, it was slaves from Africa rather than elsewhere who tended to live under the worst circumstances. Most of the African-American Muslims who I interviewed from Wallace Mohammed’s movement said they believed that most of the immigrant or foreign Muslims with whom they interacted, even after 1975, did not view them as religious equals.

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67 Author’s interview with Abdul Karim Hasan, Los Angeles, California, May 12, 2015.
68 While historians such as Ehud Toledano stress that all forms of slavery are abhorrent and degrading, African slaves in the Ottoman Empire were more likely to wind up as domestic workers or in military service than were Circassian slaves from the North Caucasus, many of whom eventually became government officials of high rank. Ehud Toledano, As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
One incident that seemed to demonstrate that was a 1978 visit by Saudi King Khaled to a Cleveland mosque affiliated with Wallace Mohammed, where he tried to ingratiate himself with his hosts by telling them, “I was raised by an African woman.” King Khaled’s mother was not of African descent; she was from the Arab tribe of al-Jiwali in the Arabian Peninsula; the king, then, was likely referring to a different woman who was a servant or slave. The comment seems to have caused no problems at the time; the newspaper for Wallace Mohammed’s movement’s even highlighted it above the headline of a positive article about the visit. Yet in retrospect, it can be seen as an illustration of the inferiority with which Saudi leaders imagined African-Americans; the Saudi king, in describing his emotional connection with his black hosts, is framing his relationship to them through a reference to a loyal servant or slave from his childhood.

Saudi discourse on non-Muslims, perceived to be overly negative, was another recurrent issue among African-American Muslims, many of whose relatives were Christian. One instance of this involved the Saudis’ distribution of free Qur’ans. Sometime in the 1980s, Wallace Mohammed and his imams received and rejected Saudi gifts of a controversial English translation of Islam’s holiest book. The version, titled the *Noble Qur’an in the English Language*, is the most widely distributed Qur’an in “Islamic bookstores and Sunni mosques in the English-speaking world,” but it has been criticized by some Westerners, including Muslims, as overtly and unnecessarily anti-Christian and anti-Semitic, due to its commentary and method of translation. (More often, the Qur’ans distributed by Saudi-financed entities had lacked that controversial language.) As Plemon el-Amin, the Atlanta imam, recalled, “They sent us this

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71 Yuskaev, “The Qur'an Comes to America: Pedagogies of Muslim Collective Memory.”
huge shipment of Qur’ans that had this terrible translation of the al-Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Qur’an, that said, ‘show me the straight way… not of those [on] who your wrath has come down – such as the Jews — nor those who go astray – such as the Christians.’ They sent us a hundred thousand of those.” 

A noteworthy moment of public discord occurred in 1988, when Wallace Mohammed publicly used the word “heretic” to criticize a spokesman for the Saudi-funded, Mecca-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Like the Muslim World League, WAMY is involved in propagating Islam around the world. In 1988, Wallace Mohammed objected to the assertion in print by the WAMY secretary-general that no religion other than Islam will be accepted by Allah.

We are given a cruel WAMY. In a recent publication which attempts to highlight today’s concerns for Muslims, a spokesman for the Saudi-based “World Association of Muslim Youth” appears to want to alarm both Muslims and non-Muslims with his seemingly HERETIC assertion on Allah’s proclamation in His Majestic Book, the Qur’an, stating, ‘the religion of Allah is Al-Islam,” and further, “should anyone choose a religion other than Al-Islam, it will not be accepted from him in the Judgment.” …

This ‘suspect of heresy’ claims to induce and to establish from the Proclamation of the Most High Lord a belief which labels non-Muslims as ‘kaafir,’ which is to say “rejectors of faith.” With this article, this WAMY spokesman targets Christians and Jews for death under Islamic or Quranic authority, unless they – while facing the execution in the final moments of their life – the non-Muslim recants or retracts the statement of his belief and profess[es] our Islamic creed.

The perceived offense was hardly new to the movement; as noted, some of the Saudi-trained shaykhs working in Wallace Mohammed’s mosques regularly used the word kufar to refer to

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72 The actual translation in this version of the Qur’an is, “The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger (such as the Jews), nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians).” In the original Arabic, the verse does not explicitly mention the words “Jews” or “Christians.” Other English versions do not explicitly mention them, though much of the traditional Sunni commentary has said that these verses do refer to Jews and Christians.


74 Imam W. Deen Muhammad, “Respect for Concerns of All People Jeopardized by Muslim Heretic.”
followers’ non-Muslim relatives. But WAMY was a widely known international organization, and its prominence gave weight to public statements of its officials. “I’ve never seen the imam so angry,” Bilal said of Wallace Mohammed. “He was talking about how anybody reading that would immediately think, ‘Okay, this is an official Islamic position that all Muslims throughout the world including our Negroes here in America take,’ just more cannon fodder for right-wingers to say we hate Christians.”

It appears to have been the only time Wallace Mohammed was openly critical of a prominent member of a major Saudi-funded organization.

Internal tensions

Contributing to the tension was Wallace Mohammed’s troubled, tension-filled relationship with his own imams, as a group, throughout his thirty-three years of leadership. This relationship has never been explored in a scholarly (or non-scholarly) work, perhaps because it is unrelated to broad trends in scholarly analysis of Islam among African-Americans and can seem, at first glance, inconsequential. But it is at least tangentially related to the movement’s relationship with Saudi religious leaders and institutions, as well as with immigrant Muslims from other countries. The potential (and reality) of his ministers receiving Saudi money loomed, to him, as a threat to his organization’s integrity as a Muslim-American movement.

A spate of Muslim Journal articles through the years, and data from my own interviews with contemporary leaders in the movement, revealed there were two main, persistent sources of conflict between Wallace Mohammed and his imams. Many, if not most, of the imams in the movement were unwilling to follow Wallace Mohammed’s religious direction as closely as he wanted them to, either from concern he was abandoning his father’s beliefs too quickly or from

75 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, July 5, 2016.
concern he wasn’t moving toward Sunni Islam quickly or comprehensively enough. Secondly, the financial reforms he imposed significantly reduced his ministers’ salaries from their levels under his father. This spurred both bitterness and a frequent habit of individual imams to personally solicit the Saudi embassy for money.  

Agieb Bilal, who in 1985 left his job as a top assistant for Wallace Mohamed to accept a full-time position in the Saudi embassy, said it was common for individual imams in the movement to arrive at the Saudi embassy in Washington D.C. seeking handouts – presumably for their own mosques. “They [Saudi embassy officials] would say, ‘Bilal! You know an Imam So-and-So?’ I’d say, ‘Yeah.’ They’d say, ‘He said Imam Mohammed sent them to get money!’ I’d say, ‘All of them were lying, and if you can help him in his individual city, Alhamdulillah, give him some help, he might need some money.’” Alfred Mohammed, an imam in Baltimore for a mosque associated with Wallace Mohammed, recalled visiting the Saudi embassy when he himself needed $3,000 to pay bills. When he requested that amount, the Saudi official expressed surprise the number wasn’t higher, a sign that other imams in the movement were requesting more, he said. This was a common enough practice to merit skeptical notice from the Council of Imams, which issued a memorandum on November 13, 1979, seeking to limit such requests. In item 1C, titled “Overseas Fund Raising,” the council wrote: “Soliciting funds overseas should be done only with the consent of the Council. Accepting funds for the Masjid is okay, however, the Council needs to look at [who’s] benefiting from such funds or gifts.”

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77 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, March 20, 2015.
78 Author’s interview with Alfred Mohammed, New York, New York, May 20, 2014.
Soon thereafter, when interviewer Tony Brown cited an *A.M. Journal* article on Wallace Mohammed’s reluctance to accept foreign money for his organization and mosques, the leader expressed concern that ill-advised relationships would form and threaten his organization’s integrity. “If we encourage that, we’re gonna have people who look perhaps or aspire to that position of imam so they can go overseas and maybe think that they’re gonna get rich … when they meet the Arab oil people, their Muslim brothers over there.”80

He noted that he himself would gladly accept foreign money to invest it in poor communities. “Saudi Arabia, for example, donates very, very big sums to relieve misery in the world among… poor people, so I have expressed desire to see that kind of help come. But I’ve done it openly and I haven’t done it on my own. I’ve also made a point of telling my people that when we do this, we must be aware of the need to protect our interests in this country as Americans.”81

While Wallace Mohammed maintained a large core of devoted followers throughout his leadership, his overall relationship with the imams who oversaw the one hundred twenty-five mosques associated with the movement never lacked for significant problems. Close readings of his newspaper and interviews with movement leaders indicate ongoing concern from the leader that too few of his imams supported his religious direction or his community programs. Having moved away from his father’s beliefs without falling squarely into the camps of Sunni Muslims from abroad, he appears to have landed where few of his imams felt comfortable. This appears to be why, over the years, he “resigned” multiple times as leader of his organization, only to retake the reins soon thereafter; he was effectively telling his imams to either follow him as he wanted to be followed, or leave and build their own audience. During one such break in 1983, in which

81 Ibid.
he “severed his association with local masajid [mosques] and their operations,” as the *A.M. Journal’s* editor wrote, Wallace Mohammed was quoted by the newspaper saying that “Most of them (Imams) are embarrassing the image of this community. So what do we need with them? Are they helping us carry out our responsibility? No! They’re just looking for an opportunity to make some money on my name. That’s all their doing. That’s the truth!”

He even accused some imams of refusing to sell the movement’s newspaper at their mosques, “because they don’t want the people to hear anything except what comes from their own mouths.” Most devastatingly, he said, “I can’t hardly think of one [imam] that I feel comfortable with. It’s hard for me to think of a single Imam that I feel comfortable with. That’s a shame! That’s really pitiful! If I think real hard and search for about 15 minutes, I might find a few – but it’s hard to find them. Believe me, they’re not helping us at all!”

During this period the newspaper often published entire letters from imams around the country explicitly pledging their support for Wallace Mohammed’s leadership, part of an apparent effort to rally his imams around him.

**Visits in the 1990s**

Despite the wariness toward and frustration with Saudi religious leaders and institutions, Wallace Mohammed’s movement did not completely sever ties with them. Even during the 1980s, the movement’s newspaper published advertisements seeking people to study abroad at the University of Medina. “NOTICE TO STUDENTS WHO WISH TO STUDY IN SAUDI ARABIA,” read the front-page note – part of the “Inside this issue” sidebar -- in the January 11, 1985, edition of the weekly *Muslim Journal*.

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84 “Inside This Issue,” *Muslim Journal*, January 11, 1985, 1.
bold type instructed them to “READ. Opportunity has been given to us from Saudi Arabia to select a number of students for further education in Islamic studies, and the sciences – General courses, Islam and Arabic will also be included.”85

The advertisement, which ran three times over the course of a month, urged high school graduates to send applications to Wallace Mohammad’s office in Chicago. People without high school degrees also could apply, as long as they explained their circumstances. “Do it now!!!” the advertisement ended. One week later, the advertisement resurfaced in tandem with a short article saying that a professor from the Saudi Islamic University of Muhammad bin Saud would soon be processing applications with Wallace Mohammed.86 The prospect of studying Islam in Saudi Arabia had been raised often enough in African American Muslim circles that in May 1985, Wallace Mohammed’s newspaper published an article about Arabic language classes being offered in Chicago that would benefit “those who are interested in studying in Saudi Arabia.”87

Among the reasons he maintained the relationship with the kingdom was his appointment in 1984 to the Supreme Council of Mosques, a prestigious committee of the Muslim World League with thirty-five members worldwide. He did not devote much time to the position; from 1982 to 1989 he apparently never traveled to Saudi Arabia, where the council’s meetings were held. But in February 1990, in the first of four trips he would make to the kingdom over a two-year period, he attended a Supreme Council meeting. In an interview with the Muslim Journal after this trip, the leader offered nothing but praise when asked his opinion of Saudi oversight of the “holy precincts” of Mecca and Medina. “I do not think we could have any better persons than the members of the Saudi Arabian Kingdom and of its ruling family there in Saudi Arabia,” he said. “Right now, I do not know of any better persons in the international world for that

86 “Applications to be Reviewed,” Muslim Journal, January 18, 1985, 3.
87 “AIC offers courses in Arabic and Islamic Studies,” Muslim Journal, May 10, 1985, 10.
When asked if he favored stronger links between the United States and Saudi Arabia, he responded, “Yes, I do. I encourage Muslims of America to look to Saudi Arabia first. We should because the Holy Precincts are there, and we should look there for our Islamic contacts.” While his words seem diplomatic in nature, if taken at face value it would be a remarkable statement appearing to counter what Wallace Mohammed had said for the previous decade and a half about the location of religious authority for Muslim-Americans.

Upon his return to the United States, and before his next trip to the kingdom, Wallace Mohammed gave a speech in Phoenix to his followers that revealed another element of the financial relationship. In discussing how donations of his followers helped him pay his bills, Wallace Mohammed mentioned that he had purchased a home with assistance of Saudis from whom he had sought a loan.

The purchase of my home was provided for by good Saudi Arabian friends. I went to them and asked for a loan, which I was going to pay back with your money, as I received it in my pay. But they (our Saudi Brothers and friends) told me, “Brother Imam, you are our Imam also. We are supposed to give [you] a home. You cannot pay back this money to us.” So they provided the home, and you keep the lights on. The lights, the phone, the gas, the water stays on and has never been cut off, because your support is always coming to those needs. (bolded in original)90

The following month, March 1990, he traveled to Saudi Arabia again, this time in hopes of receiving donations for his organization’s school system, named after his mother, Clara Muhammad. The Saudi embassy to the United States paid for this trip, not just for Wallace Mohammed but for a delegation of sixteen of his imams and education specialists. The movement’s newspaper publicized how their group was treated with high official honors

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89 Ibid.
90 “How we are to establish Muslim life in America,” Muslim Journal, March 9, 1990, 25.
including an official motorcade, flights on Saudi military planes across the peninsula, and meetings with high-ranking members of the royal family and religious leaders.\footnote{Sabir Kasib Muhammad, “Muslim American Delegation’s tour of the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia,” \textit{Muslim Journal}, April 27, 1990, 1; Sabir Kasib Muhammad, “Imam W. Deen Mohammed’s Work Recognized in Saudi Arabia,” \textit{Muslim Journal}, April 18, 1990, 1; Sabir Kasib Muhammad, “The Second Journey of a Lifetime…,” \textit{Muslim Journal}, April 13, 1990, 7.}

Yet in keeping with the long-term rhythms of the organization’s relationship with the Saudis, the second trip would end in a frustrating manner. Saudi donors declined to offer substantial donations upon learning that the Clara Muhammad schools lacked official
Figure 1. The organization’s newspaper published photographs demonstrating the close proximity of Wallace Mohammed to Saudi leaders. Photos by Sabir Kasib Muhammad, *Muslim Journal*, April 12, 1990, 7. Source: Research and Reference Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
accreditation. (This would spur an accreditation effort that became successful in 2000.92) The only donation made was $50,000 from Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, who accompanied the delegation on the trip.

Coverage in the *Muslim Journal*, however, portrayed a positive trip during which the delegation received “royal treatment,” ignoring the disappointment over donations. The extended, detailed coverage merits special attention here because it reflects the nature of the identity crisis that clearly continued to affect the organization fifteen years after Wallace Mohammed became leader. In the weeks following the trip, the newspaper published a spate of articles with elaborate detail about the delegation’s activities, not only on the Saudi motorcades, flights, and fancy meals that were provided, but also on public Saudi praise for the movement. It noted that Saudi television had cited Wallace Mohammed as “the leader of the Muslims in America.”93 Other coverage noted he had been awarded “the highest status of any American ever visiting the Kingdom,” with full state honors, and that Saudi media ran “daily features on Saudi television, radio and newspapers” about him.94 One article quoted a Saudi official suggesting the kingdom should give Wallace Mohammed more money.95 Meanwhile, photo montages portrayed Wallace Mohammed in close proximity to Saudis of prominent rank, including future King Abdallah and the Shaykh Bin Biz.96

92 Author’s interview with Agieb Bilal, telephone, March 20, 2014.
95 The dean of the College of Education at King Saud University in Riyadh appeared to say that Saudi officials had erred in previous years by not giving more money to Wallace Mohammed’s organization.
The coverage seems to have had three audiences in mind. The most important one consisted of Wallace Mohammed’s followers, who took pride in their leader’s acceptance abroad as an important dignitary on the Muslim world stage. A second audience consisted of immigrant Muslim leaders in the United States, who knew Wallace Mohammed and would be impressed at his reception by the royal family. Last but not least, a third audience consisted of officials at the Saudi embassy (and other embassies of Muslim-majority countries), who would see Wallace Mohammed’s enthusiasm for Saudi leaders and might prove more likely to coordinate larger donations.

Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the ensuing Persian Gulf War led to two more trips, which received similar coverage in the Muslim Journal. Like other Muslim-American groups, Wallace Mohammed’s would face the challenge of deciding whether to support Saudi decisions that proved extremely controversial in the Muslim world – the decisions to ask for American military assistance and to allow establishment of a new U.S. air base in the country. The kingdom, which shares borders with both Iraq and Kuwait, had seen Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait as a direct threat to its own security. Yet many Muslim organizations voiced displeasure with a Western military presence in the Arabian Peninsula, specifically over the imagined proximity of U.S. troops to Islam’s holiest cities.

Wallace Mohammed sided with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and against Saddam Hussein, a secular Arab socialist with claims against regional monarchies. On September 14, the Muslim Journal reprinted a statement condemning the invasion by future grand mufti Shakyh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bin Baz, then the Director General of the important Department of Research, Fatwa, Da’wa and Religious Guidance for the kingdom. The statement carried the loaded
headline, “The Islamic standpoint on Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait,”\textsuperscript{97} publicly granting “Islamic” status to the official Saudi view. On the front page of the same issue, thirteen imams in Wallace Mohammed’s community published a statement condemning the Iraqi invasion and backing “the decision of the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques to invite the multinational force for the defense of Saudi Arabia and the sovereignty of the countries in that region,” adding that “as indigenous American Muslims, we commend our government for honoring the friendship with Saudi Arabia and protecting our collective interests with speed, decisiveness, and diplomacy.” The headline reflected Wallace Mohammed’s concern with projecting leadership across racial and ethnic boundaries: “Taking a Stand, ‘Crisis in the Middle East,’” it read. “Statement of Position by Imams of the American Muslim Community Who identify with and support the Leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed who is regarded as the leader for Muslims in America.”\textsuperscript{98} The newspaper also printed, in full, a statement by the Saudi embassy explaining and defending its decision to allow Western troops to Saudi Arabia for a “strictly defensive and temporary” objective, showing awareness of concerns that the American military presence would outlast the war.\textsuperscript{99}

The newspaper also covered a September 1990 trip to Mecca by Wallace Mohammed and several of his followers to attend an MWL-sponsored conference related to the war. One article printed Wallace Mohammed’s response to critical questions at a press conference in New York, before leaving for the trip, on the use of non-Muslims to protect Islam’s holiest sites. “We must make decisions,” he said. “Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used non-Muslims even from among the idolaters to protect his emerging community. So there is precedent for the government’s

\textsuperscript{97} “The Islamic standpoint on Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait,” \textit{Muslim Journal}, September 14, 1990, 2.
\textsuperscript{98} “Taking a Stand, Crisis in the Middle East: Statement of Position by Imams of the American Muslim Community Who identify with and support the Leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed who is regarded as the leader for Muslims in America,” \textit{Muslim Journal}, September 14, 1990, 1
actions.” When asked if the United States had pressured the Saudi government to allow U.S. troops there, he defended the arrangement: “U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia is temporary by a pre-arranged agreement… No, the papers were not signed by the Saudi Government under duress from President Bush. The military threat required intelligent decisive action on their part.”100

Once in Saudi Arabia, he said he believed that President Bush had “great respect” for Islam and other religions. And in a statement of support to the embattled royal family, he also downplayed the widespread concerns of others that the U.S. presence on Arabian soil was disrespectful to Islamic concerns, noting that the troop presence was far from the holy sites.

Also I am told that many Muslims are believing that the military of the United States… is occupying the Sacred Places. This not true. We arrived in Jeddah and I haven’t seen the military yet. We are now in Mecca. I have not seen the military. If I wasn’t informed before, I wouldn’t even know that there was any threatening situation or the presence of a massive build-up of ammunition and troops to defend Saudi Arabia against any aggression… This build-up is at least a thousand miles away from the Haramain (the two holy places). We should be informed of that and seek the truth, when we don’t know the truth.101

Yet all this praise did not result in significant financial support. In an interview printed in the November 30, 1990, edition of the Muslim Journal, Wallace Mohammed addressed the matter directly to a questioner from Africa.

Q: How are you financed? For example do you get Saudi aid?

IWMD: Saudi Aid? Yes, I want Saudi aid. You can bring it here. I don’t have it. The Saudis help many people around the world, but we need much more help than we are getting.102

A fourth trip to Saudi Arabia, with a delegation of sixteen people in January 1991, was taken for two stated reasons: to show support for the kingdom and to meet with U.S. troops in

102 “Young African Leaders Tour the U.S.,” Muslim Journal, November 30, 1990, 15. The questioner was not a journalist but one of twenty-five adult participants in a program called “Young African Leaders.”
Saudi Arabia who had converted to Islam. After U.S. troops had received instruction from the military about Islam and on Saudi customs – “so that our soldiers would not inadvertently offend” people in the kingdom, recalled Chas Freeman, the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time - - a higher-than-expected number of troops had converted. According to Agieb Bilal, the State Department had contacted Wallace Mohammed before the trip and requested that he visit with these converts, in hope that the encounter could help sway them toward a “moderate” version of Islam rather than something more “radical.” Wallace Mohammed’s delegation never did talk with these troops, as the war began on the day they planned to meet with them. But his decision to go for this purpose reflected his willingness to be seen as a moderate Islamic alternative.

Aside from touring the kingdom from January 13, 1991, to January 21, 1991, and meeting with Saudi officials to show support for the kingdom’s position on the war, Wallace Mohammed publicly praised the Saudis to reporters there. In an interview with CNN in Riyadh, in which he was asked whether he was visiting the kingdom “as Muslim or as American or as Muslim-American,” he reflected broadly on some of the identity issues faced by Muslim-Americans, and on perceptions of Islamic law.

I have wrestled with my soul and my thinking for a long time… I feel very comfortable being American and being Muslim and I feel that I am a great moral friend of Saudi Arabia. There are hypocrites everywhere, but I have come to know members of the Saudi royal family personally and they are sincere. They are not hypocrites…

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103 Author’s interview with Chas Freeman, telephone, October 9, 2014.
104 Articles in the Muslim Journal mention that one purpose of the trip was to visit U.S. troops who had recently converted to Islam (for example, “Muslim-American delegates meet with Saudi Leaders,” Muslim Journal, February 15, 1991, 7), but they include no mention of related contact with the U.S. State Department. In an interview with Chas Freeman, U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time, that I conducted on October 9, 2014, he said that while embassy officials had been aware of the converts, he did not recall anyone proactively contacting Wallace Mohammed. Embassy documents from that time period have not yet been declassified for scholarly inquiry.
105 Author’s interview with Plemon el-Amin, Atlanta, Georgia, September 19, 2014.
106 “CNN interviews Imam W. Deen Mohammed,” Muslim Journal, February 8, 1991, 7
His support for U.S. involvement and the related Saudi position on it did not go unnoticed by American military brass. On February 5, 1992, about a year after Operation Desert Storm and one day before Wallace Mohammed would make history as the first Muslim to pray before a session of the U.S. Senate, the imam was honored with a special lunch at the Pentagon. The Pentagon’s chief chaplain praised Wallace Mohammed’s “loyal and unswerving religious leadership in support of our nation during the difficult times of the Gulf War. That’s no small thing. As you know in times of crisis it’s very important to have leadership that understands all of the difficulties of those times, and he is one of those leaders…” The Pentagon gave him two plaques, one with a drawing of the Pentagon building and one citing “his leadership to the Muslims in the military by strengthening our unity, improving our morale, our camaraderie and appreciation.”

Wallace Mohammed called the invitation “a great honor” and said he was “overwhelmed. I’m like floating in the air. I never dreamed that we would receive such an invitation.” When he completed his short speech about the basic tenets of Islam, a questioner asked him if he had had a “crisis of conscience” over his support for the war. “I had no conflict of conscience at all,” he responded. “I didn’t rush into any decision. I thought it out very carefully.” He said “all Muslims should have denounced [Saddam Hussein], throughout the world” and should have “saluted America for helping… people who are Muslim against one who is very strong and perhaps would have just walked over everybody there.” Raising the specter of Saddam Hussein conquering the Islam’s “holy precincts” of Mecca and Medina, he noted that while he himself had refused to be drafted while in the Nation of Islam in the late 1950s, he was now thankful for

the U.S. military. “I thank the army… I told my sons I’d be proud if my sons were in the military.”

**Conclusion**

Sometime around 1997, according to Wallace Mohammed’s telling in a television interview five years later, a wealthy Saudi approached him and urged his group to view the kingdom’s religious leaders as father figures and to accept their religious guidance. “This person came to me,” Wallace Mohammed recalled in 2002, “and impressed me with this idea, that ‘you need to have us as … your father’ … and left me with the impression that I was not to differ with them.”

Wallace Mohammed emphasized in the interview – conducted shortly after 9/11 -- that he did not view Saudi leadership as “extremist,” but that, had he accepted the proposed relationship, his followers “would have gotten a man for their leader [himself] who would not have been their leader. Their leader would’ve been whoever was dictating thoughts, opinions, thinking and policy to me, to them through me.” His fear of being a “conduit” for Wahhabism was not that he viewed it as “fundamentalist,” which he said he did not, but that “it was ritualistic. They would’ve had a more ritualist life… rather than a rational life… They would’ve simply been following the rituals of prayer, the rituals of hajj, etcetera, but not being free thinkers.” His followers, he added, “would have no place in America.”

This is a land of the free… They would have been monsters and dummies walking around in America, zombies… In America, if you’re not thinking on your own and somebody else is dictating your life and your thinking in everything, you’re not human.

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108 Ibid.
The interviewer asked Wallace Mohammed if his decision to reject the wealthy Saudi’s offer effectively prevented the emergence of a “fifth column of black people in the United States who now would be ready to act against their own country.” Wallace Mohammed responded in the affirmative. “Certainly,” he said. “Yes. Because most of the madhhab or schools as presented by [Islamic] leaders of this time, they do not tend to welcome thinkers who embrace the ideas, the great ideas of this nation, or the western world. If we… accept[ed] that way of thinking, I doubt if our followers would be patriotic in any degree.”

Over two decades, from 1975 to the mid-1990s, the largest African-American Muslim organization nurtured relationships with Saudi religious leaders and institutions that brought Saudi-financed religious guidance to African-American Muslims but failed in its ongoing efforts to draw significant cash donations rather than just services in kind from the oil-producing kingdom. Wallace Mohammed’s desire to move the Nation of Islam and its successor organizations toward the American mainstream and away from an instinctive opposition to U.S. foreign policy apparently complicated his relationships with Muslim leaders from foreign countries who tried to influence his own group’s political agenda involving the Muslim world. In addition, Wallace Mohammed always remained wary of sacrificing autonomy to Muslims from abroad and feared that accepting their money might pressure him to concede to their exertions of authority.

In his thirty-three years of leadership, Wallace Mohammed managed his organization’s relationship with the Saudis within the scope of his own often-conflicting religious and political agendas. Foremost, he sought guidance in educating his followers as the organization moved toward conventional Sunni Islamic norms on divinity, prophets, race and the afterlife. He pursued respect for his group internationally. Yet he did everything he could to guard African-

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110 Ibid.
American autonomy as interpreters of Islamic law, displaying strong reluctance to sacrifice this to Muslims from overseas. In addition, he pushed his followers to immerse themselves in Sunni religious practices more than they had previously, while simultaneously pushing them to participate in American society. Concerns related to the Black Freedom movement never disappeared from his rhetoric, yet he also clearly wanted to demonstrate that he was not instinctively opposed to U.S. government activity as his father had been, and that he cared about aligning with U.S. stances relating to the Cold War and subsequent exercises of overseas American power.
Chapter Four:
The Muslim World League in a “Muslim-Minority” Land

African-American Muslims were far from the only Muslim-American group targeted by the Saudi kingdom’s efforts to influence Sunni Islamic practices. This chapter explores and contextualizes the proselytization efforts of a Saudi-financed agency, the Muslim World League (MWL), in a so-called “Muslim-minority” country, the United States. I argue that the MWL’s interaction with Muslim-Americans from 1975 to 1985 was typical of its efforts in similar Muslim-minority regions in the West, where Muslim communities had a minimal communal presence prior to the 20th century and still constitute small minorities of national populations. I demonstrate that the MWL directed its proselytization in the United States to people who were already Muslims, rather than trying to convert non-Muslims to Islam. After explaining how the history of Islam in the United States positioned Muslim-Americans to benefit from MWL activities in the 1970s, I discuss the MWL’s priorities and activities in the United States and
explain how Muslim organizations indigenous to North America would arise to supplant many of its roles.

The Saudi kingdom created the MWL in 1962, tasking it with the pan-Islamic mission to organize and bolster Muslim communities in Muslim-majority and -minority countries alike, on every inhabitable continent. The MWL was based in Mecca but its continental and national branches teamed with Saudi embassies around the world to help build mosques, finance religious leaders’ salaries, donate religious literature, and distribute scholarships for extensive study at Islamic universities in the kingdom. In the United States, the MWL would simultaneously build relationships with both immigrant Muslims and African-American ones, the latter group constituting the largest single ethnic group of Muslims in the United States.

Far from the imagined center of the Muslim world, most Muslim communities in the United States in the early 20th century had developed with little direct guidance or financial help from entities based abroad. This would change in the century’s latter decades, when the mixture of increased immigration, intercontinental air travel, improvements to telecommunications, the rise of nationalism and Islamic Revivalism in the Muslim world, and, not least of all, the skyrocketing of Saudi oil revenues in the 1970s,1 resulted in larger Muslim populations in the West and increasing capabilities of Muslim-majority countries to help them prosper. Western Muslim populations could be reached more easily than before by newly arisen missionary efforts from the Middle East, financed by oil revenues.

In addition, the increases in Western Muslim populations would spur a related reexamination of what it meant for Muslims to live as a religious minority governed by non-

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1 Saudi oil revenues then declined dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s.
Muslim rulers. Islamic jurists have long believed that the habitation of Muslims in “Muslim-minority lands,” where Islam is not the dominant religion, carries religious implications not just for the individual Muslims living there, but also for the worldwide Muslim community, which is supposed to provide assistance. The idea of “Muslim minorities” is a longstanding but fluid concept in Islamic discourse, one that has acquired a new dimension since Muslim immigration to the West began increasing exponentially in the mid-20th century.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s distinctly assertive program of international proselytization has also affected the relationship between the “Muslim World” and “Muslim minorities.” Islam had been crucial to the self-identity of the House of Saud since its forebears allied with the imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 1744, but in 1962 the kingdom actually made proselytization an official part of its mission, one segment of an effort to increase its stature in the Muslim world. What propelled the Saudis in these endeavors was not just the religious responsibility of proselytization but also, within the context of the “Arab Cold War,” an assertion of its own hegemony in the region. For this, it promoted a program of pan-Islamism, designed to counter the pan-Arab nationalism of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Saudi ruling family acted against the Egyptian state’s growing influence in the Muslim world in numerous ways, including the establishment of several institutions with pan-Islamic intent, chief

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5 Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.
6 The political scientist Thomas Hegghammer has written that Saudi pan-Islamism is an ironic development, given the Saudi ulama’s “historic hostility toward non-Wahhabi Muslims.” Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.
among them the Islamic University of Medina (1961) and the Muslim World League (1962). Higher oil revenues would allow each of these Saudi creations to intensify their activities in the 1970s; one estimate placed the amount spent on Saudi missionary activities at $70 billion.

The present review focuses on the MWL and its Saudi-financed efforts of the 1970s and 1980s to build and bolster Muslim-American communities in the United States. It builds on scholarship such as Larry Poston’s *Da‘wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (1992), which argued that during periods of Islamic revivalism around the world, Islamic reformist organizations have proselytized more to Muslims than to non-Muslims; indeed, during the post-1975 era of Islamic revivalism, the MWL followed this pattern in its work in the United States.

The main sources utilized in this chapter include the *Journal of the Muslim World League*, which was published in Mecca and distributed in English and Arabic editions to subscribers and what the publication’s management viewed as “important individuals, institutions, and official agencies throughout the world.” Published monthly, it was designed to help unify and coordinate Muslim communities worldwide on behalf of the MWL. Another periodical, the *World Muslim League Magazine*, was not an official MWL publication but received money from the MWL. Published in Singapore, it provided coverage of the earliest MWL meetings. Another source is a book written by M. Ali Kettani, who studied Muslim-minority populations for the Muslim World League in the 1970s. He also held the title of Special Adviser on Muslim Minorities, Secretariat-General, for the Organization of the Islamic Conference, another Saudi-

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10 Ibid.
financed organization.\textsuperscript{11} Other sources include a small trove of internal reports from the MWL’s North American office from the early 1980s, provided to me by the MWL official who wrote them, and a one-hundred-forty-seven-page booklet called the \textit{Proceedings of the First Islamic Conference of North America}, which includes speeches and resolutions from the MWL-sponsored event, along with background information.\textsuperscript{12} This chapter also benefits from interviews with two key officials of the MWL’s North American office during the 1970s and 1980s, Dawud Assad and Muzammil Siddiqi. (Some of the sources utilized here can be described as both primary and secondary sources; the journals and writings of people affiliated with the MWL, while recording the events of recent Muslim history, also evinced a distinct point of view on the relationship between Muslim-majority countries and Muslim-minority countries.)

It is important, first, to describe the MWL’s basic history, goals and international structure. The MWL was created in May 1962 at a meeting called the “General Islamic Conference” in Mecca, with the goal of uniting Muslims communities internationally. It was financed almost entirely by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Headquartered in Mecca, it would eventually open branches in thirty-six countries. It was managed by a twenty-one member Constituent Council and represented by a Secretary-General who would sit for five-year terms. The resolutions creating the MWL were pan-Islamic in tone and critical of Egyptian-style Arab nationalism, and while the MWL was international in composition, its leaders’ activities and rhetoric reflected the spirit of Saudi government positions during the Arab Cold War and afterward. In 1984, an article in its official journal used heroic terms for the House of Saud, describing them as saviors in Islamic history for having creating the MWL:

\textsuperscript{12} Few scholars have utilized this resource, which has been cited sparingly when mentioned at all. For example, see: Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Muslims in the United States,” in Marjorie Kelly, ed., \textit{Islam: The Religious and Political Life of a World Community} (Praeger Publishers: USA, 1984), 273.
After the end of the Khalifat, it may be recalled, there was no one who wanted to do something for the Muslims as One Ummah. As a result, the Muslims felt that they were not being taken care of. To fill this vacuum, the Kingdom, being the seat of the two Holy Harams, took the initiative and founded the League in order to serve the community in various countries.\textsuperscript{13}

By 1988, the MWL had five hundred and twenty employees around the world, including four hundred and nine in Saudi Arabia and one hundred and eleven in its offices abroad.\textsuperscript{14} In the mid-1980s, its annual budget was 130 million Saudi riyals (equivalent to between $30 million and $33 million US), “allocated by the Government of Saudi Arabia,” and it also received personal donations.\textsuperscript{15} The MWL’s stated objectives, voiced in Resolution Twenty at the conference that created it in 1962, were the following:

To convey the Message of Islam in performance of the duty imposed by God upon Muslims, to explain its principles and teachings, to dispel all doubts relating to it, to combat the serious plots by which the enemies of Islam are trying to draw Muslims away from their religion and to destroy their unity and brotherhood, and to deal with Islamic questions in such a way as may be conducive to the welfare of Muslims, the realization of their aspirations and the solution of their problems.\textsuperscript{16}

Just how the MWL accomplished the first of these tasks, “convey(ing) the message of Islam,” would differ from country to country depending on the nature of Muslim communal life there. Factors included whether Islam was the majority or minority religion in the country, and, if the latter, whether it was of recent vintage, as in the West, or had a long history, as in India. In either case, the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam did not rank high among the MWL’s goals, according to its resolutions; the MWL’s secretary-general Omar Nasseef said as much in 1984 in an interview with the organization’s newspaper: “It is not our mission. We are not interested in

\textsuperscript{13} Dr. Abdullah Omar Nasseef, “More Dynamic Role for MWL,” \textit{The Muslim World League Journal}, March/April 1984, 65. Naseef was credited as the author’s writer although the article, which is about his speech, refers to him in the third person.

\textsuperscript{14} “MWL Constituent Council 29\textsuperscript{th} Session,” \textit{The Muslim World League Journal}, November 1988, 5.

\textsuperscript{15} Dr. Abdullah Omar Nasseef, “More Dynamic Role for MWL,” 65.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{World Muslim League: Resolutions and Recommendations of Islamic Conference, 14-16 Dhulhijjah, 1381 (18-20 May 1962),” World Muslim League Magazine 1:1 (1962): 27.}
increasing the number of Muslims. They are already one billion. We want to take care of their quality.”17 M. Ali Kettani, in the article “Da’wah among Muslim Minorities,” published in 1980 in the *Journal of the Muslim World League*, placed missionary work to non-Muslims very low on his priority list for da’wa efforts, beneath the organization of existing Muslim communities and the education of Muslim children and adults to prevent assimilation.18

Most of the MWL’s missionary works, then, while conveying Saudi authority worldwide, were concerned with nurturing existing Muslim communities and creating bonds among existing Muslim groups. To do this, it opened branch offices around the world, meant to “serve as permanent, active centres for the propagation of the Message of Islam.” It established an international body of scholars to issue fatwas “to state authoritatively what Islam has to say on all matters.”19 It invited prominent Islamic missionaries to Mecca to exchange views and coordinate efforts. It increased the number of Islamic periodicals in the vernacular, so as to increase locals’ understanding of sacred texts, while ultimately stressing Arabic as a unifying language.

At its formation in 1962, though, the MWL demonstrated little interest in Muslim-Americans or other Muslim minorities in the West, groups comprising a tiny portion of the worldwide Muslim population. The resolutions creating the MWL, passed by the General Islamic Conference in Mecca on May 18, 1962, did state concern for the fate of Muslim minorities in India and Ethiopia, and in countries under Communist governments, but they contained no specific mention of Muslims in Europe or the United States. Decades later, in the early 2000s, surveys would estimate the Muslim-American population in the low seven digits, but in the early

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1960s when the MWL was formed it was much smaller; two estimates were thirty thousand in 1954 and one hundred thousand in the early-1970s – about one-twentieth of one percent of the U.S. population.\(^{20}\)

Yet even at its creation, the MWL envisioned the eventuality of working with Western Muslims. The nineteenth resolution passed at the General Islamic Conference called on the MWL to, in the future, contact Muslim minorities “in various countries” to “become acquainted with their conditions and assist them in disseminating Islamic culture and safeguarding their religion.”\(^{21}\) In 1964, when Malcolm X traveled to Saudi Arabia to make hajj, the MWL offered to fund twelve scholarships to the Islamic University of Medina for the organizations he had recently created in the United States and supplied him with an imam, Shaykh Ahmed Hassoun, for his community.\(^{22}\) It also named him an official representative for the agency in the United States.\(^{23}\)

In the mid-1970s, the interest in Muslim-minority countries expanded dramatically when the MWL raised its level of missionary activity around the globe. In April 1974, at an MWL-sponsored “Conference of Islamic Organizations” (\textit{Motamar al-Munazzamat al-Islami}) in Mecca, the assembled delegates resolved to systematize missionary efforts (\textit{da’wa}) internationally. They recommended establishing “full-fledged institutions… for the Islamic Da’wah” and helping existing Muslim institutions to produce “full-time Muslim preachers and coordinate various activities.”\(^{24}\) Significantly, they recommended that a separate organization be set up on each continent to coordinate da‘wa efforts; these “continental committees” would operate under an

\(^{22}\) After leaving the Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm X founded two organizations: the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the Organization of Afro-American Unity.
international body, a “Supreme Committee for the Co-ordination of Islamic Organizations in the World.” This international body, whose members would reflect diverse Muslim populations, would have three representatives from Africa, three from Asia, and one representative each from Latin America, North America, Europe and Australia, as well as from various organizations; it would eventually become the MWL’s Supreme Council of Mosques.25

The MWL Expands in the USA

Islam has always been a religion of proselytization, since long before the era of nation-states. It might be asked, then, what circumstances arose to inspire government-funded missionary efforts. Stated justification, made in conference resolutions, contended that the existing centers of Islamic missionary work in Muslim-minority lands exhibited “conspicuous weakness” and could not effectively combat the “cultural invasion to which Islam is exposed,” an invasion said to include the forces of Communism, Bahaism and Ahmadism.26 As a result, “the Conference declares that it is absolutely necessary for Islamic Da’wah to be based on systematic planning both in terms of its activity and in its means and methods.” Its resolution advised planning to train and educate preachers in religious matters, as well as in “contemporary problems in the Islamic world.”

The use of non-Saudis to do this work constituted an important part of the MWL’s approach. The MWL, though financed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, tended not to use Saudi nationals for its on-the-ground work in other countries. Instead, it relied on well-connected local leaders who knew the cultural landscape and could more productively interact with local

25 Ibid., 54.
26 Ibid., 46. The journal used the term Qadianism to refer to Ahmadism (the Ahadmiyya movement).
Muslims. In 1975, the MWL would tap two such Muslim-American immigrant leaders, Dawud Assad, a Palestinian-American, and Ahmed Sakr, a Lebanese-American, to found and manage its North America office and become members of the MWL’s international Supreme Council of Mosques. Both men were established leaders in the scattered yet growing Muslim-American community.

Dawud Assad, who was born in Palestine in 1926, had fled after the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948, in which many of his relatives were killed. Finding temporary refuge in Jordan, he emigrated to the United States in 1951. He attended Rutgers University in New Jersey and then Northeastern University in Massachusetts, from which he graduated with an engineering degree. He then found work as chief engineer for a company called Servisco that regularly sent him to its twenty-seven plants in twenty states across the country. Assad used these trips to help organize local Muslim-American communities. Upon arrival, he would check local phonebooks for Middle Eastern restaurants and Muslim-sounding family names. He would then schedule meetings of local Muslims, at which he would prod them to organize a non-profit organization; he even provided copies of the relevant government forms. “I’d say, do you have an Islamic organization here? How many families do you have?”

In interviews in 2014 and 2015, he noted with disapproval the religious practices associated with organizations such as the Federation of Islamic Associations of the United States and Canada that existed in the United States in the 1950s. “It was mostly for Lebanese people who came from Lebanon and Syria,” he recalled. “Most of them worked in the Ford company, in cars, mechanics. They didn’t know much about religion. They used to have dancing as part of

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27 Larry Poston discussed various proselytization methods favored by Muslim groups in the United States, including mobilization of local Muslims, in Larry Poston, *Islamic Da’wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 122-134.
He also protested the practice of voting on the conference menus, where one voting choice included pork. “Some things, you don’t vote on!” Assad said.³⁰

He became president of the FIA in the early 1970s, and his efforts became known widely enough in Muslim circles that in 1975 he was invited to Mecca for an organizational meeting of the MWL’s Supreme Council of Mosques. He and twenty-nine other American Muslims, part of a three-hundred-person international audience at the meeting, made the trip. The organizers announced that the Supreme Council of Mosques would have fifty members -- twenty-eight of them permanent members and twenty-two with two-year terms. To Assad’s surprise, he and Ahmad Sakr, a native of Lebanon who had become a prominent Muslim-American community leader as well, were chosen for permanent Council seats from North America, ahead of prominent Muslim-American imams with more formal religious training. As Assad recalled,

I was surprised. I’m an engineer! I didn’t go to Azhar University. I just had my education from teachers and imams. When they [classically trained imams on the American delegation] asked the people [MWL officials in Mecca] why, they said, ‘Listen, you people, imams, you are paid. But those people there [Assad and Sakr], they have been serving Islam since the 1950s and 1960s, and they never asked for one thing. Now these are the people we need, the people who know the country, the customs of the country’… When they told them that, they closed their mouths.”³¹

For Assad, accepting the role meant leaving his engineering job to work full-time for the MWL. He and Ahmad Sakr would open and manage the MWL’s North American operations in Manhattan, at the United Nations building.

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²⁹ Author’s interview with Dawud Assad, Monroe, New Jersey, May 2, 2015.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Ibid.
Sakr was born in Beirut and studied Islam in his youth with the grand mufti of Lebanon as his tutor. He graduated from the American University of Beirut and received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, where in 1963 he was one of three men to found the Muslim Students Association. In later years, he would serve as acting president of the American Islamic College in Chicago and, in the 1980s, would found the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America. He would publish dozens of books and booklets on Islam. His decision to work for the MWL in the mid-1970s was controversial within Muslim-American leadership circles, because the MWL was viewed as a foreign organization, as opposed to the homegrown Muslim Students’ Association, which Sakr had helped found. (While the Muslim Students Association did receive funds from other countries, it was a membership organization run entirely by students in the United States.) Still, for Sakr, the draw of working for the Saudi-financed MWL was too much to resist. “The Muslim World League had more resources, so they could do more,” recalled Muzammil Siddiqi, who headed the Department of Religious Affairs for the MWL’s North American office in New York from 1976 to 1980. “That’s why he joined then and he helped establish [their] office in New York.”

33 Author’s interview with Muzammil Siddiqi, Garden Grove, California, May 11, 2015. Siddiqi himself was not on the Supreme Council of Mosques but worked for the MWL in the late 1970s and later served in several prominent roles in the Muslim-American community. A native of India and an early graduate of the Islamic University of Medina, as well as Birmingham University in England (for his Master’s Degree in Theology), Siddiqi was hired by the MWL in 1976 while completing his doctorate at Harvard University in comparative religion. In later years, he would serve as president of the Islamic Society of North America, chairman of the Fiqh Council of North America, and a board member of the North American Islamic Trust. He also served as director of the Islamic Center of Washington D.C., and, since 1981, as director of the Islamic Society of Orange County, in California.
34 Author’s interview with Muzammil Siddiqi, Garden Grove, California, May 11, 2015. Ahmad Sakr was too ill to be interviewed. Siddiqi has known him since the mid-1970s, when Sakr recruited him to work for the MWL.
The MWL’s use of local Muslims rather than Saudis in its branches around the world helped ensure that its workers would understand the cultural aspects of discrete Muslim communities and adapt their message to specific populations. This practice would distinguish the nature of the organization’s work from country to country. At the same time, in its use abroad, it would come to sully the MWL’s reputation in the United States, because among the MWL’s employees on other continents were men who would be closely tied to al-Qa‘ida and other groups classified as terrorist organizations. Abdallah Azzam, who was known as the godfather of global jihad and who served as a mentor to Osama Bin Laden, headed the MWL’s office in Peshawar, Pakistan, during periods of Islamic resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Another MWL functionary in Pakistan was Wael Julaidan, a co-founder of al-Qa‘ida along with Bin Laden in 1988.\footnote{David E. Kaplan, “The Saudi Connection,” \textit{U.S. News and World Report}, December 15, 2003, 21.} Ihab Ali worked for the MWL in the 1980s and 1990s while relaying messages to Bin Laden regarding the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kenya.\footnote{“United States of America v. Soliman S. Biheiri, Declaration in Support of Pre-Trial Detention,” August 14, 2003, 4, \texttt{http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/499.pdf} (accessed July 17, 2015); Chuck Murphy, “Pilot Led a Quiet Life in Orando,” \textit{St. Petersburg Times}, October 28, 2001, \texttt{http://www.sptimes.com/News/102801/Worldandnation/Pilot Led a quiet lif.shtml} (accessed July 17, 2015).}

In addition, in the United States shortly after 9/11, a charity called the Rabita Trust -- created in 1988 by the MWL’s then-secretary-general -- was designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. Treasury Department, due to connections between some of its workers and al-Qa‘ida.\footnote{“U.S. Treasury Resource Center,” \texttt{http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Pages/protecting-charities_execorder_13224-p.aspx} (accessed July 17, 2015).} Another organization created by the MWL, in 1978, the International Islamic Relief Organization, was believed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to have “extremist connections” that included “the Palestinian group Hamas, Algerian radicals, and the Egyptian
precursor to al-Qa‘ida, Al-Gamaat al-Islamiya.” The head of the IIRO’s Philippines’ branch was a brother-in-law to Bin Laden who was connected to plots against U.S. airlines and the pope.39

**Muslim minorities**

Basic questions over whether and how Muslims should live in Muslim-minority lands date to the early centuries of Islam, when some Muslim populations fell under political control of non-Muslims and contemporary Islamic jurists issued opinions on whether they should stay there or migrate to “Muslim lands.” A sampling of questions broached in various rulings reveals the extensive scope of the inquiries: Should Muslim-minority populations attempt to build up Muslim communities if none exists where they are, or should they stay there just temporarily and then migrate to the Muslim-majority world? What constitutes the proper practice of Islam in a non-Muslim land? Can Muslim minorities vote for political leaders in a secular state not bound by Shari‘a? Can they own businesses that sell liquor or pork to non-Muslims? Can they join an army that demands unalloyed loyalty to their non-Muslim government?40 Can they be buried in a Muslim-minority country?41

Opinions of the jurists in these matters manifested their stated concerns to preserve or strengthen the worldwide Muslim community, reflecting contemporary geopolitical realities and


perceived breakdowns of the Muslim world that are embedded in the oft-cited dichotomy of *Dar al-Islam* (the land of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (the land of war). Broadly speaking, this discourse suggests that Muslims should live in the former and migrate from the latter, though definitions of both are disputed and have allowed for different approaches. 42 Much of the discourse includes an explicit third option, a *Dar al-Ahd* (the House of Pact), which is an intermediate category where Muslims, while not in political power, were formally allowed to practice their religion.

Three related historical experiences from Islam’s first decade -- in Mecca, in Medina and in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) -- provide distinct frameworks to analyze the judicial discourse on the permissibility of living as a Muslim minority, and under non-Muslim political control. The example from Mecca harkens to Islam’s earliest years, when many of the prophet Muhammad’s fellow tribespeople rejected his message, causing him to flee (to Medina). Mecca during this short period is viewed as having been inhospitable to Muslims in every way, and therefore a place Muslims were mandated to leave. Medina, on the other hand, was where the prophet Muhammad first established a secure religious community, a *Dar al-Islam*. As leader, he established a Muslim-led government, making Medina a place to which Muslims were expected to migrate. Abyssinia played the third role, the *Dar al-Ahd*, where a non-Muslim ruler protected the religious rights of early Muslims fleeing Mecca at Muhammad’s direction in 615. 43 While it is true that no Muslim-majority state existed as an option at the time, Abyssinia can stand in as a broad middle ground – a place that was neither Muslim-led nor Muslim-majority yet was clearly hospitable to the practice of Islam.

43 A. Guillaume, *“The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah, with Introduction and Notes by A. Guillaume”* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955).
The narrative of the prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina, on the other hand, aligned with the opinion that Muslims had to migrate to lands under Islamic control. In 622, the prophet commanded his followers in Mecca, where persecution remained, to migrate to Medina, where he would become the leader. This narrative would motivate jurists and theologians to emphasize the duty of a Muslim minority to migrate; one such ruler was Ahmad al-Wanshahari (d.1508), who ruled that Muslims must emigrate even if Christian rulers are both just and tolerant. These stricter views on residence, effectively narrowing the definition of *Dar al-Islam*, were voiced by Islamic reformers in the 1700s and 1800s such as Usman dan Fodio and from revivalist groups in the 1900s such as the Muslim Brotherhood. To these reformers, enforcement of Shari’a law was necessary for a location to be considered Dar al-Islam, and anywhere else – even if rulers claimed to be Muslim – was Dar al-Harb.

The Abyssinian experience – as well as a fourth early experience, in Nubia in 652 -- helped promote a more expansive view by some jurists, that Muslims could live under non-Muslim rulers as long as they were allowed to practice their religion; in these cases, migration to Muslim-majority regions would not be mandatory. Some even viewed this permission as sufficient to view a region as part of Dar al-Islam. The Abyssinian and Nubian experiences became increasingly relevant during the 700s when Muslim populations emerged in non-Muslim lands such as India and China; during the 1200s when Mongols and Christians conquered land formerly ruled by Muslims; and in the 1800s and 1900s when non-Muslim countries came to colonize much of the Muslim world. Among the opinions justifying the experiences of Muslim-

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44 Guillaume, “*The Life of Muhammad,*” 146-155.
minorities in these regions is one from eleventh-century jurist al-Mawardi, that “If [a Muslim] is able to manifest [his] religion in one of the unbelievers’ countries, this country becomes a part of Dar-al-Islam. Hence, residing in it is better than migrating because it is hoped that others will convert to Islam [through him].”\footnote{Al-Nawawi, \textit{al-Majmu'}, vol. 19, 264, cited in Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities,” 150.}

Differences aside, the reality is that for centuries, large Muslim populations have resided in Muslim-minority lands controlled politically by non-Muslims.\footnote{Gudrun Krämer, Joseph A. Kéchichian, Syed Z. Abedin, Saleha M. Abedin, and Saleha Mahmood Abedin, “Muslim Minorities in Non-Muslim Societies,” \textit{Oxford Islamic Studies Online}, \url{http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0536} (accessed April 14, 2016).} An estimated one fifth of Muslims currently live in Muslim-minority lands,\footnote{Ibid.} and while it is unlikely that most seek out juridical rulings on the issue, these rulings have long fueled elite discourses on the Muslim-minority experience, stretching into the twenty-first century. Popular understandings of them continue to inform the lived experiences of Muslims in Muslim-minority lands who struggle with issues similar to those faced by immigrants and religious minorities of other backgrounds, such as whether assimilation will lead their American children to lose distinct religious or ethnic attachments.\footnote{al-Fadl, “Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities,” 147-149.}

Yet the expanse of Islamic history provides little guidance on this subject for the Muslim-minority experience in the United States, a place that has never been under Muslim rule and where most Muslims have migrated voluntarily from Muslim-majority lands. “For such an action by Muslims,” Bernard Lewis writes, “there is no precedent in Islamic history, no previous discussion in Islamic legal literature.”\footnote{Lewis, “Muslim Populations Under Non-Muslim Rule,” 16.}
The MWL and Muslim-minorities

The MWL’s activity reflected al-Mawardi’s views, in its recognition of proselytization or da’wa as an important and necessary rationale for remaining in a Muslim-minority land. In 1978, the *Journal of the Muslim World League* published a speech by the secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to that effect:

> Well organized and strong, this one-third [of the worldwide Muslim population] can help to spread the message of Islam throughout the world and can constitute a source of support for the “Ummah” in case of distress. Weak, it would be threatened with destruction and would, consequently, bring in its wake irreparable loss for the Muslim world.52 (emphasis added)

What it means to “spread the message of Islam” can vary; the popular implication of such conversion discourse involves seeking converts from outside one’s religion. Yet instead of devoting significant resources to this, the MWL focused most of its efforts on strengthening the religious practices and bonds of existing Muslim populations, according to the views of MWL workers. There is historic precedent for this; often, especially during periods of Islamic revivalism, Muslim missionaries focus their proselytizing on other Muslims. Poston, in summarizing the views of Abul A’la Mawdudi, wrote that the goal is to “first purify themselves if they are to present a credible witness to the remainder of the earth’s population.”53

The essence and of rationale for the MWL’s effort seems captured in part in the book *Muslim Minorities in the World Today* by Kettani, who, as noted, studied Muslim-minority populations in North America and Europe for the MWL in the 1970s.54 In 1985, Kettani published his book as an expansion of his previous work, adding his assessments of Muslim

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minorities on other continents. Kettani supported the general thrust of Saudi proselytization efforts, and his book serves as a valuable primary source to help demonstrate a mindset behind Saudi-financed missionary work. His father, Shaykh Mohammed Al-Muntasir Kettani, had helped King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to gather support in the 1960s for the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in Islamic North Africa.

While the bulk of Kettani’s book consists of summaries of Muslim-minority communities in each country around the world, it is the introduction and conclusion that are most useful here. They assert both that the Muslim-majority world should proactively help Muslim-minority populations, and that the Muslim-minority communities themselves carry a religious duty to coalesce under regional or national organizations; doing so can further “the gathering of all the Muslims living within a given non-Muslim political entity.” In a passage that tacitly urges communal backing for Saudi-financed organizing efforts, he writes,

> It is the Islamic duty of every Muslim, especially in a non-Muslim environment, to become organized with other Muslims. The organizational set-up should be aimed at establishing a viable Muslim community… The organization should express the Islamic identity of the Community, and this identity alone should under[lie] their collective identity and organization.

Kettani wrote that most Muslims in Muslim-minority communities unfortunately possessed a weak sense of Islamic identity and were unaware of the duty to organize. It would take the community’s leaders, therefore, to bring them together. “To do this,” he wrote, “the organization should have some financial means to start with. In this respect, the help of Muslims of dar-ul-Islam becomes necessary.” The existing Federation of Islamic Association of the United States and Canada, he said, was “far from satisfactory.” Significant aid from Dar al-Islam,

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56 Ibid., 261.
57 Ibid., 8.
58 Ibid., 6.
59 Ibid., 9.
he wrote, was necessary to build Muslim-minority communities into stronger entities that could religiously nurture second- and third-generations of Muslim immigrants. This help would prevent assimilation that could “nibbl[e] at the Islamic characteristics of the minority until it disappears altogether.”60 (Here, again, the concerns were similar to those voiced in many immigrant and religious-minority communities.)

The mindset promoted by the MWL, then, is decidedly against emigration back to Dar al-Islam, instead favoring social and political involvement in the new Muslim-minority country. “A Muslim community cannot be enclosed in a ghetto-like mentality. It should be capable of interacting with members of the non-Muslim community so as to fulfill its duty of da‘wah,” Kettani writes. And yet, da‘wa to non-Muslims seems a minor concern in this treatise. The overarching goal was a plan to help existing Muslim-minority communities financially stand on their own, foster new generations of Muslims, and participate in the American polity without losing their religion.

Kettani did favor limits on foreign involvement in these Muslim-minority communities. He wrote that immigrant Muslims should avoid close links to their home countries, and he criticized some of the assistance that Muslim governments gave to Muslim minorities abroad. For example, he said that while it was beneficial to help Muslim-minority communities select, train and finance their own imams, that Muslims from outside should not participate or otherwise interfere in the selection. He noted that in previous years, “several Muslim countries… sent imams to different communities around the world,” and while some were very successful, “others had no commitment to the communities they served and created more problems than they solved.”61 He also worried that direct help from embassies of Muslim countries might lead

60 Ibid., 10.
61 Ibid., 247.
Muslim minorities to be viewed by compatriots as “foreign bodies in their midst.” ⁶² The organizational effort he praises most is that of Saudi King Faisal in 1969 to create the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which he calls “a humble but no less certainly important beginning on the road to the re-unification of the ummah.” ⁶³

**Changes in the Muslim-American population**

The nature of the Muslim-American population was not static. By the 1960s and 1970s, it had already undergone several changes. It had transitioned from “being unnoticed” within the overall population, to, in the latter half of the century, “positions of greater visibility and more obvious public participation.” ⁶⁴ In 2002, Yazbeck and Smith could write, “The call to prayer, one of the most evident signs of Islamic presence, has moved, in the United States, from the world of make-believe a century ago to a visible, regular feature of the more than two thousand organized Muslim communities across the country.” ⁶⁵

The earliest phase dated to the early antebellum period, when the only known Muslim populations in North America consisted of slaves taken from regions of western Africa with large Muslim populations. ⁶⁶ Their Islamic practices, and those of any descendants, are believed

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⁶² Ibid., 246.
⁶³ Ibid., 261.
⁶⁴ Haddad and Smith, ed., *Muslim Minorities in the West*, vii.
⁶⁵ Ibid., ix.
to have largely died out by the early 1900s, to the extent that scholars posit that no Muslim-American today practices Islam as inherited from enslaved African ancestors. During the 1930s some African-Americans told interviewers that they recalled their once-enslaved grandparents having observed rituals that in retrospect were clearly Islamic, but there is no apparent connection between these slaves’ practices of Islam and the later practice of Islam by early-twentieth-century African-American Muslims such as the Ahmadiyyas, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the Nation of Islam. These groups would face criticism by Sunni immigrant groups in decades to come, but each developed sizable followings among African Americans.

Through most of the 20th century, African-American Muslims would comprise the largest single racial or ethnic group of Muslim-Americans. Yet over time, immigrant Muslims and their children have come to comprise a majority of the Muslim-American population, during what history professor Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and sociologist Adair T. Lummis have identified as five main stages of immigration starting from 1875. These immigrants’ diversity of religious practice, as well as their varied political and socioeconomic backgrounds, formed the setting for the Muslim World League’s activities in North America.

The first phase, from 1875 to 1912, included young Arab men from the Levant. Unlike later Muslim immigrants to the United States, these early arrivals were largely uneducated and unskilled; their main reasons for emigrating were economic, and after making money many

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returned to the Middle East. Still, significant numbers remained in their new country.\textsuperscript{70} “Settling mainly in industrial centers,” Haddad and Lummis wrote, “they had difficulty integrating into American society and thus tended to form their social bonds almost exclusively with fellow Muslims and compatriots.”\textsuperscript{71}

As would remain true in later decades, the size of the Muslim-American population during this early period is hard to estimate. Not only does the U.S. Census Bureau not tally the population by religion, but the Levantine immigrants cannot be assumed to have been Muslim; most were probably Eastern Orthodox Christians.\textsuperscript{72} Further complicating matters is that while U.S. immigration officials maintained information on an immigrant’s country of national origin, prior to 1899 they recorded anyone from the diverse Asian Ottoman regions as coming from “Turkey in Asia.” As religion professor Kambiz GhaneaBassiri notes, “Albanians, Macedonians, Bosnians, Herzegovinians, Croats, Serbs, and others living in the European Ottoman territories were all categorized as coming from ‘Turkey in Europe.’”\textsuperscript{73} While Syrian-American narratives have cited a supposed eagerness by immigrants to flee the degradations of Ottoman rule, this stated rationale may merely reflect the immigrants’ later desires to fit in with an American public inclined unfavorably toward the Ottomans. Kemil Karpat argues that financial motives were supreme, evidenced by the return to their native countries by many immigrants after they made money in the United States.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Kemil Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America,” \textit{International Journal of Middle East Studies} 17:2 (May 1985): 183, 185 and 195; GhaneaBassiri, \textit{A History of Islam in America}, 140.
\textsuperscript{73} GhaneaBassiri, \textit{A History of Islam in America}. 137-138. See Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860-1914,” 175-209.
\textsuperscript{74} Literature on return migration has posited that “pull” factors (positive attributes of home societies) outweigh “push” factors (negative attributes of host countries) in spurring the decisions of immigrants to return. Specific events at home can influence immigrants as well; approximately forty-five thousand Greek immigrants to the United States returned to Greece to fight in the Balkan Wars of 1924. George Gmelch, “Return Migration,” \textit{Annual Review of Anthropology} 9 (1980) 135-159; W. Scott Ingram, Immigration to the United States: Greek Immigrants (New
Haddad and Lummis’s second phase, from 1918 to 1922, included relatives of earlier arrivals during the years that British and French colonial rule supplanted Ottoman control. Yet large numbers of Muslim immigrants apparently returned home during this period as well. GhaneaBassiri estimated that by the mid-1920s, twenty thousand Muslims had immigrated to the United States. Many of these immigrants were more ritually observant than Muslims in already-settled Muslim-American communities, who met with criticism from the new arrivals. Indeed, the Muslim-to-Muslim missionary spirit of later immigration waves was not entirely absent in earlier decades; in one example, from 1921, the Ahmadi missionary Muhammad Sadiq published in his newspaper, the *Moslem Sunrise*, an open letter to the Muslim-American community, criticizing the majority of them as “Moslems in name only – Islam not playing practical [sic] part in your every-day life. Nay, even your names are generally no more Moslem because you have adopted American names.”

In the third phase, the period from 1930 to 1938, relatives again comprised the bulk of Muslim immigration. These were years when U.S. immigration law had recently implemented low quotas and caps. During this period, higher percentages of Muslim immigrants than before decided to remain in the United States, having achieved enough financial success to approach middle-class status.

Immigrants in the fourth phase, from 1947 to 1960, tended to be wealthier than their predecessors and came from across the Muslim world, not just the Middle East. Many were also better educated, having been raised in elite families in India, Pakistan, Eastern Europe and the

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76 Muhammad Sadiq, “My Advice to the Muhammadans in America,” *Moslem Sunrise* I, no. 2 (October 1921) 29.

Soviet Union. Haddad and Lummis cited multiple reasons behind this phase of immigration: “They came to America,” they wrote, “as refugees or in a quest of a better life, higher education, or advanced technical training and specialized work opportunities, as well as for ideological fulfillment.” Indeed, from 1948 to 1965, the number of students in the United States from Muslim-majority countries increased from 2,708 to 13,664. Immigrants from this phase were more likely to be critical of U.S. foreign policy than were those from previous periods, many of whom had linked their religiosity to American democratic ideals. Many in this stage were refugees from Palestine who were critical of U.S. support for Israel. Others were members, or at least supporters, of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This fourth phase would give rise to two national Muslim-American organizations for immigrants that preceded the MWL’s presence in the United States. The first, the Federation of Islamic Associations of the United States and Canada (FIA), originally called the International Muslim Society, was formed in 1952 by a Muslim U.S. Army veteran named Abdallah Igram whose complaint about the lack of religious identification options for Muslim on U.S. dog tags – for burial rights if they were killed – led to an “I” option starting in 1954. The goal of FIA was to unite Muslims in North America and “promote and teach the spirit, ethics, philosophy, and culture of Islam” among themselves and their children. Its program did not actively oppose assimilation. FIA annual conventions included dancing and live music, its constitution urged North American Muslim communities to organize into local associations, and, GhaneaBassiri

noted, a main goal was “to root Islam within local American communities and to make it an important aspect of their lives in America.”

Another immigrant organization, the Muslim Students Association, favored a different approach, one that fostered direct ties between immigrant Muslims and their home countries. The MSA was founded in 1963 by immigrants at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who had belonged to Islamist movements in the Muslim world but fled to escape persecution from nationalist governments there. Within five years the MSA had 105 local associations at colleges in North America, and had received funds from Muslim-majority countries including Kuwait and Pakistan; in 1965, as GhaneaBassiri notes, it even sent a delegation to a MWL meeting in Mecca in hopes of internationalizing its efforts. Most of its members, he adds, related to the Islamic revivalism occurring in various parts of the Muslim world. They were unlikely to view American foreign policy or secular aspects of U.S. culture in positive terms. Islam, according to noted revivalists of the twentieth-century such as Hasan al-Banna of Egypt, Abul A’la Mawdudi of British India and Pakistan, and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt, could not be set apart from politics or public affairs, even -- nay, especially -- in the modern world. Islam was supposed to constitute one’s primary identity, above nationalism, ethnicity or anything else. As al-Banna wrote, in a treatise on the Muslim Brotherhood’s mission, “Islam is an all-embracing concept which regulates every aspect of life, adjudicates on every one of its concerns and prescribing for it a solid and rigorous order.” Sayyid Qutb posited that the governments of Muslim nations, where

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laws and ways of life were “not based on complete submission to God alone,” needed to be removed by force and replaced by rulers who would institute Islamic law.85

Arriving later, and during periods of Islamic revivalism, many MSA members tended to dismiss the Islamic practices of pre-existing Muslim-American communities -- and even of the FIA -- as religiously lax. MSA members viewed themselves as more knowledgeable about Islam and as better-equipped to import knowledge to the immigrants who preceded them. As GhaneaBassiri observed, while the FIA and earlier immigrants “were more concerned about mutual understanding and coexistence with others in American society, the founders of the MSA were gravely interested in the propagation of Islam.” He continued,

In sum, the MSA was a pan-Islamic umbrella organization led by a utopian, mission-oriented immigrant Muslim student population which found in the United States fertile ground for the realization of its transformative, Islamizing project.86

These attitudes toward proselytization would continue to play important roles during Haddad’s and Lummis’s fifth wave, which started in 1967. This would be the largest wave, its size largely a result of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished nation-based immigration quotas in place for four decades. This new law favored the admission of relatives of previous immigrants, professionals, refugees, and workers in areas with labor shortages.87 The majority of immigrants to the United States in subsequent decades would be from Asia and Africa; in all, the number of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries would rise tenfold from 134,615 in 1960 to 1,554,821 in 2000.88 The number of mosques built in the

85 Sayyid Qutb, Milestones (Iowa, The Mother Mosque Foundation: date unknown), 63, 83-84.
86 GhaneaBassiri, A History of Islam in America, 270.
87 Ibid., 292-295.
1970s was five times the number founded in the 1950s or 1960s. Meanwhile, notable trends from the fourth phase continued: These immigrant Muslims had higher levels of education, adhered to stricter versions of Islam than did the earlier phases of Muslim immigrants, and were less likely to approve of American foreign policy. In addition, they were more likely than previous groups of immigrant Muslims to build mosques and national institutions and to do missionary work (da‘wa). The Muslim Students Association, originally formed in 1963, would devise in the mid-1970s a new list of priorities for “Islamic work” that reflected this shift, the new goals including “production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge… in its original purity in all fields necessary to building an Islamic civilization” and “building and/or establishing institutes such as schools and community centers.” For the MWL, the time seemed right for coordinated assistance by an international organization like itself.

**Approaches in Muslim-Minority and Muslim–Majority Lands**

The nature of the MWL’s work differed from continent to continent. In Muslim-majority countries and in regions with sizable, historic Muslim minorities, it promoted more assertive religious and political paths than in newer Muslim-minority regions of the Americas and Australia. During the mid-to-late 1970s, the MWL held separate conferences in Africa, Asia, Australia, North America, and South America that were designed to organize Islamic activities on each continent. The resolutions passed at these conferences, summarized in this section and the next, reveal the varied approaches. They also demonstrate that despite the Saudis’ centralized attempts to influence Islamic agendas around the Muslim world, the MWL’s activities reflected

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91 *MSA News* 4, no. 12 (December 1975).
the influence of “local” non-Saudi MWL workers who often did not themselves share the Salafi religious orientations that were dominant in Saudi Arabia. The resolutions reveal the MWL as an organization that, while centralized in Mecca, did not speak with a unified voice internationally. For example, as we will see, while one continental branch of the MWL was warning Muslims to avoid the West, another was firmly committing itself to bolster Western Muslim communities.

In Asia, the continent with the highest number of Muslim-majority countries, the MWL’s representatives met in 1978 in Karachi, Pakistan. Attendees took strong stances that ran counter to twentieth-century Western ideals of governmental neutrality toward religion. For example, a resolution called for “Muslim governments” to “put an end to the Christian missionary institutions in their countries” and to bar Christian missionary literature from entering “the countries of the Muslim world.” 92 Regarding what were called “Anti-Islamic Movements,” conference resolutions denounced Bahais, Freemasons and Zionists, urging the closing of Bahai centers but saving its most critical sentiments for Qadianis (a branch of the Ahmadiyya movement); indeed, a resolution cited Qadiani “leaders’ baseless claims to prophethood,” “distortion of Qur’anic texts,” and “Abolishing of Jihad (Fight in the cause of Islam).” 93 One resolution urged Muslim groups to proclaim Qadianis “heretics and non-Muslims.” Another said they should be boycotted and “should not be able to bury their dead in Muslim cemeteries.”

Another one read,

Every Muslim body, organization or association should work for putting curbs on the Qadiani temples, schools and orphanages and in all other places where Qadianis practice their foul and destructive activities. They should also pick out and chase away Qadianis from their midst, and warn the whole Muslim world against their evil practices lest they should fall in their trap. 94

93 Ibid., 19. Parentheses are in the original.
94 Ibid.
Resolutions also expressed an aggressive approach toward perceived enemies of Islam and an attitude of suspicion toward the West. For example, one resolution warned Muslim parents against “sending their children at a young and impressionable age to the Western countries where they are likely to fall prey to un-Islamic influence.” Another commended governments that “intend to model their legal systems according to Islamic Shari‘ah” and asked other governments “to follow their lead.” It even said that “conscientious Muslims” working in Asian media should “coordinate their effort” for “the revival of the Shari‘ah (Islamic Law) in all Muslim countries.”

Africa was another continent where the MWL had a presence, much of which involved building mosques, schools and Islamic centers. MWL rhetoric presented Africa as a place where Muslims needed religious guidance due to the continent’s previous exposure to allegedly faulty versions of Islam reflecting “the stress of early Islam on the simplicity of the faith.” Many African Muslims were said to lack connections to “world Islam” and thus, it was implied, remained in need of outside guidance. In May 1976, in Nouakchott, Mauritania, the MWL sponsored a conference of African Islamic leaders, at which attendees established an “African Council for Islamic Coordination,” choosing Dakar, Senegal, as the continental headquarters.

In North America, South America and Australia, continents with newer and smaller Muslim-minority populations, none of the MWL conferences adopted resolutions that were

95 Ibid., 11.
96 Ibid., 17.
98 Proceedings of the First Islamic Conference of North America, 83-84.
directly critical of other religions or Islamic groups. The emphasis, instead, was on helping fledgling Muslim communities grow through organization and guidance from national and continental committees reporting to the MWL’s Supreme Council of Mosques. In 1977, at the Islamic Conference for South America and the Caribbean, a central committee was “charged with the task of establishing Masjids in areas where Muslims have no Masjids.”100 The North American conference, which will be discussed in the next section, favored similar approaches. And at a meeting in late 1977 of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, attended by MWL officials, the council president praised the MWL’s guidance in organizing the continent’s Muslim groups, voicing confidence they could overcome past disunity.101

Notwithstanding its various continental approaches, the MWL presented the importance of its work in universal terms, and itself as the one organization in the world suited to coordinate the continental Muslim communities into a unified international body. In April 1977, the MWL held what it called the “First Islamic Conference of North America,” a title stressing the organization’s own importance by discounting the annual gatherings of other Muslim organizations in North America that had occurred for decades. The MWL’s journal noted, perhaps self-servingly, that “[s]ome Islamic circles are of the opinion that the need has become quite urgent for the establishment of a Supreme Islamic Council in North America to bring the Muslims of North America together and to attend to their religious, cultural and social affairs.”102 This attitude was also present at the Australia meeting, where the president of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils charged that “the Islamic attitude” “has not been developed fully

99 The Muslim World League also held a conference in Africa, in 1976, but the New York Public Library and Library of Congress were missing the months’ editions of the Journal of the Muslim World League that likely would have covered it.
100 “Islamic Conference of South America: The Declaration of Trinidad,” Journal of the Muslim World League, October 1977, 9.
101 “Muslims in Australia: AFIC President’s Speech,” Journal of the Muslim World League, January 1978, 59-64.
in the present leadership in the Muslim community.”103 In a different speech, the Australian praised the missionary efforts of Saudi Arabia and the MWL, which had recently provided $1.2 million for mosques and Islamic centers.104

When the Muslims of Australia commenced their journey towards solidarity and started organizing themselves under the umbrella of one organization… it was Saudi Arabia out of the whole Muslim world and it was the Muslim World League out of all the Muslim organisations [sic] which came forward and took the lead in taking interest in the affairs of the Muslim community in Australia.105

In this religiously diverse Muslim environment, the MWL’s task of appealing to wide swaths of the Muslim community was a delicate one that required an awareness of regional differences. Its approach in the United States would reflect both the Muslim-American population’s minority status as well as its newness.

The “First Islamic Conference of North America”

The First Islamic Conference of North America opened on April 22, 1977, in Newark, New Jersey. It drew approximately three hundred Muslims from across the United States and Canada and a few dozen more from the Middle East, all of them descending on a Holiday Inn hotel near Newark International Airport to participate in a grand attempt to plan the future of Muslim-American life. The guest list included representatives from one hundred forty-six mosques across the country, from California to Massachusetts; officials from twenty-four Canadian mosques, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia; and, most prominently, MWL officers including Dawud Assad and Ahmad Sakr, who managed the MWL’s North American

103 “Muslims in Australia: AFIC President’s Speech,” Journal of the Muslim World League, 62.
104 Dr. Ashfaq Ahmad, “Shaikh Amini’s Visit to Australia: The AFIC President’s Speech,” Journal of the Muslim World League, January 1977.
105 Ibid., 47.
office, as well as the MWL’s Secretary-General, Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Haraki, who flew in from Mecca.

The booklet compiling the proceedings of the First Islamic Conference of North America begins with an Introduction by Ahmad Sakr. It was written after the conference and reads now as both a proud postscript and an assertion of authority by the MWL to coordinate and supervise the growth of Islamic communities in the United States and around the world. Throughout the conference, MWL officials would use language that portrayed themselves – and, by implication, the Saudis – as the leaders of the Muslim world. The Introduction to the booklet began:

In convening the FIRST ISLAMIC CONFERENCE OF NORTH AMERICA, the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami) took a big step forward in its world wide effort in the cause of Islam. As for the Muslims of North America, the Conference was the first of its kind, held on a continental level in which delegates of 169 Muslim organizations, centers, mosques, institutions and societies from all over the United States and Canada participated.¹⁰⁶

Sakr noted also, in the introduction, that the MWL’s decision to hold the conference had been made in 1974 at the aforementioned Mecca gathering, which started “a long-range program for organizing and coordinating endeavours in the cause of Islam in different parts of the world.”¹⁰⁷

He then listed a slew of existing problems facing Muslim-American life: a lack of organization, a dearth of Islamic education, the lack of a “dedicated leadership that could maintain a viable Muslim community,” and an American culture that was alien to Islamic values.

Realizing that the situation called for organized work, coordination of activities and the setting up of priorities and planning for a better and meaningful future, the Muslim World League decided to hold the Islamic Conference of North America… to bring together the Muslim community organizations, centers, societies, institutes and mosques for mutual consultation and discussion of various problems facing the Muslim community.

¹⁰⁶ Hussain, Proceedings of the First Islamic Conference of North America, 3.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
Implicit in Sakr’s introduction is a broad critique of the contemporary Muslim-American leaders, including the Federation of Islamic Associations and the Muslim Students Association, which themselves held annual conferences. This alleged problem is simultaneously presented with a remedy – an improved leadership structure for Muslim-American communities -- for which the MWL is portrayed as uniquely suited, given its previous experience coordinating Muslim communities around the world at similar conferences.

Yet the MWL’s financial advantages did not lead to an unmistakable perch atop other groups. It is clear that inter-organizational rivalries were never absent. In a sermon (khutba) delivered on the conference’s first day, MWL Secretary-General Al-Harakhan included Quranic citations and praise for Islam as the “religion of justice, brotherhood, equity, cooperation, deeds of virtue, piety and abstinence from acts of evil and indecency.” But he also warned against jealousy and attributed contemporary problems facing the Muslim world to transgressions of Muslims themselves, whom he said had forsaken Islamic teachings. In addition, he stressed the importance of “unity of Muslims and the closeness in their ranks and their mutual support in works for the benefit of the community, to raise its standard and to increase its strength and honor.” In this context – at a conference coordinated by his Saudi-financed organization – his emphasis on unity and against jealousy could be seen as gentle pressure on the assembled to follow the MWL leadership for the sake of unity, and to not resent the wealthy Saudis.

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108 Ibid., 21-22.
109 Ibid., 23.
110 I asked Dawud Assad if members of the existing Muslim organizations in America – the Federation of Islamic Associations and the Muslim Students Association, for example – had resented the MWL’s decision to hold the Newark conference that seemed demeaning to past communal efforts by others. “You’re right,” he said. “They didn’t want to have any foreign organizations… MSA did not like it and they were fighting us. American people said, ‘Who are you to infringe upon us? We are here before you!’ But we told them we were just interested to help you out. They accepted the facts because we helped them out. And most of … the mosques built were from Muslim World League money.” Author’s interview with Dawud Assad, Monroe, New Jersey, May 2, 2015.
The next speaker, Muhammad Abdul Rauf, also addressed organizational rivalries. Rauf, born in Egypt, was a graduate of al-Azhar University who worked at times for the Egyptian government and would, during his career, run several Islamic institutions around the world, including prominent Islamic centers in New York and Washington, D.C., and a university in Malaysia. In his speech, he lamented “[t]he ugly rivalry for positions of leadership among those who pose as servants of Islam in America – even to the practice of some who, greedy for success and recognition, approach influential personalities in Muslim countries, portraying themselves as the only sincere followers of Islam,” though just whom he is criticizing here is unclear. Rauf also worried openly that existing Muslim leaders in the United States knew too little about Islam; he claimed a “superficiality of Islamic knowledge on the part of many who pose as leaders of Islam in America; ignorance of the details of shari’a and the death of knowledge of the background of early Islamic movements.”

Among the hopeful recipients of MWL largesse was Wallace Mohammed, whose organization of African-American Muslims had the largest showing at the conference. During the late 1970s, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the Saudi government and the MWL courted Wallace Mohammed in the United States and overseas, and Wallace Mohammed courted them back, partially through positive articles in the periodicals of their respective organizations. In his speech at the Newark conference, Wallace Mohammed praised the relationship.

We are blessed to have our brothers, our distinguished brothers of great repute and excellence come to the United States, from the holy city of Mecca from Arabia, to encourage us, to give us support, to encourage us to unite, to encourage us to move forward in Islam and they are not people with weak support. They have the knowledge and they have the

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112 Hussain, Proceedings of the First Islamic Conference of North America, 49.
113 Ibid.
money. We are fortunate…

Ahmad Sakr, in another speech, presented the MWL as ready to serve Muslim-Americans and invited his audience to call upon the MWL’s Department of Islamic Affairs (Department of Da‘wah), its Department of United Nations, and its Department of Administration for help. He told them to “call upon them [MWL staff members] for any service you may like them to render. The Rabita office is to serve and help the Muslims, not to take the leadership or to impose itself on others,” he said. “On the other hand, it requests you to assume leadership so that you could develop your organizations and help the Muslim community around you.”

How should we interpret this statement regarding the MWL’s role in Muslim-American communities? Sakr was asking the audience to accept the MWL’s help, while presenting the organization’s leadership aspirations as selfless and minimal. “The Rabita is trying its best from Mecca,” Sakr said, “to see what it could do for the Muslims and what the Muslims could do for themselves in all parts of the world including North America.” The MWL, he said, had helped fund “well-qualified scholars” to serve Islamic centers as imams and teachers, paid imams to proselytize in prisons, and “rendered considerable help to various Islamic centers – whether it is for its youth camps, summer schools, or other programs.”

Another speech, by the head of the MWL’s main office in Africa, portrayed the Muslim World League as already having been effective around the world. Mustafa Cisse, executive committee chair of the Islamic Coordinating Committee of Africa, praised the aforementioned African version of the meeting that was held in 1976, at which participating groups had agreed to establish a continental council. Previously, Cisse said, African Muslim organizations were “divided and in a state of disarray. Today, however, Islamic organizations in our continent are

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114 Ibid., 54-55.
115 Ibid., 61.
116 Ibid., 62.
cooperating sincerely through the African Islamic Coordinating Council.”¹¹⁷ This appears as an attempt to persuade the attendees, through the good example of the African experience, to let their newly established MWL-sponsored organizing committee take the lead in Muslim-American communal decisions.

On April 23, 1977, the second day of the conference, a resolution established a body called The Islamic Conference of America, designed to serve as a coordinating body for all Muslim-American organizations. Others recommended guidelines for operating Islamic day schools in the United States and advised that the MWL should appoint pedigreed foreign imams to North American mosques. Delegates also recommended publicity for scholarships that allowed Muslim-Americans to study Islam at universities abroad and in the United States. Along with financial help, the delegates offered cultural and moral advice. Another recommendation included advice to parents to improve the quality of Islamic teaching at home and to better discipline their children.¹¹⁸

How It Worked

It seems, then, that the MWL maintained a desire to take on the preeminent role in Muslim-American communal life. Yet to establish itself as a force in North America would require much more than holding a national conference. The MWL’s largest influence was felt through donations of seed money to Muslim-American organizations and through the financing or training of imams and religious teachers for American mosques.

These efforts and others are reflected in internal annual reports from its American bureau that were filed to the MWL’s international headquarters in Mecca, as well as from interviews

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 83.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 95.
with officials. Collectively, these sources reveal MWL concerns with issues both broad and narrow in Muslim-minority life. By the mid-1980s there were five official committees on the “Local Council of Masajid in the United States of America,” the subgroup of the Supreme World Council of Mosques that served as the MWL’s national presence in the United States. These committees focused on Preaching and Education (helping to provide and train imams for American mosques); Media (countering anti-Islamic messages in the media); Improvement and Help (providing funding to mosques); Social Service Programs; and African-American Affairs. Of these committees, the most prominent was for Improvement and Help, which focused on funding new mosques and on providing mosques with trained imams in the United States.

On November 23, 1982, at a meeting in Paterson, New Jersey, a city with a large Arab-American community, MWL officials in the United States concluded that they had “the obligation of providing aid to the Muslim communities which still do not have mosques of their own in their towns… to help them perform their role in spreading the call for Islam and the Islamic education.” To qualify for this aid, a mosque or fledgling Islamic organization had to join the MWL’s Local Council of Masajid, which became sort of a national membership organization for mosques. Twenty mosques were represented at the organization’s founding meeting in Philadelphia in March 1978. By 1979, the number of member-mosques had risen to thirty-seven; by 1980, to fifty-seven, the vast majority of which had forwarded requests for financial aid from the MWL; by 1984, to one hundred thirty; and by 1985, to one hundred fifty-one. Dawud Assad recalled in an interview that the MWL, through this Local Council, gave

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money to sixty to seventy mosques during these years, with most recipients receiving between $30,000 and $50,000; the maximum for any one organization was $500,000. In 1982, according to the annual report he submitted to Mecca, “24 Islamic Associations” received about $1 million among them. Recipients included the Islam World Association of Troy, Michigan, which received $50,000 to establish a mosque, and the Islamic Center of New England, which received $100,000 to help build its school in Quincy, Massachusetts.122 (Larger donations in the high six- or low-seven-figures would come not from the MWL’s coffers but from the Saudi embassy in Washington D.C., which, for example, provided more than $1 million for the $25 million construction of the Islamic Center of New York during the 1980s.123)

Requests for assistance actually predated the founding of the Local Council. Muzammil Saddiqi, director of religious affairs for the MWL’s North American office in the late 1970s, recalled that “once the Muslim World League established an office in New York, we started receiving a lot of requests from communities that wanted to build mosques, ‘We want to build that! Help us, help us!’”124

The MWL’s office in North America worked closely with the Saudi embassy in Washington, D.C., to ensure that together their efforts would reach the highest number of mosques in the most productive ways.125 Any financial decisions by the MWL in the United States ultimately needed approval from the Mecca headquarters. As Assad wrote in 1985,

The [Local] Council evaluates the cost required for the provision of the activities of these mosques and centers… then it transfers the evaluation to the Association Office in New York to be in turn transferred to the General

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123 Other countries including Kuwait also contributed significant amounts to this center, including Kuwait and Libya. “Islamic Cultural Centre in New York” Muslim World League Journal, November/December 1984, 57.
124 Author’s interview with Muzammil Siddiqi, Garden Grove, California, May 11, 2015.
Secretariat of the Muslim World League in Mecca or the Supreme International Council of Masajid.\textsuperscript{126}

Grant distribution was one method of aiding mosques while simultaneously asserting Saudi authority over Muslim-Americans. Another was by sponsoring imam-training programs. In 1978, one year after the First Islamic Conference of North America, the MWL’s North American office sponsored a training program for African-American imams, at Wallace Mohammed’s request. As noted in Chapter Three, the main six-week training session included workshops on Islamic rituals, history, law and jurisprudence, as well as basic Arabic. Approximately one hundred people attended, about half of them imams from Wallace Mohammed’s organization, which had recently begun moving toward mainstream Sunni Islam after decades under a racialist theology. “It was a learning experience for the imams,” said Muzammil Saddiqi, director of religious affairs for the MWL’s North American office in the late 1970s, offering an opinion that Wallace Mohammed’s imams would have contested: “Many of them… did not know the basics of Islam.”\textsuperscript{127}

The nature of the MWL’s imam-training programs for other Islamic organizations was different. While Wallace Mohammed’s organization had full-time imams, most mosques in the United States could not afford that. Instead, they used part-timers who held other day jobs. As Saddiqi explained, many of these part-timers lacked any formal religious training and knew little about the Qur’an. “So you have a doctor [as an imam], or any person who is more articulate…,” he said. “He becomes a spokesman for the mosque. But he does not have religious knowledge, so he needs some help on that.”\textsuperscript{128} To suit this reality, the MWL would more often hold training sessions for part-time imams. In the mid-1980s, the MWL would sponsor weeks-long training

\textsuperscript{127} Author’s interview with Muzammil Siddiqi, Garden Grove, California, May 11, 2015.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
sessions for such imams, led by shaykhs from Mohammed Ibn Saud University of Riyadh and the Islamic University of Islamabad. It also would hold shorter weekend sessions.\textsuperscript{129}

In addition to training imams already in the United States, the MWL imported between thirty and forty imams from the Muslim-majority world to serve at American mosques, either as imams who would lead the mosque or as specialists in Arabic or Islamic studies who held subordinate roles.\textsuperscript{130} In the mid-1980s, the MWL arranged with the grand mufti of Lebanon for ten imams from his country to move to the United States and work at immigrant-run mosques there; as mentioned in Chapter Three, it also arranged for six foreign shaykhs with training in classical Islamic studies to work at Wallace Mohammed’s mosques. Some of these arrangements worked well; Imam Hamad Ahmad Chebli, from Lebanon, was originally sent by the MWL to a mosque in Louisiana and then to South Brunswick, New Jersey, where since 1986 he has served the Islamic Society of Central Jersey. Other arrangements were beset with problems. Cultural clashes often plagued the relationships between foreign shaykhs and the Muslims at Wallace Mohammed’s mosques. And many immigrant mosques in the United States simply did not want to accept the MWL’s help, for fear there would be strings attached.\textsuperscript{131} As Haddad and Smith wrote, “imported imams… tend[ed] to propagate the official policies of the sponsoring government or the ideologies to which they subscribe.”\textsuperscript{132} In an academic study of eight mosques during the 1980s, by Haddad and Lummis, leaders of three of these mosques said they had

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} Author’s interview with Dawud Assad, Monroe, New Jersey, May 2, 2015.
\textsuperscript{132} Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith, ed., \textit{Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible} (California: Altamira Press, 2002), xvi.
rejected MWL offers of full-time paid imams who would be selected for them. As two Muslim-Americans in the study told the authors:

The Muslim World League wanted to send us an imam who speaks English, Albanian and Arabic, but the Albanian community in this mosque did not want that kind of help; they wanted to be themselves.

I know there are imams in the U.S. sent by Saudi Arabia. But I think most people in our congregation, and I also speak for myself as part of the congregation, would like to continue to see an imam come out from themselves.133

This resistance helps demonstrate that Saudi money appeared to come with a price, at least through the lenses of many Muslim-American organizations that wanted to make their own way in their new country.

Conclusion

The Muslim World League’s strategy in the United States reflected a juridical view to expand the scope of Islamic life in Muslim-minority lands. While the MWL broadly favored the Islamic revivalist agenda of reformers such as Hasan al-Banna, Abul A’la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb on the need for the integration of Islam and public life, the organization’s work bolstering Muslim communities in the West effectively rejected assertions by well-known Islamic revivalists that the only places suitable for Muslims to live were those governed by Shari’a. The MWL’s activities abroad aligned with different juridical opinions saying that as long as Muslims could publicly practice their religion, a region could be viewed as acceptably falling within Dar al-Islam.

133 Yazbeck Haddad and Lummis, Islamic Values in the United States, 63.
In the United States and other Muslim-minority countries in the West, the MWL provided aid to fledgling Muslim-minority communities. Between 1975 and 1985, the MWL contributed at least $10 million to these communities in the United States, providing seed money for mosques, Islamic schools and Islamic centers; financing imams’ salaries; training imams; and providing Qur’ans. In these years the MWL played an important role in bolstering Muslim-American communal life, mostly through financial grants to dozens of mosques and Islamic associations.

While the MWL’s lofty self-image led it to call its national gathering of April 1977 the “First Islamic Conference in North America,” the MWL was not the first Muslim organization to host national conferences in the United States; the Federation of Islamic Associations and the Muslim Student Associations both predated the MWL’s presence. In addition, other influential Muslim-American organizations were growing or being founded in the 1970s and 1980s. The Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) was founded in 1971, followed in 1982 by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), an outgrowth of the Muslim Students’ Association. ISNA, an outgrowth of the MSA, ICNA, the Council on American Islamic Relations, and the North American Islamic Trust, as well as the Muslim Students Association itself, would eventually surpass the MWL in prominence. Crowds at the annual conferences of these organizations can reach five digits; ISNA now regularly attracts thirty-five thousand people. In time, the MWL would become overshadowed by these U.S.-based Muslim groups whose growth effectively challenged the MWL’s Saudi-financed religious authority. This was, actually, in keeping with M. Ali Kettani’s views that the aid from the Muslim world to Muslim-minority communities should be geared toward self-sufficiency, self-management, and the growth of domestic Islamic knowledge and authority.

134 Author’s interview with Dawud Assad, Monroe, New Jersey, May 2, 2015.
Concerning matters of religious authority in the United States, the most important new organization was the Fiqh Council of North America, which in 1988 expanded its role. Previously a branch of the Muslim Students Association in the 1960s, and later affiliated with the Islamic Society of North America, its main task had been issuing non-binding rulings for North American Muslims on when the new moon was viewed to start the holy month of Ramadan, a disputed issue in Muslim communities around the world. But in 1988 the Fiqh Council became a “larger and more authoritative body of Muslim scholars (ulama),” to “effectively confront the many legal issues facing Muslims in North America.”\(^\text{135}\) This represented an important moment in the growth of the Muslim-American community, because this body was based in North America, and one qualification for membership on its nineteen-member council was five years of North American residence.\(^\text{136}\) This rule was designed to foster a distinctly Muslim-American scholarly perspective that would require no consulting with Muslims abroad when considering matters of religious import.

Rulings by the Fiqh Council of America remain non-binding, of course, and many Muslim-Americans continue to look abroad for religious guidance. Yet the Fiqh Council and other groups have bolstered the communal Islamic infrastructure from what it was in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Muslim World League filled a void to help build the community.


\(^{136}\) Ibid., 201.
Chapter Five:
A Salafi Movement among African American Muslims

A self-identifying Salafi movement among African Americans, fully birthed only in the 1990s, provided the starkest example of sustained Saudi influence on African American Muslims. African American Salafis, like other Salafis, devoted themselves to replicating the practices of the first three generations of Muslims, striving to purify the practice of Islam. They believed that Muslims who weren’t Salafi were practicing corrupted forms of the religion. Salafis eschewed ties to these other Muslims, criticizing them as innovators who did not uphold the “true Islam.” During the 1990s, thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of African American Salafis nurtured communal connections to Islamic authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, consulting by telephone, online or in person about communal issues and application of Islamic religious law to life in the United States.

Followers of the Salafi movement distanced themselves from American cultural norms, bolstering their sense of transnational identity and promising inclusion in the single group of
Muslims said to be bound for paradise. In this chapter I argue that these attractions bore similarities to what had drawn thousands from previous generations of African Americans to the Nation of Islam. Whereas the NOI had promoted a racial cosmology unknown to the broader Muslim world, and where Wallace Mohammed’s organization later resisted Saudi influence while transitioning to Sunni Islam, African American Salafis broadly accepted guidance from the Saudi religious establishment and closely identified with the international Salafi movement. Indeed, avoidance of the NOI’s heterodoxies was a powerful push toward Salafism for many African American Muslims. This chapter contrasts the transnationalism of the Salafi movement not only with the old Islamic transnationalism of the NOI but also with the newer Islamic transnationalism of Wallace Mohammed’s movement, in the Salafis’ willingness to broadly accept religious guidance from Saudi Arabia. While charting the African American Salafi movement’s growth and the communal conflicts that helped shape it, this chapter also demonstrates that its existence was inextricably linked to Saudi proselytization efforts. Crucially, the Salafi mosques would nurture relationships with elderly shaykhs in Saudi Arabia, whose words from Medina would directly affect communal disputes that arose among African American Salafis. Fatwas and other statements made by these shaykhs, issued six thousand miles away, would serve as probative claims when these conflicts flared. Even when a shaykh’s Saudi credentials failed to trump an opposing argument, their very usage in the first place revealed at least the perception that African American Salafis looked to Muslims abroad – rather than to other Muslims in the United States -- for authority on religious matters.

Indeed, the main force behind the Salafi movement among African Americans was the Saudi university system, including the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) and other Saudi universities such as Umm al-Qura in Mecca and Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University
in Riyadh.\(^1\) At least several dozen African Americans left the United States in the ensuing three decades to study at these universities under years-long scholarships financed by the kingdom. Some, after graduating and returning to the United States, secured leadership roles at mosques where they incorporated the Salafi teachings they had learned. These often represented stark departures from previous practices at the mosques.\(^2\)

The differences between African American Salafi mosques and other predominately African American mosques were easily discernible. Salafi imams, in their Friday sermons, emphasized the importance of hadiths – traditions of the prophet Muhammad – while stressing the difference between those deemed to be authentic and inauthentic transmissions of the prophet’s words and deeds.\(^3\) Attendees at Salafi mosques wore Arabian-style garb such as the *thawb* (long robes) for men and *niqab* (veils covering the face) for women. Board members were Salafi, and new policies were enforced with communal pressure: Men stopped wearing gold jewelry. Pants were worn above ankles (in accordance with several hadiths). Muslims followed advice to not vote and to not attend non-Muslim weddings. At conferences, Salafis would gather in large numbers to hear shaykhs from abroad and would debate religious matters for hours, taking determined stances on whether shaykhs elsewhere, who they perhaps had never met, were “off the path” and therefore to be “boycotted.” Salafi imams persistently and emphatically warned against *bid’a*, forbidden religious innovation, and criticized Muslims who were viewed as having indulged in


Imam Abu Muslimah of East Orange, New Jersey, a founding leader of the Salafi movement among African Americans, preached the following in 2006:

It is an obligation to warn against deviant bid‘a. ... If someone celebrates the prophet’s birthday, you tell them stop doing that, it’s a bid‘a. (If) he says ‘No, come on, where’s your evidence?’, you say the prophet said whoever invents something that’s not from this religion of ours, then it’s rejected. Celebrating the prophet’s birthday is not from this religion and it’s rejected as bid‘a. 5

Salafism’s profession of religious authenticity and certainty, backed by accessible proof texts translated into English, constituted a significant draw. 6 Sermons at Salafi mosques repeated the Salafi belief, drawn from well-known traditions (hadith), that the prophet Muhammad had divided the world’s Muslims into seventy-three sects and that only one of them – the one with views promulgated by him and his followers – would avoid hellfire. 7 Salafis also cite another hadith in which the prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “The best of my community [i.e., Muslims] are my generation, then those who come after them, and then those who come after them.” 8 This latter hadith has been used to justify the Salafi belief in the authenticity of the practices of the first three generations of Muslims.

Even with Wallace Mohammed’s move away from the NOI’s racial views and toward mainstream Sunni beliefs, the NOI’s unusual theology remained visible in the communal rear-view mirror, and African American Salafis strove to align with internationally respected interpretations of Islamic scripture and law. Salafism represented a staunch departure from the Nation of Islam’s pre-1975 stances on matters of the divine, prophethood, race and the afterlife.

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It even differed, in its emphasis on hadith and preferences for certain Arab cultural norms, from Wallace Mohammed’s brand of Sunnism. For African American Muslims and others who self-identify as Salafis, the term became a badge of honor signifying the single correct form of Islam.

In this chapter I first review the scholarly discourse that has attempted to define the term “Salafism” and classify its adherents. I then chart the growth of the African American Salafi movement through individual Saudi-educated imams. A profile of the community based on oral histories follows, and then I analyze important conflicts that helped shape its history, linking them to the siting of Islamic religious authority in Saudi Arabia, rather than the United States. I then examine how African Americans have responded to Salafi norms on gender roles and marriage. The section after that explores the transnational reach of Salafism in other countries, using my work and others’ recent monographs on Salafi movements around the world to revisit the theories of “Saudi-ization” and “deculturation” promulgated by the political scientist Olivier Roy, who posited that the globalization of Salafi norms promoted by Saudi Arabia has led to a de-emphasis of local Islamic norms affiliated with specific cultures and countries.

**Discourse on Salafism**

The Salafi movement among African Americans remains a neglected topic of study. As Islamic Studies professor Sherman Jackson observed, writing in 2005 about Islam among black Americans, “Everyone in the Muslim community knows… of the influence of Salafism over the past two decades or so. Yet, this is hardly reflected in the scholarly literature on Islam in America.” Jackson briefly mentioned the movement in his book *Islam and the Blackamerican*, challenging the Salafis’ beliefs that they are actually replicating Islamic practices of 1,400 years

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ago. Abdin Chande argued in the journal *Islamic Studies* that African American Salafis are unrealistic in their attempts to build a religious society devoid of local cultural norms.\(^{10}\) The most extensive scholarship is a 2010 article in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* by Shadee Elmasry entitled “The Salafis in America: The Rise, Decline and Prospects for a Sunni Muslim Movement among African Americans.”\(^{11}\) In twenty pages, ElMasry discusses the community’s trajectory, linking its origin to the Islamic University of Medina and a rise in Black Consciousness related in part to the 1993 release of the Malcolm X movie starring Denzel Washington. Elmasry, building on Chande’s critique, suggests that the Saudi educations failed to prepare future Salafi leaders for “inter-madhhab dialogue” – relations with non-Salafi Muslims – and other pluralistic realities of religion in the United States.\(^{12}\)

Even to the cautious user, the terms Salafi and Salafism present a slew of semantic challenges ranging from the basic meaning of the words, to the classification of various Salafi groups, to the term’s conflation with Wahhabism -- a contested term itself that refers to a Saudi strain of Salafism that is affiliated with the royal family and its favored shaykhs. Especially since 9/11, Western Islamicists and political scientists have attempted to define Salafism for both popular and scholarly audiences, and to clarify misconceptions prominent in the media regarding its meaning, its global development, and its contemporary geography.

The question of what separates Salafis from other Muslims can be fraught with complexity, given that other forms of Islam contain beliefs in common with Salafism. Distinctions tend to lie in emphasis and interpretation. Crucially, Salafis are more likely than other Muslims to espouse an especially strict version of monotheism, or *tawhid*, emphasizing that all religious devotion

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 233-234.
must be for God alone. While other Muslims -- such as Sufis or Shi’i -- may pray at gravesites or shrines of deceased “saints,” hoping for their intercession with God, Salafis view this practice as polytheistic and sinful worship of the non-divine. In the name of monotheism they have historically opposed it, reasoning that all worship must be directed exclusively toward God, lest the worshiper be supposing divinity where it does not exist.  

Salafis are also more likely than non-Salafis to dissect and rely on hadith in their quest to model the behavior of the prophet Muhammad. They express the belief that hadith deemed authentic are just as relevant to contemporary periods as they were to Muhammad’s era fourteen hundred years ago, relating to what Muhammad said about family life, clothes, manners, sex, personal hygiene, and other matters. They contend that attempts by other Muslims to ignore or contextualize certain hadiths out of practice are misguided -- even evil -- efforts to tinker with divine revelation. In addition, in striving to emulate the practices of the salaf al-salih – the “pious ancestors” – from Islam’s first three generations, Salafis continuously warn against what are viewed as accumulated “traditions” and teachings linked to local Muslim cultures rather than from the best practices and intents of the earliest Muslims. Indeed, the concept of “tradition,” or “imitation,” is scorned by Salafis. “Traditional” practices are deemed un-Islamic, believed to have been followed by other Muslims solely in deference to preceding generations who had it wrong. These acquired traditions, such as worshiping at shrines, are condemned as bid’a, or innovations, and are constantly warned and guarded against. Many Salafis will denounce other Muslims as “off the path” if they are deemed innovators or if they are leaders who do not uphold

12 Peter Mandaville writes that in one sense, the term “Salafi” is a generic one, in that many if not most Muslims who try to emulate the prophet Muhammad and the earliest Muslims might not identify themselves as “Salafis.” Peter Mandaville, Global Political Islam (New York: Routledge, 2007), 245.
critical elements of Islamic law. Some Salafis will even pronounce excommunication -- *takfīr* -- on other Muslims. The criticism of non-Salafi innovators aligns with a notion popular in Salafi circles, that of *al-wala’ wal bara’*, which is translated as “loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of non-Muslims.”

Their quest to recapture the purest religious habits of the earliest Muslims has also led many Salafis to disavow close followings of the established Islamic legal schools of thought, or madhhabs, which had developed in the centuries following the prophet Muhammad’s death. As the Sunni world’s four main schools of thought – known as Hanbalism, Hanafism, Malikism, and Shafism – were not present in the earliest decades of Islamic history, Salafis believe that each contains religious innovations representing departures from the earliest, purest Islamic practices. Salafis prefer, instead, what is called *ijtihad*, or individual reasoning that relies on the study of hadith, to resolve issues not directly addressed in the Qur’an. (Critics charge that most Salafis, lacking a classical Islamic education, will themselves follow a particular Salafi shaykh without truly reasoning for themselves.) As will be shown later, the historic reluctance of the Saudi religious establishment to formally identify with a madhhab, despite its broad linkages to Hanbali legal school, has contributed to discord among Salafis in both Saudi Arabia and the United States.

In attempting to classify and explain the political distinctions among various Salafi groups, scholars of Islamic Studies and Middle Eastern politics have broadly divided Salafis into three

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categories: quietist, activist, and jihadi. The Salafi movement among African American Muslims is a quietist movement, and therefore that group of Salafis is the focus of this study. But a review of all three types is in order here, because their differences help illuminate their distinct approaches toward politics and society, even as the boundaries between categories can be less than rigid.

Quietist or pietistic Salafists eschew all overtly political activity, from partisan activism to political violence. They contend that involvement in party politics increases the odds of dreaded dissension (fitna) among Muslims. Their societal engagement, instead, consists of attempting to purify Islam from religious innovations believed to have accumulated over centuries into corrupted religious “traditions.” They tend to support the leadership of their national rulers, imperfect as they may be. Saudi royalty is closely aligned with quietist Salafism within the kingdom, benefiting from its doctrinal opposition to violence against political rulers -- which of course leads to support for the monarchy itself. Saudi kings have appointed to high positions quietist shaykhs who condemn political resistance against the House of Saud. In 1991, the kingdom’s highest ranking shaykh, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bin Biz, granted theological backing to the

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20 Joas Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Another issue, noted by Thomas Hegghammer, reflects another problem with this set of classifications as an analytical tool. Hegghammer asks, “At what level of extremism does an actor start or cease to be a Jihadi-Salafi?” There is no obvious answer. He also notes the difficulties in concluding which Muslim groups favor Salafi theology over Muslim Brotherhood ideology, or vice versa. And the classification does not distinguish between jihadi groups that focus their struggles on the Muslim world, rather than on the West. See Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism,” in Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement, ed. Roel Meijer, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 244-266.
21 Within Salafi discourse, the terms “innovation” (bid’a) and “tradition” (taqlid) can refer to the same religious practices. Salafis believe that various “innovations” in Islamic practices have gained so much credibility in parts of the world, that they have acquired the status of impure “traditions” that are imitated despite not having been part of Islam at its beginning.
22 This belief stems from an oft-quoted aphorism by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) that “sixty years under an oppressive imam are preferable to one night without one.” Cited in Laurent Bonnfoy, “How Transnational is Salafism in Yemen?” in Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 324.
House of Saud’s controversial decision to permit American troops in Saudi territory during the Gulf War. This was widely viewed as an example of quietist loyalty to the ruler. Many quietist Salafis – including groups of African Americans – have aligned themselves with Shaykh Rabi al-Madkhali, a former dean at the Islamic University of Medina who is discussed later in the chapter. These “Madkhali” Salafis partly define themselves in opposition to “Qutbis,” the alleged followers of Sayyid Qutb, the mid-twentieth-century Egyptian who favored overthrows of governments that were deemed un-Islamic.

Salafis in the second group, activists, favor political activism that is non-violent as a means of acquiring political power to ensure that Islamic law is followed. In Saudi Arabia, Salafis of this type are aligned with the Sahwa Movement and “Suriri groups” that have publicly criticized the Saudi kingdom as corrupt and un-Islamic. In Egypt, Salafi groups have migrated to this activist category from the quietist realm since the Arab Spring of 2011, which Richard Gauvain argues complicated quietist efforts to remain on the political sidelines.23 As Bernard Haykel writes, Salafis in this group “have adapted some of the teachings as well as the political consciousness of the Muslim Brotherhood in seeking to effect political reform and in aspiring to power.”24

Salafis in the third group, jihadists, are the ones best known in the West due to their violence and continual calls for the re-establishment of a caliphate.25 The most prominent examples are al-Qa‘ida and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. Al-Qa‘eda’s Creed and Path, a document laying out the group’s beliefs, states that any political leader who institutes anything other than God’s rule is an infidel “who has abandoned the Muslim community and has followed the rule of

the age of pre-Islamic ignorance \textit{[jahiliyya]}\textsuperscript{26}. These rulers and their supporters are then identified as legitimate targets for “armed and violent rebellion” against whom “every Muslim” has an individual duty to fight.\textsuperscript{27} In associating modern Muslim (and non-Muslim) countries with \textit{jahiliyya}, and deeming such people as targets for violence, al-Qa‘ida was incorporating part of the worldview of Sayyid Qutb, who had favored the replacement, by any means, of governments deemed un-Islamic.

Quietists can seem less overtly political than other types of Salafis, in that they do not actively seek political change. And yet their self-professed apoliticism carries political ramifications of its own. In Saudi Arabia, where quietist Salafis back and are backed by the royal family, this support undercuts nascent political opposition to the regime. In the United States, the refusal of quietist Salafis to engage the political process can be said to have political ramifications for African American communities as well, though the African American Salafi population represents a small minority of the African American Muslim population, and likely a small fraction of one percent of the total African American population.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” 52.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 52-53.
\textsuperscript{28} The Salafi population among African Americans is hard to estimate. My estimates of “thousands, if not tens of thousands,” were seconded by members, leaders and observers of the community. Estimates of the overall Muslim populations in the United States range from three million (Pew Research Center) to seven million (Council on American-Islamic Relations), with African Americans now approximately one-quarter of this (the African American rate was higher in the 1970s and 1980s, when increased immigration from Muslim-majority countries was a more recent phenomenon. See: “A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population,” \url{http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/} (accessed May 4, 2016); “Islam Basics,” \url{http://www.cair.com/publications/about-islam.html} (accessed May 4, 2016); “A Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans,” \url{http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-1-a-demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/} (accessed May 4, 2016).
Saudi Universities and African American Salafis

The Salafi movement among African Americans would not resemble its current form but for the existence of the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) and other Saudi colleges formed in the mid-20th century. The majority of IUM students were non-Saudi, and the university’s stated goal was for all of them – African American and otherwise – to return to their home countries upon completing their studies. Even those who left before completing a degree program could return home to reputations as Islamic authorities, by dint of their time in the kingdom. In the 1970s and 1980s, at least dozens of African American Muslims won scholarships to study for years at a time at these universities in Medina, Riyadh, Mecca and Jeddah, where they would learn Islamic jurisprudence, missionary work (da’wa), and the Arabic language, all helpful tools for Muslim leadership back home. In their home countries, the prestige of having studied at a Saudi university often helped returnees secure leadership roles in Muslim-American communities. Many of these graduates self-identified as Salafis and maintained contacts with their former professors at the kingdom’s universities. Eventually, as a result of their leaders’ ties to Saudi universities, not to mention their own faith in answers from abroad, regular members of the mosques would form their own relationships with these Saudi shaykhs through telelinks (electronic connections between shaykhs in Medina and Muslims in the United states via telephone and Internet chat rooms) or visits to the kingdom, where top shaykhs are readily accessible for consultation.

As noted, the type of Salafi Islam associated with African Americans has unquestionably been quietist; even the conflicts that riled the community have pitted one quietist strain against another one. To explore why this is true, it is instructive to review the ideological history of Saudi universities, which spawned the movement. When the Saudi royal family created the
universities during the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was engaged in the so-called Arab Cold War with Egypt. After Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1961 nationalized al-Azhar University, the oldest and most prestigious institution in the Sunni Muslim world, the House of Saud decided to bolster its own university system. To staff its newfound educational infrastructure, the kingdom offered jobs to Muslim Brotherhood members who, in opposition to Nasser’s regime, had been exiled from Egypt. When Egypt joined with Syria in the late 1950s to form the United Arab Republic, exiled Muslim Brothers from Syria would also find refuge and teach in Saudi Arabia. Prominent Muslim Brothers, then, would staff the university, and globally known Islamic revivalists such as Abul A’la Mawdudi of Pakistan held advisory roles designing curricula. These revivalists believed Islam should regulate every aspect of life and that the religious realm was naturally linked to “public affairs.” They professed the belief, as had Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna, that Islam constituted a Muslim’s primary identity -- above nationalism, cultural traditions, or anything else. Within the kingdom, the spirit of these revivalists was captured in a 1970 text known as “Educational Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” that tasked education with “conveying the understanding of Islam in a just and comprehensive manner” and “inculcating in [the individual student] an Islamic epistemology so that his conception of the universe, the individual, and life emanates from a total Islamic vision.”

The policy reflected the Islamic worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood more than that preferred by the kingdom, highlighting how influential the non-Saudi visitors had become within

29 Kerr, The Arab Cold War.
30 Lacroix, Awakening Islam, 40.
32 Lacroix, Awakening Islam, 46.
Saudi Arabia. Two different camps had formed at the university system: one camp was concerned foremost with promoting monotheism (*tawhid*) and Islamic purification, while the other camp emphasized what was called “Islamic culture” – a structure of knowledge that stressed the “totalizing character of the Islamic conception of the world with respect to values, systems, and ideas, and the critique of the humanist legacy they contain.”

While some who taught and studied at the kingdom’s universities would become associated with Salafi-jihadi or activist movements, it would be the quietist Salafi professors who most influenced African American students.

The highest-ranking religious figure in Saudi Arabia during the growth of the African-American Salafi movement was ʻAbd al-ʻAziz Bin Baz (d.1999). His early history with the monarchy had been turbulent, though; there are reports that in the 1940s, while in his mid-thirties, he had criticized the Saudi king for allowing U.S. oil companies too much access to the Arabian Peninsula. After a prison term and repentance, he began to ascend the religious ranks and became revered in the kingdom’s Salafi circles. He was the first vice president of the Islamic University of Medina, recruiting many of its new professors. He later became the university’s president and held other esteemed positions including head of the Committee of Senior Scholars and, in 1993, Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. For Bin Baz’s aforementioned support of the Saudi king’s decision to allow Western (non-Muslim) troops into the country after Saddam Hussein invaded Iraq, he was reviled by Osama bin Laden, a critic of the Saudi regime from a decade prior to 9/11. But while ostensibly a quietist, Bin Baz and his number two, Muhammad al-

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33 Ibid.
34 Among the teachers were Muhammad Qutb (brother of Sayyid Qutb), who taught at the Islamic University of Medina, and Abdallah Azzam, who taught at King ʻAbd al-ʻAziz University in Jeddah. Among the students were Safar Al-Hawali (of the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia), who studied at umm al-Qura in Mecca, and Osama Bin Laden, who studied at King ʻAbd al-ʻAziz University.
36 Ibid.
Uthaymin (d.2001), maintained widespread support through long-term alliances with competing factions in the kingdom.\footnote{Ibid., 78.}

As early as 1964, when Bin Baz was vice president of the IUM, African American Muslims were offered scholarships there. That year, Malcolm X, who had just left the Nation of Islam, was given twelve scholarships for members of his Muslim-American organization. But not until the 1970s and 1980s did larger numbers of African Americans study in the kingdom. Upon returning home, several of them, settling back in New Jersey where they were raised, managed what in the 1990s became the heart of the African American Salafi movement in the United States. The home mosque was called the Islamic Center of East Orange, and it was founded by a Newark man named Ahmed Burhani who was formerly a member of the Nation of Islam and then Wallace Mohammed’s movement. Burhani received a scholarship to study Arabic and Islamic jurisprudence at King Saud University in Riyadh, a consolation prize after he lost a leadership struggle in 1976 at the main Newark mosque of Wallace Mohammed. When Burhani returned to the United States in 1979, he found himself less enamored with Wallace Mohammed’s organization, and he founded the Islamic Center of East Orange the following year. There he taught a mainstream form of Sunni Islamic Orthodoxy — not Salafism, a word he didn’t use — but he markedly distanced himself from mosques affiliated with Wallace Mohammed. Within a few years Burhani’s mosque was drawing six hundred people for Friday prayers.\footnote{Author’s interview with W. Deen Shareef, Newark, New Jersey, January 22, 2016.}

Burhani would not oversee the East Orange mosque during its Salafi era. In November 1993 the mosque’s board replaced him with a Newark man named Dawud Adib, who also had studied in Saudi Arabia. Adib, a former NOI member himself, widely described as a charismatic speaker
and leader, secured the top job after having studied two years at the IUM. Due to his speaking engagements around the country and his enthusiasm for sermonizing on hadiths, the Islamic Center of East Orange became known nationally as the hub of Salafism for African Americans. Adib introduced detailed study of hadith at the mosque. He successfully urged men to wear white robes to Friday prayers, and women to cover in darker tones. More women wore veils (niqab) to cover their faces. Mosque board members had to agree to abide by Islam’s ban on paying interest for cars and homes — a rule uncommon for board members even in immigrant mosques. Adib urged mosque attendees to explicitly refer to themselves as Salafis, an approach favored by Shaykh Bin Baz and Shaykh Nasir al-Din al-Albani, another internationally prominent Salafi leader. Burhani, contrasting Adib’s successor’s approach from his own, recalled, “When I had become an imam, everyone was just starting to become introduced to orthodox Islam. People were not really sure about themselves, and my approach was to gradually get people to assimilate to what Islam requires of them. His [Adib’s] approach was a more direct one: ‘Okay, let’s do everything right away.’”

Yet Dawud Adib’s tenure at the Islamic Center of East Orange lasted less than two years. In February 1995, he was replaced by another African American Muslim who had been educated in Saudi Arabia. Like his two predecessors, Abu Muslimah hailed from New Jersey. Abu Muslimah, unlike Burhani and Adib, actually completed a degree program in the kingdom, at IUM. Lecturing around the country as his predecessor did, Abu Muslimah in the mid-1990s strengthened the mosque’s reputation as a national center for Salafism among African Americans. In 1997, he oversaw the purchase of a former National Guard armory for $325,000,

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40 Author’s interview with Ahmed Burhani, East Orange, New Jersey, November 6, 2014.
41 He had also graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey, having studied business management and African American history.
moving the mosque there from its smaller structure on Lincoln Street in East Orange and renaming it the Islamic Center of America or, in Arabic, *Masjid Ahlus-Sunna* (Mosque of the People of the Sunnah). Easily visible from its location along the Garden State Parkway, the armory building could – and frequently did – accommodate a thousand people for Friday prayers. In his sermons, Abu Muslimah would sternly instruct on Islamic theology and behavior.

> Leave off the dirty, filthy character of the *kufar* [non-believers] ...Purify your souls from this bad character! Purify yourselves so that you can be successful! Purify yourselves from *riba* [interest] and usury! Get out of those mortgages! Give back those car notes! Cut up your credit cards!... Purify yourselves from living far from the centers of the Muslims! Move to where the Muslims are! Live close to the masjids!

Practices at the mosque turned even stricter. Abu Muslimah persistently warned against forbidden religious innovation — *bid‘a* — and criticized Muslims who he said indulged in it.

“Like a small Mecca”

The Saudis had a ripe target in Newark. The city’s black populations have long shown unusually high levels of interest in Islam, dating to the Nation of Islam’s heyday in the 1960s. And while Chicago is the capital of the African American Muslim world, having served as the base for Elijah Muhammad, Wallace Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan, Newark has drawn protracted attention for its African American Muslim history. Some twentieth-century histories of African American Islam begin with the 1913 founding, in Newark, of the Moorish-Science Temple by Noble Drew Ali of North Carolina. About 20 years later, a disciple of Ali’s, a man

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42 Islamic teachings generally forbid loans that are repaid with interest.
later known as Elijah Muhammad, would become the Nation of Islam’s national leader.\textsuperscript{45} The Newark NOI mosque, known in the movement as Temple number twenty-five, developed a reputation in the 1960s for strong loyalty to the cause, a loyalty related to its militant minister James Shabazz, nicknamed the “Son of Thunder” for his sermonizing style. Shortly after the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, it became known that the three men convicted of his murder had prayed at Newark mosques, and a legend developed among African-American Muslims in the area that men from Newark were called on for the killing because only they were deemed capable by national NOI figures. In 1970, assassins would fatally shoot Minister Shabazz.

When I first learned this history as a reporter in 2007 and 2008, I suspected the locals were exaggerating their reputation in the ways any local branch of a national organization might build itself up to an inquirer late to the scene. In July 2008, two months before Wallace Mohammed died, I was fortunate to secure a brief interview with him. I asked whether the locals were exaggerating their national reputation within the organization. Without hesitating, he recalled an incident from about five years earlier when he was giving a speech at a convention in the Midwest. From the podium, he had noticed something strange: Everywhere he looked, it seemed, he saw someone from the Newark area.

We usually know the mannerisms. They’re different, the Muslims of Newark from the mannerisms of the Muslims of other parts of the United States: the way they talk, the way they move, their aura. I noticed it... I asked for a showing of hands, and hands went up. I told them to stand: ‘Let me see the Newark area.’ They represented, I believe, about one-fourth of the numbers at the annual convention.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{45} Evanzz, \textit{The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad}, 65.
\textsuperscript{46} Author’s interview with Wallace Mohammed, telephone, July 24, 2008. He died on September 9, 2008.
A simple explanation for this is hard to come by. Why should Newark have a stronger NOI presence than other cities? Wallace Mohammed cited the leadership of Minister James Shabazz from the 1960s. “He was the one who built a very strong following there in Newark,” he said. “And after him, it was the persons he influenced... He was very high-spirited. He was a very militant man, very strong man.”

Whatever the reason for Newark’s outsized role in the NOI and Islam’s place among African Americans there, the area in the 1990s became an unofficial headquarters of the African-American Salafi movement. The Islamic Center of East Orange hosted regular national conferences that would draw more than a thousand attendees. Dozens -- maybe hundreds -- of Muslims even moved to East Orange from around the country to be within walking distance of the mosque. “It was like you were living in a Muslim country,” said Umar Lee, a former member of the community who in 2007 wrote a well-read blog about African American Salafis. “No other place around it could do it like East Orange, if you were attracted to Salafi... You could do business with Muslims. Everyone could be a Muslim in your life. It was almost like you weren’t living in America.”

Abu Muslimah, Dawud Adib and a third African American Muslim who studied in Medina, Abu Usamah, ranked high among the most popular Salafi speakers, giving recorded lectures to large audiences at mosques and conferences around the country. “It got to a point,” wrote Umar Lee, “where it was not strange to find people who had 300-400 tapes in their collections.” Their popularity was especially high in Philadelphia, which in the following decade would overtake

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47 Ibid.
48 Another Saudi-inspired Salafi community was located in northern Virginia, and while it included African Americans, it was dominated by immigrant Muslims.
49 Author’s interview with Umar Lee, telephone, July 28, 2015.
50 Ibid.
East Orange as the movement’s hub. In the mid-1990s, due to their speaking engagements and the sale of cassette tapes with their sermons, these Saudi-educated imams began to eclipse the popularity of the nationally known Imam Siraj Wahhaj among selected groups of African American Muslims in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{52} Wahhaj, a former Nation of Islam minister who had left Wallace Mohammed’s movement to start his own Sunni mosque after a Muslim World League training event in 1977, had built his own national reputation as an Islamic authority and speaker at Muslim-American fundraising events.\textsuperscript{53} But he did not identify as a Salafi, and by the mid-1990s Muslims inclined toward Salafism came to prefer Abu Muslimah and others who were more proficient in Arabic and had studied more extensively at Saudi universities.\textsuperscript{54}

The certainty with which Abu Muslimah expressed himself on religious matters – a certainty widely associated with Salafis’ assuredness that they practice the only correct form of Islam – served to both attract and alienate members of the community. On one hand, his religious message, his educational pedigree, and his assuredness helped draw massive crowds to his mosque and to lectures around the country. On the other hand, a growing number of detractors had come to see him as unnecessarily forceful when disagreed with or when he felt crossed. He was known to publicly denounce other Muslims in the community by name as dangerous to Islam or “off the path.” In perhaps the most notable instance, in March 1996, he vehemently condemned an upstart mosque that had opened a mile and a half from his own Islamic center. After the new mosque – named \textit{Masjid As-Haabul Yameen}, and known as the Fourth Avenue Mosque – held its first Friday prayer service, Abu Muslimah publicly called it a \textit{masjid dirar} -- a Qur’anic term that means “mosque of harm” -- and told his mosque’s attendees not only to

\textsuperscript{52} Author’s interview with Tahir Wyatt, telephone, February 5, 2016.
\textsuperscript{53} In 1991, he had been the first Muslim religious leader to open a Senate session with a prayer. He has remained a major figure in Muslim-American life into the 2010s.
\textsuperscript{54} Author’s interview with Tahir Wyatt, telephone, February 5, 2016.
“boycott” the new mosque but also to not return the Islamic greeting of peace to people who went there. Numerous Muslim leaders tried to intercede, including the head of a U.S.-based immigrant Salafi group called the Qur’an and Sunnah Society, who solicited an opinion from Shaykh Albani overseas. This was an attempt to influence Abu Muslimah through the opinion of one of the world’s most prominent Salafi scholars. Shaykh Albani said he believed Abu Muslimah’s characterization was improper, and that the new mosque was far enough from the first one. But Abu Muslimah continued to defend his use of the term, saying Shaykh Albani had been given incorrect information about the situation.

The new mosque struggled at first, while attendance surged at Abu Muslimah’s mosque, which in 1997 purchased the armory building on the Garden State Parkway—widely viewed as a symbol of the community’s strength. “Abu Muslimah was not someone I agreed with all the time, but I tremendously respected his leadership ability,” said Umar Lee. “He was able to take a very working class community of African American Muslims and was able to move from a small house mosque into a huge armory building… They were able to do a lot of volunteer work to fix it up, to create a school and a community where people all over the country wanted to move. It was a major accomplishment.”

In addition to transforming their religious practices, the movement introduced newfound disciplines and kindnesses into the rhythms of daily life. Abu Muslimah described the impacts in

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55 The Qur’anic verse in question, 9:107, is said to concern a mosque built by enemies of Islam in the 620s, in the holy city of Medina. Its builders invited the prophet Muhammed to pray there under phony pretense, intending to deceive him, according to Islamic tradition, which also says Allah prevented Muhammad from going there, and that the prophet later had it burned down. The verse is commonly translated into English like this: “And there are those hypocrites who took for themselves a mosque (masjid) for causing harm (dirar) and disbelief and division among the believers and as a station for whoever had warred against Allah and His Messenger before. And they will surely swear, ‘We intended only the best.’ And Allah testifies that indeed they are liars.’

56 Interview with Tahir Wyatt, telephone, March 14, 2016.

57 Author’s interview with Umar Lee, telephone, July 28, 2015.
a manner reminiscent of how African American converts from earlier eras spoke of the transformative nature of the NOI.

You were really trying to be a believer, really trying to perfect your character, really trying to develop a relationship with your Lord, things that were missing in our lives growing up. It was the big thing here. Everyone was proud to learn the new verse from the Qur’an, to practice the new practice. Where else would you find men from the ghetto giving each other gifts, especially something insignificant, showing the thought counts… We began practicing things that we would consider… corny, telling people I love you for the sake of Allah.58

Still, others recall the period as a divisive one. At the Fourth Avenue Mosque, which regularly draws several hundred people for Friday prayers, many attendees say that due to their experience at Abu Muslimah’s mosque and the “masjid dirar” incident, they view “Salafi” self-identification as unnecessarily divisive. While members of the Fourth Avenue mosque take many religious cues from Salafism, they do not self-identify as Salafis. They say they find some practices of self-identifying Salafi mosques to be excessive and some people at Salafi mosques to be overly judgmental of other Muslims.

That said, many approaches to Islamic authority among Fourth Avenue attendees are similar to those at self-identifying Salafi mosques. For example, in interviews, many at the Fourth Avenue Mosque – and in the broader Salafi community as a whole – readily cited hadiths to explain routine decisions and practices. A man named Shakoor Mustafa, who left Abu Muslimah’s mosque for Fourth Avenue after the split, keeps twenty-eight volumes of hadith on his book shelves at home and refers to his collection nearly every day. Mustafa, who does not identify as a Salafi, said, “I believe if there’s something I want to understand, I cannot get a contemporary view of that understanding. I have to get the select view, predicated on something

58 Author’s interview with Abu Muslimah, East Orange, New Jersey, December 15, 2015.
from someone who is a salaf.” He cited a hadith when he explained to me his habit of dying his entire crown red with henna, rather than just his beard as many other African American Salafis do.

One of the things I read (in a hadith) once was that the prophet saw a boy and he saw him with his hair half cut... He said, ‘Tell your mother to either shave your head bald or cut it even, don’t make it like that.’ Balance is the objective Allah describes in the Qur’an... So for me, when I saw that he (the prophet) said ‘dye your beard,’ what I did was also do my hair and my eyebrows because I didn’t want them uneven. I don’t see anybody else doing that but I did that just to complete and achieve the objective of the principle of balance.

Mustafa regularly invokes hadith in conversations, frequently starting sentences with the phrase “The prophet said....” To a teen boy at a restaurant one evening: “Be careful of rap. The prophet said, ‘The devil likes poetry.’” To a man he wanted to quickly re-pay the twenty dollars he owed: “The prophet said, ‘Pay the man his money before the sweat dries on his brow.’” Discussing a recent illness, he cited a verse from the Qur’an on the healing power of honey, from a chapter on bees. He says he takes a teaspoon every hour when he needs to quash a viral infection, and says other people should too.

Like many others in the community, Mustafa has sought religious advice from Islamic authorities abroad. During the 1990s, friends planted doubt in his mind over the Islamic permissibility of his day job as a Newark police officer. He resolved the issue for himself during an upcoming pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, seeking out the second highest-ranking Saudi shaykh, Muhammad al-Uthaymin. Through a translator, Shaykh Uthaymin reassured Mustafa it was indeed permissible to be a police officer, as long as he did not oppress Muslims. “I was really honored to meet him, and to have from him this kind of sanction,” Mustafa recalled. “When

59 Author’s interview with Shakoor Mustafa, Parsippany, New Jersey, November 17, 2015.
60 Ibid. The hadith he is citing is explained at “Islam Question and Answer,” islamqa.info/en/110209 (accessed April 7, 2016).
people question me about it I can say, ‘I got a number of references for you, first and foremost Shaykh Uthaymin.’”

Walking with me outside the Fourth Avenue mosque after Friday prayer, Mustafa reflected on the warm communal vibe. Approximately two hundred people from the service, dozens of them local government workers, mingled in the open air while respecting religious rules against gender-mixing. Women covered their hair, though fewer were veiled than at self-identifying Salafi mosques; most wore a jilbab, a loose-fitting over-garment. On the avenue, halal restaurants, Islamic clothing shops, and book sellers did brisk business. Men congenially called each other “shaykh” and spoke of their next trip to “Saudi.” Mustafa mused: “It’s like a small Mecca... You feel like you’re floating because you’re experiencing some of the idealism of a real vibrant Muslim community. Here is a place where your name is safe, your honor is safe, your person is safe, your property is safe. It’s a real thriving community. Short of my trip going to Mecca, this is like the closest thing I can experience here.”

During the mid-1990s, Mustafa attended the Islamic Center of East Orange but left after Abu Muslimah called the Fourth Avenue Mosque a “masjid dirar,” which Mustafa felt was an extreme response. He avoids calling himself a Salafi, saying he believes the atmospheres of self-identifying Salafi mosques are overly judgmental. “I hate,” Mustafa said, “for anybody trying to stick an Islamic thermometer up my ass to get my temperature.”

Salafi vs. Salafi

The community’s ascent was thickly intertwined with two other major communal conflicts, both of them related at least partially to directives and statements issued in Saudi Arabia.

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61 Author’s interview with Shakoor Mustafa, Newark, New Jersey, November 28, 2015.
62 Author’s interview with Shakoor Mustafa, Newark, New Jersey, November 28, 2015.
Community members held shaykhs associated with the kingdom in high regard and often relied on their words from abroad as valued evidence for their own Islamic positions in the United States. In the late 1990s, the foreign shaykhs’ writings and recorded statements would contribute to a schism that roiled the African-American Salafi movement and eventually caused its center of gravity to shift to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, ninety miles southwest.

The first of these disputes involved the question of whether to name a single national leader—an “emir of the Salafis.” The controversial idea stemmed from a fatwa issued by Shaykh Bin Biz that said Muslims in Muslim-minority countries could elect such a leader to help guard their communal interests. In December 1998, a group of seventy-five Salafi leaders from across the country nominated a two-person slate, meant to be approved by a larger communal vote: The proposed emir was a Saudi-educated imam of Egyptian descent named Muhammad Sayed Adly, who had been close to African American Salafis. Abu Muslimah was the proposed deputy emir. But opponents charged it was an unnecessary, divisive idea, and a power play by Abu Muslimah, who remained a polarizing figure.

Supporters cited Shaykh Bin Baz’s fatwa as a rationale, arguing it should be applied to Salafi communities in the United States.63 “The expectation…was, it would be face-changing for American Islam,” recalled Ahmed Burhani, who favored the plan. “It was going to give this body of people a titular head to lead the way.” The proposed amir, Shaykh Adly, attempted to garner support at a meeting attended by hundreds on July 3, 1999, telling the audience a national leader could help move their movement forward. “Islam is not only memorizing a few books about *aqidah* [creed] and afterwards sitting in every masjid debating with each other about certain issues,” Adly said that day. “This position of uniting ourselves, and having [an] amir as single

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63 The question had been posed to Shaykh Bin Baz by a representatives of a group in Kuwait called *Jam`iyat Ihya’ al-Turath*. 
head to lead our efforts toward pleasing Allah subhana wa ta‘ala [is] to bring ourselves together as Muslims, to unite our efforts, to try to establish a better program to improve our conditions.”

Yet the prevailing winds opposed the idea. Adly and Abu Muslimah never garnered enough support, and the idea was denounced by a U.S.-based immigrant Salafi group called the Qur’an and Sunnah Society, which had formed in the late 1980s. Another issue was the presence of Abu Muslimah’s name on the slate. At the meeting in July 1999, Shaykh Adly openly fretted that “[s]ome people keep believing very strongly [that] this a game Abu Muslimah started and Mohammed Adly [is] only a front for him.” He denied this was true and cited Shaykh Bin Baz’s fatwa. He also presented what he viewed as additional evidence – support by the second most prominent shaykh in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad al-Uthaymin. Months earlier, upon hearing that another Muslim in the community planned a trip to the kingdom, Adly had asked this man to present their community’s dilemma to Uthaymin, and to ask whether he supported the idea of an emir. At the July 1999 meeting, Adly had the man publicly relay Uthaymin’s backing. Still, the idea failed.

The second dispute proved more divisive and consequential, pitting Abu Muslimah against the aforementioned Shaykh Rabi al-Madkhali of Saudi Arabia. Clearly, Abu Muslimah never intended to cross paths with Madkhali, a former professor at the IUM who, while not of first- or second-tier prominence in Saudi Arabia, had developed loyal followings among groups of quietist Salafis abroad, including in England and the United States. Madkhali, born in the kingdom in 1931, had been a professor on the Faculty of Hadith at the Islamic University of Medina. In the 1990s he was firmly ensconced in the quietest camp of Salafis that is loyal to the

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
Saudi royal family, professing that Muslims should focus on religious purification rather than political activism. In his writings he freely refuted those he believed in error, especially political activists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sahwa political reform movement in Saudi Arabia. In the 1990s, after receiving lavish public praise from one of the most prominent Salafi shaykhs in the world, Nasir al-Din al-Albani, Shaykh Madkhali would develop loyal followings abroad with Salafi movements in other countries, including the United States and England. Madkhali became involved in African American Salafi affairs more than any other foreign shaykh, his views often leading to turbulence at American mosques that raised questions over the sighting of Islamic religious authority.

In the late 1990s, Abu Muslimah found himself on the receiving end of Medina-to-New-Jersey criticism from the Saudi shaykh that would spread to Muslim circles internationally and turn many of his own African American followers against him. The conflict stemmed from a passing statement made by Abu Muslimah during a lecture at his mosque, in 1996, that religious authorities in Saudi Arabia taught not Salafism but the Hanbali methodology of Islamic thought.

Al-Ham dulillaah I can easily say that I studied in the University of Madeenah, that they aren’t teaching the Madhhab [methodology] as-Salafee, in the University of Madeenah, nor are the scholars of Arabia known to the scholars of the Da’wah As-Salafiiyyah, in this world, and the bigger ones that are calling to this Da’wah[, B]ut that these scholars there in Arabia they’re known as Hanbalee scholars, and that’s their madhhab [methodology], and they teach it and they taught it and they call the people to their madhhab. 

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This proved a controversial statement. Throughout the 1900s the term Salafism had increasingly become a badge of honor in the kingdom, along with a guiding principle that anyone who identified with an Islamic madhhab or “school of law” named for a historic imam from Islam’s early centuries – Imam Ibn AHanbal, Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Malik and Imam Shafi‘i, being the main examples -- could not be Salafi, as those schools identified with regional “traditions” said to have differed from what the very earliest Muslims intended. A variant of Abu Muslimah’s observation had been made by the internationally renowned Shaykh Nasir al-Din al-Albani in the 1960s, contributing to his exile from Saudi Arabia after having taught there from 1961 to 1963. Just as the issue had proved problematic for Shaykh Albani, so would it prove damaging to Abu Muslimah.

Upon hearing Abu Muslimah’s statement, one of his listeners – my sources did not recall his name – was apparently dismayed, and he complained about this alleged smear to an American man known as Abd al-Rahman, who was an IUM student at the time. Abd al-Rahman was visiting the United States at the time and secured a cassette recording. Once he returned to Medina for university classes, he played the tape for his fellow students. In late 1998, when Abu Muslimah made hajj, he was asked to meet with Shaykh Madkhali, a staunch defender of the Salafi bona fides of Saudi religious leaders like himself. The meeting, held in a hotel room in Medina, would take the form of an unofficial trial, where Abu Muslimah was the defendant, Abd al-Rahman the prosecutor, and Shaykh Madkhali the judge. More than a dozen other Salafi observers, most of them students, filled the room.71

According to several people who were present, and a detailed (and polemical) account posted on the Internet, Abu Muslimah was asked, in front of Shaykh Madkhali, whether he had claimed Saudi scholars were not Salafis. He denied saying it. But Abd al-Rahman played the cassette.

71 Author’s interview with Tahir Wyatt, telephone, Friday, February 5, 2016.
Abu Muslimah then defended his statement by saying, “We did not hear the scholars of Arabia say they are Salafi.” Shaykh Madkhali is said to have responded, “You are a hidden Hizbi [partisan] and a liar. You are an enemy to the Da’watus-Salifiyyah [Salafi Mission] [sic] and I have seen the likes of you many times before!”

In the United States, this eventually served as a devastating verdict against Abu Muslimah’s credibility. Rabi al-Madkhali was not widely known at the time, and his criticism was not widely circulated immediately, but after some of his followers learned about it the following year, they berated Abu Muslimah upon his arrival at the Germantown mosque in Philadelphia to give one of his weekly sermons, preventing him from speaking. Word of this spread, and many African American Salafis, always conscious of remaining “on the path,” stopped attending Abu Muslimah’s mosque in East Orange. Friday attendance declined from over a thousand to approximately half that, the imam’s reputation damaged among large contingents of African American Salafis.

Abu Muslimah showed no willingness to concede ground to Rabi al-Madkhali’s views. But in an effort to calm tensions, a number of other shaykhs from IUM had urged Abu Muslimah to write a letter of rectification saying that the Saudi shaykhs in Medina were indeed Salafis. He did so, hoping to put the issue behind him. Still, afterward he publicly stated that he had not changed his position, and that he wouldn’t let outsiders “bully” his community:

The only time we’re changing is if it Qur’an changes or we made a statement in opposition to the Qur’an, or the only time we’re changing is when the Sunnah change or we say something in opposition to the Sunna, but outside of that, nobody is going to come and bully us to make us change something cause you don’t like

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72 The term hizbi (sometimes rendered hizbee) means partisan and is viewed negatively, implying that a person hurts the cause of Muslim unity.
74 Author’s interview with Tahir Wyatt, telephone, Friday, February 5, 2016.
what we’re saying or you disagree with us. We’re men just like the rest of the people are men.”

For his opponents, this new statement served as a second transgression, and they subsequently had Rabi al-Madkhali condemn Abu Muslimah in stronger terms that explicitly advised Salafis to avoid his mosque. They would publish accounts of their conversations with Madkhali in a seventeen-page document called Uncovering the Hidden Hizbee: Aboo Muslimah, Abdullaah Tawfeeq, Imam of Masjid Ahlus Sunnah, which would become available online, easily accessible to the entire Salafi community in the United States and interested people abroad.75

Within two years, a contingent of once-active members of Abu Muslimah’s mosque in East Orange would leave to start a new one, Masjid Rahmah, in adjacent Newark. It opened the first week of September 2001. The immediate conflict leading to the break involved a hajj committee, known as Brothers United, which organized pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia. It was owned and managed by a small group of individuals who attended the mosque, but before long Abu Muslimah began insisting that the mosque manage the program. When he publicly criticized the individuals for not turning the business over, they considered leaving the mosque. They consulted people in Saudi Arabia who told them Abu Muslimah was not a Salafi and that they should start a new mosque.76

To Abu Muslimah, the involvement of Rabi al-Madkhali represented an effort to prevent Salafis in the United States from developing religious authority. “Shaykh Rabi felt slightly envious or jealous that ‘Those people are their own leaders,’” Abu Muslimah said in an interview in 2015. He lamented that many African American Muslims were all too willing to go along with Madkhali, seemingly hesitant to view an African American as a religious authority. He also said the incident ran counter to the spirit of instruction at the IUM:

In our last year, often times they referred to us as the ‘scholars of your countries, the judges of your countries.’ The teachers were being polite with us in that way, calling us shaykh or judge or religious authority of

75 Ibid., 10-14.
76 Author’s interview with Abdul Wasi, telephone, December 16, 2016.
your country. ‘How do you view such as such?’ ‘What would you do, such and such?’ That’s what I understood from it.77

A different view was offered by Abdul Wasi, a member of the aforementioned hajj committee, Brothers United, that Abu Muslimah sought to disband. In his estimation, people such as Abu Muslimah, who had earned a Master’s Degree at the IUM, could be valuable resources for spreading the call of Islam in the United States, but only those with a Ph.D could be relied on for authoritative interpretations of sacred scripture and oral traditions. He cited Tahir Wyatt, an African American from Philadelphia scheduled to earn his Ph.D at the IUM in 2017, as an example of someone who, if he moves back to the United States, could be such an Islamic authority in the country. He explained his reliance in the 1990s on Saudi shaykhs, or “scholars.”

Some people are under the impression that there are scholars in America. When we use the word “scholars,” … there are no actual scholars in America, no scholars in the West. What we do have in the West is, we have students. We have students who have graduated [from Islamic universities abroad]… They are what we would call da‘is, people who bring the message [of Islam], but they are not scholars. In the Islamic world they’re not considered scholars, even with those degrees.

Gender and Polygamy

Women in the African American Salafi movement are much more likely to wear a veil (niqab) covering their faces than are African American Muslims in other Islamic movements. Gender separation appears to be enforced more stringently. In sermons, and in books sold outside mosques, it is stressed that women should not leave their homes without a husband’s permission and should not be receiving calls from men they are not married to.

In 2007, I interviewed an African American woman in her twenties outside the Fourth Avenue Mosque in East Orange, after a Friday juma prayer, as at least one hundred other Muslims milled about in the high point of the weekly social scene. She did not want to tell me her name, but she said she had recently become Muslim. She expressed bewilderment over her new husband’s anger whenever her male friends called the home. “If a guy calls and asks for me,

77 Author’s interview with Abu Muslimah, East Orange, New Jersey, December 15, 2015.
I’ll get in trouble. If a woman calls, I won’t,” she said. Our brief conversation was overheard by a second African American Muslim woman, who joined the conversation, saying, “That’s not weird. That’s protocol.” She then whispered what was presumably some advice to the first woman. When the first woman walked away, the second woman explained to me further: “Once you become Muslim, you don’t have friends of the opposite sex, not in the sense of ‘We buddy-buddy’,” she said. “...They say that when man and woman are together, that shaytan [the devil] makes three.”

The rate of polygyny in the African American Salafi community appears to be higher than in Wallace Mohammed’s group; some Salafi leaders estimated that between five to ten percent of African American Salafi men have, at some point, had at least two wives at a time. While Wallace Mohammed generally discouraged polygyny, tending to stress the need for equal treatment of wives and the benefits of legal marriage licenses, which he knew were impossible to secure for polygynous arrangements, Salafi imams emphasized that polygyny is a permissible Islamic rite mentioned in the Qur’an. It is often encouraged in imams’ sermons and the literature sold at the Salafi mosques. A book entitled *A Concise Manual of Marriage*, sold outside Masjid Rahmah in Newark and written by Shaykh Uthaymin, warns that “the limiting of man to one wife (only) has the potential to result in evil and the fulfillment of lust by other avenues.” On a tape sold at Masjid Rahmah, in a sermon called “Righteous Wife,” an African American imam from Britain named Abu Khadeejah, speaking at a Masjid Rahmah-sponsored conference, acknowledges that current wives are often traumatized when a husband announces he will marry again. But he said a “transgression” occurs only when that wife lashes out at her husband,

> It is upon you, my sisters, to be patient... so long as your husband is a good individual, meaning good with the religion... So what if he goes and gets married again? Is he not still your husband?... Just because he has taken a second wife he has become the most evil man upon the earth?... This is not from the behavior of a righteous woman.\(^78\)

\(^78\) “Characteristics of a Righteous Wife, Aboo Khadeejah,” cassette, available at masjidrahmah@hotmail.com.
A full-throated Salafi defense of polygyny in the West was put forth by Imam Bilal Philips of Canada and his wife Jameela Jones. Philips, born in Jamaica, is a Salafi imam who was educated in Saudi Arabia and Great Britain and who has since developed an extensive international following. Their book *Polygamy in Islaam*, first published in 1985 and reprinted at least four times, confronts Western discomfort and nervousness over polygamy. The authors note that women outnumber eligible men and too often cannot find a husband, and that Jesus is not known to have forbidden polygamy. Most important, they write, polygyny is allowable by divine decree, made permissible in the Qur’an, and Allah’s laws “are not bound by considerations of time and place, but stand applicable whenever circumstances permit.”

The authors observe that while Western legal conventions criminalize polygyny, they do not prosecute adultery, and that therefore adulterous men bear no legal responsibility for women they sleep with outside of marriage, unless a pregnancy results and paternity is detected through DNA tests. Polygyny, they say, is a better alternative in that it offers legal male guardianship to more women. Even if it painful for the first wife to have to share her husband, they write, polygynous arrangements are beneficial for other women and for society at large.

Still, the moment a husband tells his first wife he wants a second wife, is a moment neither forgets. “Of course the women, as we know, always feel it is something that they did wrong,” said a man known as Abu Dawud, who attended Masjid Rahmah and lived married to two wives for five years. “They always [say], ‘I’m always trying to make you happy!’... But they are educated to understand that everything in the world is not about you.” His first wife, to whom he is still married, accepted his taking a second wife after initial reluctance, he said. “I was showing her the benefit in it — She will receive a reward from Allah for allowing her husband, who she feels is exclusively hers, ... to share with someone who needed a husband at the time.”

79 Bilal Philips has four million followers on Twitter.
82 Author’s interview with Abu Dawud, Newark, New Jersey, July 12, 2015.
Unmarried women in these communities hold different views about being approached by married men looking for a second wife. In 2008, while walking to meet someone outside the Fourth Avenue Mosque for an interview, I walked past two women talking in hushed tones, but loud enough for me to hear; the first woman seemed aghast that a married man had proposed such an arrangement to her. On a different occasion, another woman spoke enthusiastically about having male companionship without having to devote her entire life to a husband. A third woman, who had previously been married and divorced twice, spoke positively about one day becoming a second wife. “When I was a non-Muslim,” she recalled, “I had a problem with my boyfriend looking at another woman, or my husband looking at another woman.” It was bad for her self-esteem, she said. But were she in a polygynous marriage, she speculated, “I’d know this [other woman] is his wife. And I’m his wife. And it’s permissible by Allah for him to do that. As long as he treats us fairly.”

It is difficult to compare the extent of polygyny among African American Salafis to that in other Muslim groups in the United States. It is likely more prevalent than in Wallace Mohammed’s movement, given the differences in how the movements’ leaders discuss it. But the extent to which polygyny among Salafis is a departure from practices of other African American Muslim Sunni groups is difficult to estimate, because based on anecdotal evidence it was not uncommon in earlier movements such as Dar al-Islam.

**Saudi Arabia, the “Saudi-ization” Question and “Deculturation”**

I have argued that it is hard to imagine the African American Salafi movement existing in anything resembling its current form without the influence of Saudi religious leaders and the kingdom’s university system. Shaykhs linked to the kingdom were significant -- and often the ultimate -- sources of religious authority for many African American Salafis. Still, the nature and

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83 Author’s interview, East Orange, New Jersey, date unknown.
extent of “Saudi-ization” internationally -- that is, the degree to which Saudi Arabia has influenced Islamic movements around the world – remains a matter of dispute. The political scientist Olivier Roy laid the groundwork for the debate, arguing in 2006 that the Islamic world should be viewed not as a territorial entity, but instead in abstract or imaginary terms unconnected to national, continental or cultural boundaries. The transnational influences of Salafism, he contended, have bolstered this “deterritorialized” Islam, serving to eradicate ethnic, local and tribal religious traditions in favor of the universalistic Salafi ideals that are taught at Saudi universities. Indeed, the reduction of local religious and cultural influences on Islamic practices is a central goal of the Islamic movement in Saudi Arabia that started in the 1730s with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who strove to “purify” or “cleanse” Islam from traditions believed to have sullied the “true Islam” practiced by the earliest Muslims. Roy argues that as a result of the religious and intellectual networks that formed through Saudi networks, “‘local’ Islams are giving way to global Salafism in many Islamic teaching institutions… and none of the cultural markers is retained.”

Many scholars have argued that Roy overstated the extent of this Saudi influence. Bernard Haykel has written that while Saudi missionary operations were critical in helping spread Salafi ideals, they were not sufficient to sustain the movements in different countries; other religious forces and Islamic traditions similar to Salafism in the host country were necessary as well. Along those lines, Madawi al-Rasheed observed that Saudi religious leaders were unable to control former students once they returned to their native countries, noting that “as transnational

85 Ibid., 104.
processes gather momentum, they escape the control of those who initiate them."\(^{87}\) Indeed, the historical narratives of Salafi movements in four countries that are studied in separate monographs – Egypt\(^{88}\), Yemen\(^{89}\), Jordan\(^{90}\) and Lebanon\(^{91}\) – demonstrate the import of both Saudi influence and local politics and cultures in the development of Salafi movements in different countries.\(^{92}\) Collectively, these monographs demonstrate that local political realities – which increasingly show willingness among Salafis to actively oppose their national governments – often help shape the development of local Salafi communities, even if their leaders previously studied with quietist, apolitical Salafis in Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, where Saudi-educated quietist Muqbil al-Wadi was the leading Salafi figure, Laurent Bonnefoy argues against the very concept of Saudi-ization; Bonnefoy contends the idea is overly tied to state-centric viewpoints that undervalue “transnational actors” – that is, regular people with grievances – who are at the center


\(^{92}\) The aforementioned monographs collectively demonstrate that national political realities, distinct in each country, dramatically affect an essential component of Salafism – the degree of Salafi political involvement. In Yemen, the main Salafi leader, Muqbil al-Wadi, was an apolitical quietist who had studied in Saudi Arabia and been close to Shaykh Bin Baz. Yet during the 1900s, at the dawn of Yemeni electoral politics, some of al-Wadi’s former students formed a Salafi political organization – *al-Hikma*. Al-Wadi would criticize Hikma members for their political activism.\(^{92}\) In Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak’s government oversaw the formal removal of Islam as the “religion of the state,” and where Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasser had imprisoned Muslim Brotherhood members in the 1950s, the quietest Salafi stance was increasingly difficult to defend, especially after the Arab Spring of 2011. The political atmosphere then witnessed increased political engagement between Qutbis and Madkhalis, as old political dividing lines frayed.\(^{92}\) In Lebanon, where religious affiliation and election results have been formally tied since the National Pact of 1940 – the president is Maronite Christian, the prime minister is Sunni, the parliament speaker is Shi’i, and the deputy speaker of Parliament is Greek Orthodox -- the decades-old quietist disposition of some Lebanese Salafis took an activist turn after 2005 due to the murder of the Sunni prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, and due to perceptions of political pressure and a perceived Shi’i ascendency associated with the rise of Hezbollah.\(^{92}\) And in Jordan, where the Muslim Brotherhood is active politically but is perceived as weak due to its alliance with the government, Salafis are more loathe to enter the political system, worried that doing so will mean replicating the Muslim Brother’s path toward compromising their ideals. Similar narratives are told in chapters of Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, involving Salafism in Pakistan 126-142; Sudan 143-168; Indonesia 169-188; Palestine, 221-243; France, 364-383; Great Britain 384-403; and Netherlands 404-423.\(^{92}\)
of the religious exchanges. These regular people are not mere puppets of state interests, he says; they are independent actors whose allegiances reflect their own agency. As he writes,

These actors have the ability to bypass states and act within the specific social spaces that have appeared to fill the gaps of inter-state and institutionalized relations. Much of their interactions occur in what Peter Mandaville defines as ‘translocality,’ stressing the local dimension and the ‘situatedness’ of these actors as well as their capacity to cross territories. These gaps are indeed never fully deterritorialized and disconnected from their local contest as they connect places, imaginings, experiences and histories beyond borders.  

And yet in the United States, where there is no centuries-old tradition of Salafism, Saudi religious leaders have maintained significant influence in Salafi communities. Saudi Arabia has undoubtedly affected the Salafi religious culture, which would not exist in its current form but for graduates of Saudi universities and other returning students. Roy’s critics argue convincingly that he overstates the extent to which local Islamic cultures have been eradicated, yet these same critics can understate the extent of the Saudi influence that does exist. Part of Bonnefoy’s argument against Saudi-ization is that Yemen’s top Salafi, despite having studied in Saudi Arabia, issued many opinions against the Saudi regime, and that Salafism in Yemen was more likely to oppose than support the Saudi monarchy. In Bonnefoy’s telling, this opposition signified a lack of Saudi impact on Yemen’s Salafi community. But I would argue that Bonnefoy’s reasoning is overly reliant on a narrow conception of Saudi Salafism that privileges kingdom-friendly quietism over the mixture of religio-political beliefs that exists in Saudi universities and in Saudi society in general, where support for the quietist approach is far from universal. Protest movements are not foreign to the kingdom, especially since the 1990s, and political activism among Salafis abroad hardly indicates a lack of Saudi influence.

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93 Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen*, 112.
94 Ibid., 15.
That said, the extent of Saudi-ization is probably more identifiable in the United States, among African American Salafis, than for Salafis in most other countries. It is true that Muslims from other countries influenced African American Muslim movements starting in the early 20th century, starting with the Ahmadiyya movement of British India, but since the 1970s those efforts have been dwarfed by Saudi-financed missions. Yet in the Muslim-majority world, where Salafi movements and their organizational infrastructure have existed for centuries, the extent of Saudi influence is less clear. In Yemen, India and West Africa, several contemporaries of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab -- Shaykh Muhammad al-Shawkani, Shaykh Waliullah Dehlawi and Shaykh Uthman don Fodio, respectively – led movements often described as Salafi in nature. In the 1860s, interaction with shaykhs of the Ahl al-Hadith of India, a Salafi movement, influenced the way Saudi Salafis would stress avoidance of individual madhhab in favor of *ijtihad*. More recently, Shaykh Albani developed loyal groups of Salafi students in Jordan and Syria. Still, even in Muslim-majority countries Salafism is often associated with Saudi influence. Richard Gauvain, in his book on Salafism in Egypt, observed that many Egyptian Salafis understand creedal aspects of Islam through the teachings of Shaykhs Bin Baz, Uthaymin and al-Albani. Gauvain cited an anecdote of his meeting with one particular shaykh, who was affiliated with the Cairo-based Salafi group *Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya*, who responded defensively when Gauvain told him that others in Egypt had recommended a work by the Saudi Uthaymin as the best work on ritual. The shaykh responded with the name of a fellow Egyptian who had also written on the topic.\(^\text{96}\)

While Saudi influence on the African American Salafi movement is obvious, the extent of Saudi-ization is debatable. Leaders and non-leaders alike acknowledge that, as in every religious

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community, the personal discipline associated with these teachings is not easy to maintain. A widely used term, “off the *deen* (religion),” refers to un-Islamic behavior, like drug use or sexual impropriety, by Salafis. And yet it seems a stretch to argue that forays into “street life” signify a lack of Saudi-ization. Even in the kingdom, where Salafism is the predominant form of Islam, widespread adherence to Salafi norms cannot be assumed; witness the presence of the so-called Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, whose “religious police” patrolled Saudi streets with sticks from the 1980s to 2007.

Yet Salafi and Saudi are not synonyms, begging the question: If there have long been Salafis elsewhere, why is the term so frequently associated with the type of Sunni Islam observed in Saudi Arabia? The historian Henri Lauziere has suggested that the widespread association of Salafism with Saudi Arabia stems mainly from a single French writer’s misuse of the term in 1921, which set off an imprecise, confusing historical narrative about Salafism. The unwitting culprit was Louis Massignon, who, starting in 1919, applied the term Salafi to refer to a late-nineteenth-century religious movement of Islamic reformists and their followers. This particular set of Islamic reformists included Jamal al-Din al-Afghani of Syria, Mohammed Abduh of Egypt, and Rashid Rida of Syria, whose main stated quest was to reform Islam and Islamic culture to meet challenges presented by Western countries and empires. This emphasis differed significantly from that of the Saudi Salafis associated with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his ideological descendants, who linked their mission to challenges facing Islam from within, rather than from the West. Lauziere observes that neither Afghani nor Abduh ever used the word Salafi to describe themselves, yet after Massignon in 1921 applied the label to

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99 Ibid., 375.
them retroactively, the epithet caught on with other Western (and non-Western) writers who referred to them. (Confusion would increase because Rida, later in life, actually migrated ideologically toward the religious worldview favored by Saudi religious leaders.) Lauziere further links the confusion to the name of a private business called the Salafiyyah Bookstore (al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya), which opened in Cairo in 1909. This outlet sold books that were not limited, in any sense, to “Salafi” writers in the theological sense of the term; instead, its literature reflected the concerns of Abduh’s modernist movement. According to Lauziere, the name itself “willy-nilly intertwined the term salafiyya with the elevation of Arabs and Muslims in the modern world,” and thus “expanded the scope of this adjective well beyond its original theological meaning and associated it with a broad and multifaceted reformist program.”

In 1912, the Syrian-born proprietors of the Salafiyya Bookstore entered business with Rashid Rida, a main disciple of Muhammad Abduh. In 1916, one of the original proprietors, al-Khatib, moved to Mecca to assist Sharif Husayn, who had just launched the Arab Revolt. In 1928, a branch opened in Mecca, selling “Hanbali and Wahhabi books that suited local patrons” but also literature that would not have met their approval.

**Conclusion**

During the spring of 2015, in the days leading up to the Islamic University of Medina’s commencement, the school’s administration requested that the graduates not wear their Arabian robes to the ceremony, despite having grown used to them while studying there. Instead, they urged their departing students to receive their diplomas in garb more familiar to their homelands, where in coming weeks and months it was hoped they would secure positions as Islamic

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100 Ibid., 377.
101 Ibid., 378.
102 Ibid., 383.
authorities. The idea was to display the diversity of the graduating class, which included students from fifty countries, as well as the diversity of the greater Islamic world. Yet it also served to highlight a dilemma the graduates would face at home, where they would be, on the one hand, far removed culturally from the confines of a Saudi Islamic university, and, on the other hand, equipped with an education suiting them to usher Arabian Salafi norms into Muslim environments that were not yet familiar or hospitable to Salafism.

African Americans in the Salafi movement made different choices than the African American Muslims who came before them, whose communities had lacked the immersion with Saudi cultural norms and ongoing relationships with religious leaders from another country that African American Salafis developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas Wallace Mohammed’s movement had resisted much if not most of the guidance from the Saudi and Saudi-educated religious leaders sent to teach them, African American Salafis tended to accept the principle that the best Islamic leaders had been educated abroad, often in Saudi Arabia, and that teachings of Saudi religious leaders merited regular consultation.

103 Interview with Ibn Muneer, Queens, New York, December 15, 2015.
Conclusion

With his educational pedigree, Tahir Wyatt, an African American man from Philadelphia who was born in 1978, might have been expected to develop a place of unrivaled leadership within the Saudi-inspired Salafi movement among African Americans. From 1996 to 2016 he was a student at the Islamic University of Medina, poised to earn his doctorate in Islamic creed (*aqida*) in his final year. In 2013 he became the first English speaker to be given a teaching chair at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, one of the two holiest sites in Islam. And throughout his years as a doctoral student he traveled the United States during breaks to speak at mosques, building a national reputation for his knowledge.

Yet during the final five years of his studies, Wyatt’s Salafi credentials came under intense attack by Shaykh Rabi al-Madkhali and his small groups of loyal, vocal Salafi followers in Europe and the United States. Madkhali, a quietist Salafi, was the shaykh who had criticized Imam Abu Muslimah of East Orange during the 1990s, not to mention a slew of other Muslim leaders around the world. ¹ Wyatt and Abu Muslimah’s situations were not entirely similar; Abu

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Muslimah, it will be recalled, had raised Madkhali’s ire by publicly denying the Salafi credentials of Saudi scholars. Tahir Wyatt, on the other hand, stood accused of a more passive violation; in 2011 he had declined a request by Madkhali to denounce a particular Egyptian shaykh, Abul-Hasan al-Ma‘ribee, who Madkhali had publicly condemned as overly political and of harboring sympathies for Sayyid Qutb, the late Muslim Brotherhood leader who had favored rebellion against any government that did not institute Shari‘a law (meaning, in Qutb’s estimation, all governments in the world).

Madkhali had first criticized Ma‘ribee in 2002 and soon began demanding that others publicly denounce him as well. A reluctant Wyatt, who countered that he had never even met Ma‘ribee and that other Saudi scholars advised him against such a condemnation, refused Madkhali’s demand. For this stance Madkhali criticized him as being off the Salafi path, a charge that gained traction with Madkhali’s British followers, who were associated with the website Salafi Publications, whose credo -- “Exposing Deviant Ideologies, Extremism, Terrorism and their Proponents” – refers not only to violent and politically active Islamist groups but also non-Salafi Muslims, who they view as deviants within Islam. The situation intensified in 2011 when a Salafi mosque in Newark, New Jersey, scheduled an educational conference that initially listed both Madkhali and Wyatt on the program – Madkhali via telelink and Wyatt in person -- among nine speakers. Madkhali insisted on Wyatt’s removal from the program. The Newark mosque, Masjid Rahmah quickly complied, removing him from the schedule. But when other Saudi shaykhs -- among them a Saudi Salafi named Salih as-Suhaymi -- vouched for Wyatt’s Salafi credentials, the mosque administration reinstated Wyatt to the program and removed Madkhali. Shaykh Madkhali would be reinstated soon thereafter, but Wyatt remained on the program. Masjid Rahmah’s imam, Abu Muhammad al-Maghribi, who resigned from his position,
has said he left because of of Wyatt’s inclusion, which he said he viewed as an insult to Madkhali.²

In the years to come, Wyatt would be repeatedly denounced by Madkhali’s followers at the aforementioned Salafi Publications over his refusal to condemn the Egyptian shaykh as Madkhali had demanded. To Shaykh Suhaymi, who had defended Wyatt before the 2011 conference, the preference for Madkhali over Wyatt by vocal Western Salafis boded poorly for the autonomy of North American Muslims over their religious affairs. He called for Muslims in the United States to not undercut developing leaders from their own country – such as Wyatt –and criticized the leader of Salafi Publications for sowing dissension. “The solution is in your hands, O American Muslims,” Suhaymi advised, according to a translation. “You should accept those who come from your people and are known to have sound minhaj [religious path]. You must learn from him and accept what he says.”³

As recounted in Chapter Five, Madkhali’s criticisms had long served to marginalize other Salafi leaders – African American and otherwise-- around the world, and it is worth noting here that within Saudi Arabia itself, Madkhali has never held the rank of a top-tier theologian. While he studied under the most prominent Salafi shaykhs as a student, and had himself served as chair of the Sunnah department at the IUM’s College of Hadith, he lacked the status of Shaykhs Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz and Muhammad al-Uthaymin, or the massive followings of Shaykhs Nasir al-Din al-Albani or Muqbil al-Wadi, the latter a quietist Salafi based in Yemen.⁴ But starting in the 1990s Madkhali developed increasingly vocal followings in Western countries, especially

England and the United States, after receiving significant praise from Shaykh Albani, revered as perhaps the world’s most prominent quietist Salafi. Yet as Madkhali began criticizing more and more Muslim leaders, even Albani, whose praise had launched Madkhali’s ascent, came to publicly question his approach. Madkhali’s influence further increased in the West during the first years of the twenty-first century after the deaths of all four of the aforementioned shaykhs – Bin Baz, Uthaymin, Albani and al-Wadi.

Even without this cadre of detractors, Tahir Wyatt could have faced increasingly sophisticated competition for prominence as a Muslim leader, given the increased breadth of Sunni leadership and educational infrastructure in the United States. In 1996, two American converts to Islam – Zaid Shakur, who is African American, and Hamza Yusuf, who is white -- founded the small Zaytuna Institute in California with the goal of producing U.S.-raised Islamic leaders who could rule on matters of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and reduce the perception that American Muslims needed to travel overseas to study Islam and Islamic teachings. In 2010, Zaytuna received accreditation from the Western States Association and was allowed to run a baccalaureate program in Islamic Law. They offered college-style courses on Islam in the United States, in an environment where Americans would feel comfortable and at home; a co-founder even described one of his motives as weeding out Middle Eastern cultural norms from widespread American perceptions of what it means to be Islamic. Women on campus would not be forced to cover their heads (though most female students did so). Gender separation, so prevalent in other parts of the Muslim world abroad, were not enforced either in classes or at the lunch table.

5 Ibid.
6 It is often referred to as the first Islamic liberal arts college in the United States.
Another Islamic educational effort in the United States -- more recent and more Salafi-oriented than Zaytuna -- was the AlMaghrib Institute. Founded in 2002, it has specialized in weekend or dual-weekend seminars, held across the country, that are often taught by Muslims who have graduated from the Islamic University of Medina or other Islamic colleges abroad. Given this background, which is shared by its dean of academic affairs, Yasir Qadhi, an IUM graduate who is of Pakistani descent, AlMaghrib has been credited with “almost single-handedly reviv[ing] the Salafi movement in the US among Sunni American Muslim college students.” The founders hope for a permanent campus that can support a degree-offering institution.

Other attempts to base Islamic authority in the United States, in a non-university setting, was the Fiqh Council of North America, mentioned in Chapter Four. The Fiqh Council’s goal was to provide religious guidance to Muslim-Americans on practical matters. Formerly a small branch of the Muslim Students Association in the 1960s, it expanded its role in 1988 as part of the Islamic Society of North America. Among the qualifications for membership on its nineteen-member council was five years of residence in North America, a rule designed to ensure its jurists were familiar with the culture in which they offered non-binding advice.

None of these efforts has been specifically geared toward African American Muslims, nor to their specific communal concerns, so the old questions of authority and identity remain relevant: Given the twenty-first-century strengthening state of Islamic infrastructure in the United States, from where should African American Muslims seek Islamic authority? Can they now, or

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9 In 2005, a group of mostly African American Muslim leaders founded the Muslim Alliance of North America, an association devoted mainly to concerns of African American and Hispanic Muslims. While it held two conferences in 2007 and 2008, it had little momentum or accomplishments thereafter. In April 2016 its leaders held a meeting aimed at rejuvenating the organization through special attention to programs helping former prisoners reenter society and a Fiqh Research Council that would issue rulings on practical matters. Author’s interview with Ihsan Bagby, telephone, April 28, 2016. Bagby is on MANA’s Diwan (governing body) and a former General Secretary of the organization.
eventually, train “their” religious leaders themselves, without guidance either from abroad or from immigrant-led religious institutions? What role should racial unity and concerns play in how religious authority is envisioned? In analyzing these issues, Sherman Jackson historicized Islam among African Americans over the last century into three separate parts, or “resurrections,” a term he wittingly appropriated from decades-old NOI rhetoric. The “first resurrection,” from 1930 to 1975, ended with the death of Elijah Muhammad. It encompassed a period when increased numbers of African Americans, though still a small minority of them, turned toward Islam and “were said to have been delivered from the darkness of their slave mentality into the light of their true Blackamerican selves.” The term generally refers to the heyday of the Nation of Islam, whose leader Elijah Muhammad used it to emphasize the magnitude of what it meant for them to embrace Islam. What came next, the “second resurrection,” encompassed the decades after 1975, when the broad historical trajectory of Islam among African Americans remained largely connected to charismatic leaders -- Imam Wallace Mohammed and Minister Louis Farrakhan – “rather than any objective method of scriptural interpretation,” Jackson wrote. He posited that a “third resurrection” would look very different from what preceded it; rather than revolve around charismatic leaders, it would be based mainly on “the structured discourse of the Sunni tradition.” African American Muslims would “master” and “appropriate” Sunni traditions, emerging from the process as “self-authenticating subjects rather than dependent objects.” They would need neither guidance from immigrant Muslims nor university educations in the Muslim-majority world.

11 Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, xx. Jackson was writing in 2005, when both Wallace Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan were both alive. Wallace Mohammed died in 2008. Farrakhan turned eighty-three years old on May 11, 2016, still the leader of the Reconstituted Nation of Islam.
How American Muslims – African American and otherwise – have navigated relationships of authority with Muslims abroad and among themselves since 2000, the year that ended the period I have studied, has been affected by two main forces: 9/11 and the Internet. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 led to increased government and media scrutiny on American Muslims’ connections to Muslim-majority countries, with special attention falling on Saudi Arabia, home to fifteen of the nineteen hijackers who commandeered planes on 9/11. This extra scrutiny on African American Salafis, a reality despite their quietist orientation and longstanding opposition to al-Qa’ida, could not have helped their efforts at communal growth. (Meanwhile, Wallace Mohammed’s movement had begun shifting away from Saudi Arabia before 9/11 due to the tensions discussed in Chapter Four, instead nurturing alliances with religious leaders in Syria and Malaysia.)

Yet over time it is the Internet that has left a stronger imprint on both the religious nature of Islam and matters of authority among African Americans. In the 1960s and 1970s, the particularistic impulses of the Nation of Islam and Moorish Science Temple of America had already begun facing stiff competition when changes to immigration laws attracted large numbers of arrivals from Muslim-majority countries who would challenge the groups’ heterodoxies. The internet has multiplied that effect, allowing new and prospective converts to juxtapose unusual cosmologies of the NOI and the Five Percenters, for example, against more common Sunni beliefs that can seem more authentic due to their longer histories and breadth of international followings. The same is true of religious texts, which are now near-universally available to followers and prospective followers. And the speeches and sermons given by Wallace Mohammed in the 1970s, which would have otherwise remained unknown to anyone but his devoted followers who had purchased books of his compiled works, are now widely

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12 The Five-Percent Nation, also known as the Nation of Gods and Earths, was founded by a former NOI member named Clarence 13X. The name reflects the organization’s belief that members are among the five percent of the population that can enlighten the rest of humanity with the truth.
available on sites such as New Africa Radio and Youtube. The contentious and often brash nature of religious debate among Salafis, meanwhile, has ensured the online publication of nearly every position worth having or inquiring about regarding Salafi mosques, leaders, and organizations. Anyone using a search engine to learn about Salafism among African Americans will be inundated with results on any matter or leader. The internet has also helped bolster the influence of Salafi religious stances, which center around proof texts for positions on every issue, over other types of Islam. This is not to predict the advent of Saudi cultural norms in the United States; rather, it is to note that Salafi use of ancient texts has increasingly led non-Salafi Muslims to justify their own positions in writing. (This type of response is present in other non-Muslim religious communities as well.)

At the same time, and with similar energy, the internet has negatively affected the centralization of religious organizations and movements. The posting of major criticisms, minor imperfections and any negative perceptions at all, are as visible to casual and determined viewers alike, in ways that can easily dissuade people from trying a religious approach or remaining at a place of worship. And even for devoted believers, who now have instant access to the same texts formerly restricted to religious leaders who had studied in seminaries, the internet can easily be used to challenge the authority of venerable institutions and organizations. Salafi chatrooms bring together far-flung believers to closely follow a beloved shaykh’s every word, but the followers can also, rather easily, check the shaykh’s references for accuracy. Indeed, the migration of sacred texts from purely analogue form to both analogue and digital has profoundly changed the ways people experience them. When people want to read a sacred text all the way through, or ruminate on an entire chapter, they may still favor the printed copy, which may occupy honored real estate in the home. But for acquiring information about a specific issue –
what does the Bible, the Qur’an, the Talmud or hadiths say about a given topic? – for one’s personal interest and practical matters, the search functions of Internet databases offer more promising options. The texts, writes Becker, “are no longer subject to the hierarchical materiality of analogue media. They are accessible via search functions and do not need to be read or seen as a whole text.”

Whether owing to fear of U.S. government scrutiny or a sincere desire for religious purity over partisan politics, the Islamic transnationalisms of the two groups studied here broadly resemble, in the 2010s, what they were during the Persian Gulf War of 1990 and 1991. During that period, Wallace Mohammed’s group supported the U.S. government positions, and quietist Muslim leaders associated with the Saudi royal family would have supported the kingdom’s military alliance with the west against Saddam Hussein.

There are differences from that period. Wallace Mohammed’s movement in the 2010s has lacked the relationship with Saudi officials that it had in the final decades of the 20th century, having built ties to religious institutions in Syria and Malaysia. Wallace Mohammed died in 2008, leaving his movement to split among various strains. Wallace Mohammed II leads the Mosque Cares movement that his father founded during his last decade, but retains no formal leadership over his father’s followers; indeed, the dissension that characterized itself during Wallace Mohammed’s period remains. As for the Salafi movement among African Americans, it is widely viewed as a shade of its 1990s self. It remains vibrant at individual mosques, less so as a national movement. The divisions discussed in Chapter Five, which split the movement’s main

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14 Ibid., 433.
base in New Jersey, led to a shift in the center of gravity to Philadelphia. Shaykh Madkhali’s continuing influence has demonstrated the power that individual Saudi shaykhs can retain over foreign audiences, while also offering a model for the African American leaders he has spurned to build and rebuild their own followings with bases in North America.

At least some of the pieces seem aligned for Sherman Jackson’s “Third Resurrection,” a time when African American Muslims, to the extent they can be considered in a collective sense, are less organized around charismatic leaders such as Elijah Muhammad, Wallace Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan. In the 2010s, African American Muslims with degrees from Islamic institutions abroad are less rare than they were in previous decades, and efforts such as Zaytuna and AlMaghrib are well underway, designed to provide domestic seminaries that can train future Muslim leaders. This study on Islamic transnationalism, then, concludes on a somewhat ironic note, with the observation that American Muslims’ engagements with the Muslim-majority world has had the effect of making the Muslim future in the United States less transnational. I qualified the word “ironic” because the goals of the transnational exchanges examined in this study always included a stronger domestic Islamic infrastructure. It is true that African American Muslims, like people of other religions and ethnicities, will continue to imagine themselves as part of a community that transcends national boundaries. Yet the nature of their transnational ties could change if Islamic seminaries do manage to take hold in the United States, as Muslim leaders hope they will. With more options for respected and even accredited Islamic educations, future American Muslims may feel less inclined to move overseas to study Islam, or to otherwise rely on Muslims abroad for religious guidance. That day seems closer in 2016, when this study was published, than it was during the final quarter-century of the 20th century. Whichever
preferences for authority are held by the coming generations, they will play a large role in shaping Muslim communities in the United States.
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