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Farrakhan Accepts Orthodox Islam

Photo: W. D. Muhammad, leader of the Muslim American Society, and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, right, pray during traditional Muslim prayer services February 25, 2000, in Chicago.

Photo/Charles Bennett

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On Savior's Day, the Nation of Islam's annual gathering on February 26, Louis Farrakhan announced his acceptance of orthodox Islam, renouncing his organization's race theology, and ending more than two decades of rivalry with Imam W.D. Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's son and head of the Muslim American Society. Sharing the stage with Imam Muhammad, Farrakhan declared, "From this day forward, Imam Muhammad, whatever our small problems, we'll work them out for the glory of Allah." Farrakhan, who organized the Million Man March in 1995, is estimated to have some 200,000 followers in the NOI, while W.D. Muhammad's organization is believed to have two million followers. The American Muslim community has warmly received the reconciliation between these two prominent leaders.

The rapprochement between Farrakhan and W.D. Muhammad came 25 years after the death of Elijah Muhammad, who established the Nation of Islam in the 1930s. To members of the NOI, Elijah Muhammad was held to be the "last messenger of Allah" because of his close friendship with Wallace D. Fard (or "Farraad"), the NOI's revered prophet who is often said to have disappeared in 1934. Elijah Muhammad preached a separatist black theology that held the black man to be superior to the white man (the "white devil"), who was originally created by a rogue scientist. According to Richard Brent Turner, author of *Islam in the African-American Experience*, under the leadership of Muhammad, "the black Muslim movement acquired

one million followers and seventy-six mosques in the United States and abroad. Its holdings, which included the Guaranty Bank and Trust Company, thousands of acres of farmland, the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper (with the largest circulation of any African-American newspaper), housing complexes, aircraft, and retail and wholesale businesses, were estimated at \$85,000,000 by the 1970s."

Wallace D. Muhammad, named by his father for Wallace D. Fard, was educated in Egypt and heavily influenced by orthodox Islam. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca several times and remained a friend and supporter of Malcolm X after the civil rights leader departed the NOI. Wallace often clashed with his father over aspects of Islamic theology and was expelled from the NOI on several occasions but always welcomed back into the fold. Upon his father's death in 1975, Wallace D. Muhammad became the Supreme Minister of the NOI. Two months after assuming the leadership of the organization, he announced his acceptance of the five pillars of orthodox Islam, rejecting his father's racial exclusivity and allowing non-blacks to join the NOI. W.D. Muhammad (who changed his name to Warith D. Muhammad) argued that his father was not "the Messenger of Allah," but the voice and interpreter of Fard's words, and renamed the organization the World Community of Islam in the West, which eventually became the Muslim American Society.

Although he revised NOI theology, W.D. Muhammad has repeatedly praised Elijah Muhammad for achieving the "First Resurrection" of African Americans by introducing them to Islam, noting that the "Second Resurrection" (which Elijah Muhammad had foreseen as an "apocalyptic event") was to be directed towards all Americans. W.D. Muhammad also undertook sweeping reforms in the administration of the NOI, sharing power with a council of six imams, each responsible for a region of the country. Recognized worldwide as a religious leader, W.D. Muhammad received the Gold Medal of Recognition from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and was nominated international president for the World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1995.

In March 1978, Louis Abdul Farrakhan, a former calypso singer and violinist who had joined the NOI in 1955, broke ranks with Muhammad's organization. Farrakhan revived the NOI, urging African Americans to return to the theology of Fard and calling for racial separatism, black economic autonomy, and reparations for African Americans (including a "demand for a separate land"). Farrakhan also reestablished the Fruit of Islam, the NOI's paramilitary organization, which Imam Muhammad had done away with.

For decades Farrakhan rejected orthodox Islam, saying it did not take into consideration the special circumstances of African-Americans. Moreover, in opting for a black supremacist ideology, Farrakhan also denounced the racism in Muslim societies. "I see Muslims taking advantage of blacks in Arabia and Africa. I will not jump over one black Christian to find brotherhood with a Muslim...If you [orthodox Muslims] are so interested in the black man in America, why don't you clean up the ghettos in Mecca," he said at a rally in Harlem in 1980. "The ghettos in the Holy City where the Sudanese and other black African Muslims live are some of the worst I've ever seen anywhere...I see racism in the Muslim world, clean it up!"

Despite wide travel in the Islamic world and close friendships with leaders such as Muammar Qaddafi, Farrakhan continued to shun classical Islam. "We believe that Allah came to us in the name of W. Farraad Muhammad, the messiah of the Christians and the Mahdi of the Muslims," he declared on Savior's Day in 1991. "Many of my Muslim brothers say this is un-

Islamic...I visited Mecca and I sat with the scholars and this is the point we wrangled over...And when I finished, they shut their mouths."

Nine years later, after a "near-death experience," the cancer-stricken 66-year-old leader has dramatically changed his views. "Has Farrakhan changed? Yeah, I have," he said at last month's Savior's Day. "No man undergoes a trial and comes out the same...A fool changes not, but a wise man changes often." Farrakhan went on to renounce the NOI's race theology and recited the *shahada*, the creed of orthodox Islam: "Allah sent Muhammad with the final revelation to the world...There is no prophet after the Prophet Muhammad, and no book after the Koran." In the past NOI members did not follow many of the traditions of orthodox Muslims and had their own version of the *shahada*: "There is no God but God and Elijah Muhammad is his prophet." By pronouncing the traditional *shahada* of mainstream Islam, Farrakhan signaled a major shift in NOI theology and religious practice.

Although his statements represented a significant departure from earlier rhetoric, Farrakhan was quick to reassure his followers. "I haven't abandoned you," he said. "You as a people should never doubt me after my years of service." He embraced W.D. Muhammad. "After twenty-five years, you and I can walk together as brothers," Farrakhan said. "Twenty-five years later, I know that your father wanted this." W.D. Muhammad, in turn, responded, "Whatever has troubled us in the past, I think we can bury it now and never look back at that grave."

In a later speech at Harvard University, W. D. Muhammad praised Farrakhan's move toward mainstream Islam but also paid tribute to Wallace D. Fard and the important role he played in spreading Islam among black Americans. Fard, Muhammad said, used reverse psychology and symbolism, "to organize discontents, outcasts, socially rejected, poor, illiterates and culturally-deprived African-Americans of the ghetto," but Elijah Muhammad "took emphasis away from [Fard's] symbolic language." According to W.D. Muhammad, "[Fard's] Islam is to be seen as a strategy for planting Islam in the soul of [the] black community, among those who represent the sub-class in the black community...[in] a racially-diseased America." W.D. Muhammad also dispelled myths about Fard's identity and alleged "disappearance" in 1934, recalling that Fard, who he said was probably a Pakistani member of the Ahmaddiyah religious movement, used to visit Elijah Muhammad at home in the 1950s and even offered to teach the young Wallace the Urdu language.

Given the rich history of Islam in the African American experience, most African American Muslims have welcomed Farrakhan's about face, seeing it as a step towards the long-overdue normalization of relations between the NOI and the Muslim American Society. Muslim leaders outside the African American community have also reacted positively to the Farrakhan's new outlook, noting that NOI followers have begun observing Ramadan and *djuma* congregational prayers like orthodox Muslims around the world. Sayyid Syeed, secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which mostly represents immigrant Muslims, welcomed Farrakhan's olive branch, saying it would improve Islam's image. "Demonization has been our major challenge in America," he said. "Islam is a universal religion, for all races, all colors, all groups. We need to unite under one God, under one prophet and one universal brotherhood."

Critics who have long called Farrakhan a "messenger of hate" have reacted to the Minister's change with cautious optimism. Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, praised W.D. Muhammad as a "counter-voice to the extremism and anti-Semitism of Farrakhan," but remained wary

of an alliance between the two organizations. Foxman told *The Jerusalem Post* that he hoped W.D. Muhammad, "a responsible leader of the African-American Moslem community," would temper Farrakhan's racism, instead of becoming contaminated by it. "We will know very quickly" what the new friendship will yield, said Foxman. Farrakhan's infamous anti-Semitism has previously found expression in statements referring to Adolf Hitler as "wickedly great," and Judaism as "a gutter religion."

Although some observers remain skeptical, most Muslims have appreciated the significance of Farrakhan's reconciliation with mainstream Muslim leaders. "ISNA and the Muslim American Society made a major move toward embracing the Minister as a Muslim," said Precious Rasheeda Muhammad, organizer of the Harvard conference and a student at the University's Divinity School. "This must be recognized as progress in the unification of Muslim Americans. It should not be viewed as support of any racist ideologies...Once someone declares the *shahada*, they are Muslim. Minister Farrakhan did that on February 26 in front of thousands of witnesses. Therefore he should be supported by Muslims.

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