

# America's Other Muslims

While Louis Farrakhan captures headlines, the lesser-known W. D. Mohammed has a large following among African-American Muslims—and a warmer view of the United States. Can he help make America's immigrant Muslims more at home in their adopted country?

*by Peter Skerry*

On Labor Day weekend 2004, more than a thousand African-American men and women gathered at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Chicago for a Saturday afternoon fashion show. Black women of various shapes and sizes glided down the runway in eye-catching African prints fashioned into stylish but loose-fitting dresses. There were even a few male models, sporting similarly colorful tunics and leisure suits. The patter of the announcers was accompanied by an African-American version of Muzak—understated funk punctuated with the occasional unobtrusive rap number. Every so often audience members were reminded to “write those checks and spend that money.”

The “head-wrap,” usually some kind of turban, worn by every woman on the runway was a sign that this was no ordinary fashion show, as was the way the clothes were described to the audience. Though the emcee occasionally noted how a particular dress “accentuated” the figure of the model sashaying down the runway, the most frequently heard word was “modest,” as in “This outfit would be good for a night on the town when you want to look stylish *and* modest” or “This is for the sister who wants to be modest *and* strut her stuff.”

The fashion show had begun with a reading from the Qur'an—in Arabic, by a

woman. Once again, highly unusual. The occasion was the annual convention of Imam Warith Deen (W. D.) Mohammed's organization, The Mosque Cares. The three-day event had begun the day before, Friday (*Jumma*), the Muslim day of prayer, with a two-and-a-half-hour service attended by about 3,000 worshipers. These were middle- to lower-middle-class husbands, wives, and children, a few of whom were surely not Muslim. They were also, as Imam Mohammed later put it to me, “folks who want to get past resentment and who want to be one with humanity.”

Again, the service was not typical of Muslim prayer services around the world. There was little kneeling and prostration. Indeed, there was little actual praying, and not much Arabic was spoken. (The overwhelming majority of those present would not have understood a whole lot.) The session was taken up mostly with a rambling but low-key sermon (*khutba*) by Imam Mohammed, who emphasized the importance of taking “conscious, rational responsibility” for one's self, toward the goal of taking advantage of the opportunities available in the United States. At the concluding session on Sunday afternoon, the dominant topics were community economic empowerment and Muslim education and schools.



*Calling himself “a new Muslim,” W. D. Mohammed, son of the Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad, has quietly led his followers in unexpected directions since the death of his father in 1975.*

In the hotel exhibition hall, the conference’s “Business Bazaar” was crammed with booths staffed by African-American entrepreneurs selling vitamins, fruit ciders and specialty foods, skin care products, books and DVDs, and other items catering to the needs of middle-class African-American Muslims. In the background, soothing R&B and pop standards were piped in, interrupted at one point by a live Muslim hip-hop performance.

In his *khutba*, Imam Mohammed drew frequently on his own life, including his upbringing in the Nation of Islam by his father, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, whose formal title is routinely invoked by the imam and his followers, always with the utmost respect. What was *not* mentioned all weekend, either by the imam or by any of the other African-American Muslims attending, was the Patriot Act.

That may have been the most striking aspect of the event. For at virtually any other Muslim gathering these days, the Patriot Act is routinely and angrily denounced—for the

most part, inaccurately—as the basis for the deportations, detentions, and profiling that have frightened and outraged Muslims in this country. The majority of Muslims in the United States are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Many of them are not citizens. All of them understandably feel vulnerable and, indeed, targeted in this post-9/11 environment.

But not so vulnerable that immigrant Muslims pass up any opportunity to condemn the Bush administration. Again, the contrast with the African-American Muslims at the Hyatt Regency was stark. Imam Mohammed *did* mention President Bush once, in connection with the Iraq war. He did not offer enthusiastic support for the president, but he went out of his way not to criticize him or his policies.

**W**. D. Mohammed took over the Nation of Islam—a curious amalgam of freemasonry, Christianity, and Islam that religion scholar C. Eric Lincoln once dubbed a “proto-Islamic cult”—upon his



father's death in 1975, and immediately brought its adherents to Sunni Islam. Not only did the son change the name of the organization, he transformed its ideology, eliminating its antiwhite racism and embracing the political institutions of the United States. And he did all this while continuing to honor his father's memory.

**B**ut times have changed, and what might once have seemed interesting or important about W. D. Mohammed now seems less so. What matters today is whether his version of Islam, clearly African-American but also far closer to traditional Islam than his father's eccentric doctrine, will prove compatible with what immigrant

Muslims believe and practice. His openness to American society, culture, and politics makes it difficult for immigrant Muslims, and indeed for some African-American Muslims, to embrace his teachings. Yet Imam Mohammed's efforts to ground his work in authentically Arabic and Islamic sources cause problems for those uncomfortable about straying too far from their African-American roots. Meanwhile, America's powerful social and cultural turbines are drawing immigrant Muslims, and especially their children, into the American mainstream—sometimes not obviously, usually not completely, and almost never painlessly. Gradually, this process is transforming what it means to be a Muslim in America.

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*The faithful listen as Imam Mohammed addresses the annual convention of The Mosque Cares in Chicago earlier this year.*

important a role—social, cultural, or political—he and his followers will play in the unfolding drama.

**T**oday there are between two and three million Muslims living in the United States. Most of them—anywhere from two-thirds to four-fifths—are immigrant-origin Muslims. Since 9/11 these newcomers have felt under siege yet challenged to become more directly involved in American society and politics. For potential allies and guides through this unfamiliar terrain, they have been turning to African-American Muslims.

But immigrant Muslims themselves hardly constitute a cohesive political group. Although social and cultural change and post-9/11 pressures are bringing them together, they remain divided along sectarian, linguistic, and national-origin

At the same time, post-9/11 political realities impress upon immigrant Muslim leaders the need for role models and allies. African-American Muslims loom large in such scenarios. And as the spiritual leader of nearly three-fifths of the more than 300 African-American mosques, so does W. D. Mohammed. Reliable numbers are hard to come by. By the most generous estimates, Mohammed's following could not exceed 50,000. But no other African-American Muslim leader has nearly that number. At 71, he has the bearing and reputation of a statesman. He is an esteemed figure who, by remaining above petty personal conflicts and divisive political squabbles, has gained the respect not only of African Americans of all faiths but of immigrant Muslims and their leaders. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how

lines. More to the point, long-standing differences continue to divide immigrant Muslims from their African-American coreligionists. The same weekend that W. D. Mohammed's convention was meeting in downtown Chicago, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the largest immigrant Muslim organization in America, was welcoming more than 30,000 individuals to its annual convention across town at O'Hare Airport. (At the ISNA conference, President Bush and the Patriot Act were roundly denounced.) This was not the first time such a crosstown split had occurred. On occasion, the two conventions have shared some speakers, including their leaders. But the organizations remain distinct, with different constituencies, each worshipping Allah in its own way—and mostly in its own mosques.

Nor is W. D. Mohammed's position unchallenged. Within his own highly decentralized organization, many imams ignore his advice and follow their own paths. Among African Americans, Islam is fragmented into more than a dozen sects, including several remnants still claiming the mantle of the Nation of Islam. A few leaders have emerged as rivals to Imam Mohammed for media attention and African-American loyalties. Of these, the most visible is Minister Louis Farrakhan, who picked up the reins (and the name) of the Nation of Islam dropped by W. D. Mohammed, and who in recent years has moved the Nation closer to Sunni Islam.

Another important figure is Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin—the former civil rights firebrand and Black Panther H. Rap Brown—who typifies those African-American Muslims who want to practice a purer, more authentic version of Islam than that espoused by Imam Mohammed, and who are far more critical of American society than he.

The individual and organizational rivalries among these leaders are exacerbated by daunting theological, ideological, and political crosscurrents. Many African-American Muslims, not just aging 1960s revolutionaries, complain that W. D. Mohammed and his adherents practice a form of Islam not well grounded in knowledge of either Arabic or the Islamic texts and commentaries. Many take issue as well with Imam Mohammed's relatively uncritical embrace of American values and institutions. As Sherman Jackson, a professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Michigan, has observed, Imam Mohammed is criticized, and often dismissed, for practicing "*nouveau Islamique*."

**I**n contrast to the mass of ordinary Black Muslims isolated within the bronzed ghetto created for them by his father, W. D. Mohammed was brought up in a cosmopolitan environment. Travel abroad and his education in this country exposed him to the languages, religions, and politics of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Like his contemporary and sometime ally Malcolm X, Mohammed converted to Sunni Islam in

the 1960s. When he assumed leadership of the Nation of Islam in 1975, it should not have been a surprise that he immediately opened the doors to the "white devils" and, according to Vassar College religion professor Lawrence Mamiya, declared that "there will be no such category as a white Muslim or a black Muslim. All will be Muslims. All children of God." Of even greater significance to Muslims, Mohammed rejected the highly unorthodox doctrine that his father's teacher, Wallace D. Fard, was God incarnate, and that Elijah Muhammad was his prophet. Again contradicting his father, Mohammed began teaching the orthodox Muslim doctrine that there is in fact life after death.

It was less predictable that W. D. Mohammed would have immediately disbanded the Fruit of Islam, his father's menacing praetorian guard. (The young Mohammed had served as a "Junior Fruit," which, he told the convention audience, was among his happiest memories.) Imam Mohammed also drastically decentralized the hierarchy built up over decades by his father. The legacy of that restructuring endures today: Mohammed has little formal authority and not much control over the roughly 185 mosques that are affiliated with his organization—or, more accurately, his network.

**E**ven more surprising, indeed paradoxical, was that W. D. Mohammed's move toward Sunni Islam also entailed significant movement toward mainstream America. Women were allowed to go out alone at night and were afforded greater responsibilities in the mosques. Imam Mohammed publicly endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment and rejected his father's condemnation of civic engagement and allegiance to the U.S. government. Though he himself, as a conscientious objector (in accordance with his father's teaching), had refused to enter the military, Mohammed decreed that such service was no longer forbidden. Indeed, within a few years he was lecturing at the Pentagon.

The imam also encouraged his followers to vote and perform other civic duties. In the mosques (no longer known as "tem-

ples”), the Nation of Islam’s flag was replaced with the American flag, and students at affiliated schools were taught to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The American flag appeared on the cover of the organization’s newspaper, where it can still be found today. As Mohammed told *The Jerusalem Post* in the mid-1990s, “We should love America passionately now that America has changed so drastically within a relatively short period of time.”

Since 9/11, W. D. Mohammed’s fervor for America has hardly waned. The contrast with attitudes among immigrant Muslims is striking, and he highlighted it in a recent interview with me. We met in a spartan, slightly shabby, one-story brick building on the outskirts of Chicago. It seemed a place to meet a plumbing contractor, not a spiritual leader.

But this is a very down-to-earth, unassuming man. The imam arrived in a late-model but nondescript SUV, accompanied only by his daughter—without the male entourage of assistants and bodyguards that many such leaders have. He was well dressed but casual, and definitely not flashy, in a tailored suit and knit polo shirt. As he had reminded his audience at the Hyatt Regency, he once worked as a welder and still considers himself “an ordinary man, in fact a very ordinary man.”

Across a conference table crowded into a back room, Imam Mohammed speaks softly, affably. Echoing themes from the convention, he emphasizes the importance of “conscious beings” who seek “the rational truth” and avoid sentimentalism, which he associates with Christianity. When pressed on this point, he wryly says, “Well, yes, I like my tomatoes firm!”

Even while embracing America and denouncing black racism and separatism, W. D. Mohammed has always been attentive to group pride and race consciousness; at times he has even appeared to espouse black nationalism, though he has never actually done so. One of his first official acts upon succeeding his father was to rename the Nation of Islam’s former Harlem temple after Malcolm X. During the same period, Imam Mohammed coined the

term “Bilalian” to refer to all black people, not just Black Muslims. This was an allusion to Bilal Ibn Rabah, an Ethiopian slave who had been brought to Arabia and later became a confidant of the Prophet and then the first muezzin, the person who calls believers to prayer. Bilal was a link not only to Islam but to Africa, at a time when black Americans began to refer to themselves as African Americans.

The Nation of Islam’s old newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, was renamed *The Bilalian News* (it later became today’s *Muslim Journal*), and the mosque in south-central Los Angeles became the Bilal Islamic Center, a name that has stuck. Today, the term “Bilal” is much less in vogue. Still, W. D. Mohammed continues to appeal to black pride, particularly in the context of business development and community empowerment. At the Chicago convention, he even argued that “your heart is dead if you waste five gallons of gas to drive to a white man’s store rather than shop within your own community.” Yet in the next breath he urged his audience not to “make a racial picture, but a human picture. If you establish yourself in a racial picture first, you establish yourself a mess.”

Ihsan Bagby, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Kentucky who is himself a Muslim and an African American, reminds us that the relationship between Islam and their own racial and ethnic heritage is a critical issue for African-American Muslims—perhaps *the* critical issue:

African-American Muslims come to Islam carrying African-American and American cultural experiences (foremost the Black Church and the street), and the question arises: How much of that unique African-American culture is to be left behind? . . . To what extent should African-American Muslims follow the traditional practices of the Muslim world, which is the culture that immigrant Muslims bear?

Group pride and race consciousness are definitely part of the glue that binds W. D. Mo-

hammed's followers to him and to one another, but in his hands they are never ideologically charged. Advancing them has never been the goal of the organization.

Despite the deference Imam Mohammed paid to group sensitivities, his reforms were not implemented without dissension. Many longtime adherents departed. Over the years, there have been tensions between the imam and the most prominent of these dissidents, Louis Farrakhan, but, true to form, Mohammed has avoided any personal criticism of Farrakhan. In a 1999 interview with *The Los Angeles Times*' Teresa Watanabe, he acknowledged Farrakhan's "positives," such as his urging "the poor, irresponsible black men . . . to accept responsibility for their families, to earn an honest income." But he concluded that Farrakhan's perspective had become irrelevant:

The Nation was designed to attract poor and hopeless blacks to come to something created for nobody but them. But we live in new realities now. Blacks are being encouraged to aspire to the highest positions in America now. Everything is open to us. There is very little place for the extreme idea of the Nation of Islam in America today.

In February 2000, W. D. Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan publicly reconciled at an event in Chicago. Also making an unprecedented appearance with Farrakhan was Kashmiri-born Sayyid Syeed, the secretary-general of ISNA. Both Mohammed and Syeed acknowledged Farrakhan's movement toward orthodoxy, including his observance of Ramadan according to the lunar calendar and his recognition of Friday prayer as the principal religious gathering of the week. Indeed, at this session Farrakhan effectively renounced the Nation of Islam's basic teaching that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet by declaring that "we bear witness that there is no prophet after the prophet Mohammed." Most observers attribute Farrakhan's rapprochement with Islam at least in part to his bout with prostate can-

cer. But having survived that, Farrakhan has never quite followed through, and the Nation remains outside the broad umbrella of Islam.

Other differences between Minister Farrakhan and Imam Mohammed remain vivid. Farrakhan has indulged in anti-Semitism; Imam Mohammed habitually points to his conversations with prominent rabbis and Jewish organizations (even though headlines such as "Ariel Sharon's Government Using Hitler Tactics" appear in his *Muslim Journal*). The imam and his lieutenants also boast of his consultations with Vatican officials and audiences with the pope, and they highlight his friendship with televangelist Reverend Robert Schuller, who has spoken at the annual convention.

At the same time, Imam Mohammed is hardly reluctant to criticize Christianity, though he does so without a trace of sectarian venom. In his *khutba* at the Hyatt Regency, he referred obliquely to Christianity as "the old religion," whose appeals to emotion were intended to "make you docile and put you at the service of political rulers." In contrast, he pointed out, "we don't treat you like sheep or fish," but focus instead on "the conscious, rational person." Yet in the same *khutba*, Mohammed also reassured his listeners: "Many of you were Christian. . . . That's nothing to be ashamed of. . . . It's something to be proud of."

W. D. Mohammed's approach to politics offers another point of contrast with Farrakhan. As noted earlier, Mohammed has urged his followers to get involved in politics. Farrakhan moved in the same direction with characteristic zeal by plunging headlong into Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns. Imam Mohammed's approach has been more discreet, which is undoubtedly why he opposed Jackson's candidacy. In 1976 he endorsed Jimmy Carter for president and in 1992 supported George H. W. Bush. But though perceived as socially and politically conservative, he has avoided being strongly identified with any one political personality, party, or platform. For Mohammed, promoting individual responsibility and rebuilding communities, not

playing electoral politics, is what's critical.

While Farrakhan was courting controversy and media attention with events such as the Million Man March on Washington in 1995, W. D. Mohammed kept a lower profile, maintaining relationships with his imams and busying himself with an overhaul of the curriculum of the Islamic elementary schools he had inherited from his father. In honor of his mother, these were renamed the Sister Clara Muhammad Schools, and there are now about 35 in operation. More recently, he has been building up a cooperative purchasing network that relies on local imams and their mosques to purchase and distribute halal meats and foods. The Collective Purchasing Conference may also be a way for Mohammed to exercise more authority over his imams.

One reason W. D. Mohammed was able to pursue such low-visibility, long-term institution-building is that, at least until the mid-1990s, he received support from Arab governments. Much as his father formed close ties to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Mohammed maintained cordial relations with Anwar el-Sadat. C. Eric Lincoln reports that the imam was the only American observer invited to attend the Tenth Annual Islamic Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Fez, Morocco, in May 1979. Around the same time, he was named by Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states "sole consultant and trustee" for the distribution of Islamic missionary funds in the United States. Perhaps more critical to many Muslims in America, he was given the responsibility of certifying Americans who applied for Saudi visas to make the hajj to Mecca.

W. D. Mohammed's ties to the Saudis merit particular attention. Saudis reportedly contributed millions toward the construction of the Bilal Islamic Center in Los Angeles. And in his interview with me, Imam Mohammed acknowledged that for several years they gave him an annual payment of about \$70,000. His relationship with the Saudi Arabian government was probably strongest during the Gulf War. At the beginning of that conflict, according to Georgetown University historian Yvonne

Haddad, the Saudi ambassador convened a meeting of American Muslim leaders. In that roomful of Saudi beneficiaries, W. D. Mohammed was the only one who did as he was asked: He signed a document supporting U.S. intervention in the region. All the others refused, and their support from the Saudis soon ended. Imam Mohammed's funding continued for a few more years. He indicated to me that it stopped sometime in 1994, when he claims to have broken with the Saudis. In an interview with *The Los Angeles Times* in 1999 he said:

I don't receive any money now, but I have received some and I lost it . . . because I suspected some strings were attached. I said I can't accept this kind of relationship. They were choosing my friends for me, too. The enemy of the friends who were giving me money was supposed to be my enemy, too.

In the years since 9/11, it has been reported that the Bilal Center continues to receive Saudi funding. If it does, the explanation may lie with the decentralized nature of Mohammed's organization and his limited control over imams in his network. The salient point here is that throughout the roughly 20-year period when Imam Mohammed cooperated with the Saudis, he effectively defied their religious doctrine by placing himself and his organization squarely within the American mainstream.

As that meeting with the Saudi ambassador suggests, African-American Muslims tend to see the world very differently from their immigrant coreligionists. Relations between African-American and immigrant Muslims are strained at worst, wary at best. Aside from differences of language, culture, and national origin, tensions have long been fueled by class disparities. Immigrant Muslims tend to be university educated and comfortably situated, while African-American Muslims are likely to be neither. Even W. D. Mohammed's followers, who seem better off than other African-American Muslims,

barely have a foothold in the middle class. For immigrant Muslims, then, episodes such as the meeting with the Saudi ambassador are bound to fuel deep-seated prejudices that African-American Muslims are not reliable and independent actors.

A still greater issue for immigrant Muslims is their perception that African-American Muslims lack a solid grounding in the Arabic language and Islamic texts and do not practice their faith rigorously. These suspicions are not completely unfounded. Ihsan Bagby and several colleagues interviewed (before 9/11) leaders at more than one-third of the 1,200 or so U.S. mosques.\* The results confirm that African-American imams generally are less likely to have degrees from either secular or Islamic institutions than their immigrant counterparts. Moreover, African-American imams are much more likely to be working part-time or as volunteers.

Mosques affiliated with W. D. Mohammed seem particularly susceptible to these shortcomings. Bagby's data suggest, for example, that imams associated with Mohammed have less formal Islamic education than other African-American imams, who tend to be educated outside the United States. A similar lack of rigor is indicated by the informality of their worship services. Imam Mohammed is well versed in Arabic and the Islamic texts, but such learning was not much in evidence at the *Jummah* service he led at the Chicago convention. This casual tone is even more apparent at local mosques, where worshipers drift in late, talk during the service, and fail to sit and kneel in the tight, ordered rows ("shoulder-to-shoulder, feet-to-feet" is the saying) that Muslims, as preoccupied with correct practice as with correct belief, value highly. Even the imams complain about this. As an immigrant Muslim activist sympathetic to Imam Mohammed said to me, "Their mosques feel like churches!"

\*The Mosque Study Project 2000, part of a comprehensive Hartford Seminary study of religious congregations, is the only such survey of mosques in America. It was cosponsored by W. D. Mohammed, ISNA, the Islamic Council of North America, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

W. D. Mohammed is mindful of the problem. In recent years, he has been urging his imams to become better grounded in Islam and Arabic. But his decentralized organization has afforded him neither the authority nor the resources to move his underpaid, mostly part-time imams toward this goal. At the same time, his emphasis on Islamic rigor has bumped up against group pride and been interpreted by many as a rejection of African-American culture. In the late summer of 2003, these tensions burst into the open when Mohammed publicly criticized his imams for dragging their feet.

Tensions over religion clearly poison political relations between African-American and immigrant Muslims. As Abdul Karim Hasan, imam at the Bilal Islamic Center, told *The Los Angeles Times*, "We share the faith with immigrant Muslims, but not much else. . . . They think we don't know as much about religion as they do." The low point was reached during the closing weeks of the 2000 presidential campaign, when immigrant Muslim organizations, claiming to speak for all Muslim Americans, endorsed George W. Bush—without acknowledging African-American Muslim objections to that endorsement. Things did not improve much after 9/11, when immigrant Muslims experienced what to them was Bush's betrayal, and many of their African-American brothers and sisters could not resist saying, "We told you so."

I am not aware that W. D. Mohammed ever expressed that sentiment. On the contrary, it is likely that he too supported Bush in 2000, though it is characteristic of the man that I have not been able to verify this. But in the post-9/11 context, what has to frustrate, even anger, immigrant Muslims is Imam Mohammed's refusal to criticize either the Patriot Act or the president's Iraq policies. More to the point, there has long been a subtle distance that Mohammed puts between himself and his immigrant brothers and sisters. Indeed, he was voicing concerns about them long before 9/11. In 1997 he told *The San Jose Mercury News*, "I am a new Muslim. I



*W. D. Mohammed (left) of The Mosque Cares and the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan publicly reconciled five years ago, after Farrakhan's pledge to accept more orthodox Islamic practices.*

don't quite identify with the thinking of the Islamic world. I identify with the beliefs of the Islamic world, but not necessarily with the thinking of most of the voices I'm hearing." More recently, in my interview with him, he related that, despite warm personal relations with some of their leaders, he was uneasy with immigrant Muslims and concerned that they were not entirely friendly toward the United States. As he put it, "I'm not comfort-

able with some of their friends."

**T**here are African-American Muslims who express fewer complaints about immigrant Muslims. Scattered among the 44 percent of predominantly African-American mosques *not* affiliated with W. D. Mohammed's organization, they encompass many different sectarian tendencies and do not constitute a cohesive group. But they do share a longstanding

orientation, going back to the 1930s and 1940s, toward Sunni Islam. They have therefore been designated “historically Sunni African-American Muslims” HSAAM, for short—by Professor Bagby. As African Americans, these particular Muslims tend to make Islam the basis of a reformulated critique—even a condemnation—of the American mainstream. One of the most visible leaders in this disparate group is Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, the former H. Rap Brown. Al-Amin, whose Atlanta-based organization is called the National Community, converted to Islam while in jail during the 1970s. He is now back in prison, after being convicted in February 2002 of killing a policeman.

Imam Al-Amin and other HSAAM Muslims do not necessarily call for the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. Rather, they seek to withdraw from what they regard as a corrupt, immoral society and build separate institutions and communities as defenses against it. For such Muslims, whether African-American or not, this goal has meant a rejection of involvement in American politics—a position that has found support among the Saudis. In the words of Steven Barboza, an American journalist who has written about his own conversion to Islam, “While H. Rap Brown would have enjoined listeners to bear and tear down, Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin says discipline yourselves through prayer, fasting, charity, and steadfastness, so that you will be organized and prepared when Allah tears the system down.”

**D**espite (some would say *because of*) his radical views and relatively small following, Imam Al-Amin has been recognized, even championed, by immigrant Muslim leaders and organizations. His perspective is broadly typical of HSAAM Muslims, whose views in some respects resemble those of immigrant Muslims more than they do those of W. D. Mohammed and his followers. This can be stated with some confidence, thanks again to Professor Bagby’s Mosque Study Project 2000. His data indicate that three-

fourths of all predominantly African-American mosques have been founded since 1970; their number continues to increase, though not so fast as the number of immigrant mosques. And at least since the 1980s, the number of HSAAM mosques has increased faster than the number of W. D. Mohammed mosques.

HSAAM mosques are also much stricter and more literal than W. D. Mohammed affiliates in interpreting the Qur’an. This is signaled by the mosques’ treatment of women. Bagby’s data indicate that somewhat greater numbers of women are involved in W. D. Mohammed mosques than in HSAAM or immigrant mosques. Only 16 percent of W. D. Mohammed mosques make women pray behind a curtain or in another room, while 45 percent of HSAAM mosques—and 81 percent of immigrant mosques—do. (That fashion show at the Chicago convention would definitely not go over well with these other Muslims.) Finally, there is the question of whether Muslim women can serve on a mosque’s governing board. Ninety-three percent of W. D. Mohammed affiliates allow women on their boards, as compared with only 60 percent of HSAAM mosques and 66 percent of immigrant mosques.

As for the ever-present pull of group pride and race consciousness, the differences between these two groups are notable. Asked how well they try to preserve their ethnic or national heritage, 29 percent of W. D. Mohammed affiliates said “very well,” while only six percent of HSAAM mosques did. This is to be expected, since HSAAM mosques are oriented more toward traditional Islam, which de-emphasizes racial and ethnic differences in favor of the *umma*—the worldwide community of all Muslims.

From the perspective of the non-Muslim majority, perhaps the most striking divergence between these two groups of African-American Muslims concerns how open they are to American society. Bagby’s data indicate that HSAAM Muslims are much more critical of America than are the followers of W. D. Mohammed. Ninety-three percent of his affiliates strongly agree that Muslims

should be involved in American society, while only 49 percent of HSAAM mosques do. Even more striking is the divergence of views about involvement in American politics: 90 percent of W. D. Mohammed mosques—but only 37 percent of HSAAM mosques—strongly agree that Muslims should participate in the political process. And while 33 percent of W. D. Mohammed mosques believe that America is hostile to Islam, fully 74 percent of HSAAM mosques do. Finally, and most compellingly, the data indicate that only 18 percent of W. D. Mohammed affiliates and 24 percent of immigrant mosques strongly agree that “America is an immoral, corrupt society.” The figure for HSAAM mosques is 66 percent.

**T**he irony is that W. D. Mohammed and his followers are more open to American society but also more intent on holding on to their African-American heritage than their HSAAM brothers and sisters. As Bagby reminds us, the pull of black culture and group identity is a fact of life for most African Americans. Their culture and group identity are, in fact, constitutive of their identity as Americans. A leader such as Imam Mohammed is not likely to ignore this, but neither will a rival such as Farrakhan let him forget it.

Of course, such particularistic tendencies do not go unchallenged in today’s world. Thanks to the media, jet travel, Arab petrodollars, and immigration, the globalized reality of Islam has had a powerful influence on W. D. Mohammed, Louis Farrakhan, and HSAAM Muslims—just as it did on Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X before them. Among African Americans, globalization has made it difficult to sustain deviant or cultish versions of Islam—but clearly, *not* versions that are implacably hostile to America. Indeed, these same globalizing forces have contributed to the legitimacy and influence of HSAAM Muslims. Among these African Americans at least, black nationalist and separatist impulses have been sublimated into a new, Third World ideology. For them, the test of authenticity is no longer blackness but “Islamicity.”

Immigrant Muslim leaders would like

all these differences somehow to get blurred. They are struggling to overcome divisions not only among themselves but among African-American Muslims and proto-Muslims such as Farrakhan. Of course, the principal challenge is to bring African-American Muslims generally together with immigrant Muslims. Unity of that sort appeals to Muslims normatively as a step toward realizing the *umma*. But it is also obviously in the interest of immigrant Muslim leaders, who are struggling to protect themselves and forge alliances in the wake of 9/11.

Such strategic calculations are more complicated for African-American Muslim leaders. For some, Islam is just a new platform from which to condemn the United States, much as it is for some immigrant Muslims. Yet for those such as W. D. Mohammed, Islam has actually been the way back to the American mainstream. This is undoubtedly why, even as he has worked to bring his followers closer to Islam, Imam Mohammed has distanced himself from immigrant Muslims. His imams seem to get that point, at least. Once again, Imam Hasan of the Bilal Center is obligingly blunt: “For African-American Muslims, the priorities are economic justice, education, and service to humanity at the street level in our country. We don’t make decisions based on what is good for Pakistan, Afghanistan, or the Middle East.”

It would not be easy, under any circumstances, for any one individual to negotiate all these crosscurrents. For W. D. Mohammed, these challenges arise just as his own organization struggles to maintain its cohesion and membership. But if the example of Imam Mohammed and his followers demonstrates anything, it is American society’s vitality and its capacity to absorb and adapt. In the midst of the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, who would have dared anticipate the gains, however incomplete, that have been made? Certainly no one would have foreseen that a generation later, the son of the leader of a bizarre, racist cult would offer Americans hope, and even some help, in the face of daunting new challenges. □