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The Nation of Islam and the Muslim World: Theologically Divorced and Politically United

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Abstract
The Nation of Islam (NOI) is an African American religious movement that originated in Detroit, Michigan, during the 1930s based on a rather heterodox form of the Muslim religion. Founded by the enigmatic Wallace D. Fard and taken over by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad upon Fard’s disappearance in 1934, the NOI came to exert important economic, political, and cultural influence in the African American community with its program of economic independence and charismatic high profile members such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Advocating the complete separation of Black people from the White race of “blue-eyed devils”, the NOI was a lightning rod for controversy. With Elijah Muhammad’s death in 1975, leadership of the organization passed into the hands of Warith Deen Mohammed, who dropped the name “Nation of Islam” and radically reorganized the group along quasi-Sunni Islamic lines. However, in 1977, long time NOI member Minister Louis Farrakhan reestablished the Nation of Islam according to Elijah Muhammad’s doctrine, and subsequently propelled it back into America’s national consciousness with his controversial involvement in Jesse Jackson’s 1984 presidential campaign and the 1995 Million Man March in Washington D.C. Although the NOI has done much to popularize Islam in the U.S., the Nation’s religious beliefs bear little resemblance to traditional Islamic theology. While the Nation shares a common vocabulary with Muslims around the world, the NOI’s teachings concerning God, cosmology, Prophet Muhammad and the afterlife can be deemed heterodox, or even heretical, by Islamic standards. But despite its vast ideological differences from the international Muslim community, the NOI has come to be seen like a partner, even an ally, by many in the Arab and Muslim worlds. This paper explores the NOI’s trajectory and ideology, together with the reasons behind that apparent paradox, and shows it to be built on common interest rather than a common faith.

Introduction
With four vigorous cries of “Allahu Akbar,” the Arabic phrase for “God is the greatest,” the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan was welcomed to the stage. After basking in the fervent applause for a few seconds, Farrakhan, dressed in a style reminiscent of Col. Mu’ammar al-Gaddafi, raised his arms and greeted his hundreds, if not thousands, of adoring followers with “As-salamu ‘alaykum,” [May peace be upon you], to which his parishioners resoundingly responded “Wa ‘alaykum as-salam” [and also upon you]. Based on this short exchange, a spectator might assume to be watching a traditional Islamic religious event. However, upon further inspection, a knowledgeable observer would notice that, despite the trappings of Islamic culture, Farrakhan’s spectacle was markedly different from the standard customs and procedures of Islamic worship. To begin with, the service was not taking place in a mosque, but rather in an enormous building that resembled an evangelical mega-church. Secondly, the men and women of...
the congregation – entirely African-American in its composition – sat next to one another on pews, instead of being segregated and seating on the floor. Finally, an attentive onlooker would know for certain that something was amiss when he or she heard Minister Farrakhan begin his sermon: “In the name of Allah, who came in the person of Master Fard Muhammad, to whom praise is due forever. We thank him for his coming, and we thank him for raising up among us his messenger, Messiah, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. I am his student, and I am honored beyond words to stand before you today.”

Hence Minister Louis Farrakhan is not a practitioner of orthodox Islam; but he is, nevertheless, the current spiritual leader of the African American religious movement known as the Nation of Islam (NOI). The above quotations are from the February 26, 2010 celebration of Saviours’ Day, the annual commemoration of the birth of Master Wallace Fard Muhammad, “Great Mahdi of the Muslims and the Messiah of the Christians” and founder of the NOI (Muhammad 2008). Although the name “Nation of Islam,” would suggest that Master Fard Muhammad’s religion was derived from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, the NOI’s beliefs are only tenuously linked to the theology of orthodox Islam. With wildly different views about God, cosmology, Prophet Muhammad and the afterlife, traditional Islam and the traditional beliefs of the NOI are ideologically incompatible (Ansari 1981, pp. 140–172). But despite its remarkable differences from the international Muslim community, the NOI has often enjoyed a warm relationship with prominent political figures in the Islamic World (Ansari 1981, pp. 172–173; McAlister 1999, p. 627). The truth is that those alliances between the NOI and the international ummah (Islamic community) can be attributed to shared political goals, commonly held anti-Western and anti-colonial rhetoric, and perceived cultural and ethnic ties (McAlister 1999, pp. 627–635).

**History of the Nation of Islam**

The NOI does not have its origins in 7th century Mecca, but rather in 1930s Detroit. In Paradise Valley, an African American ghetto crippled by the effects of the Great Depression, a silk merchant by the name of Wallace D. Fard launched the “Allah Temple of Islam” in 1930 (Marsh 2000, p. 37). Fard had previously been a member of the Moorish Science Temple, a Chicago-based Black Nationalist organization with pseudo-Islamic trappings, but when the Temple’s founder, Noble Drew Ali, died under mysterious circumstances in 1929, Fard declared himself to be a reincarnated version of Ali and set out to start his own religious group (p. 35). Fard’s congregation was entirely Black, and Fard himself claimed to be an “Asiatic Black man” and a member of the Quraish tribe (to which Prophet Muhammad belonged) (Evanzz 1999, p. 73).

Wallace D. Fard was in fact Wali Dodd Fard, an immigrant from New Zealand of mixed Afghani and British heritage (Evanzz 1999, p. 73; Evanzz 2011). Regardless of his own racial background, it is clear that Fard identified fully with the African-American community – and that his Temple’s religious doctrine was expressed in explicitly racial terms: According to Fard, the path to Black liberation could only be found through complete separation from the White race of “blue-eyed devils” (Ansari 1981, pp. 138–139).

Wallace D. Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934, but leadership of the organization he founded, now called the Nation of Islam, passed into the capable hands of Elijah Muhammad, Fard’s charismatic protégé. Elijah Muhammad, formerly known as Elijah Poole, was an unemployed auto worker from Georgia who joined the NOI in 1931 (Marsh 2000, p. 38). It was under his leadership that the NOI’s theology crystallized, and
during his 41-year-long rule of the organization it came to exert important economic, political and cultural influence within the African-American community (Ansari 1981, p. 140).

Muhammad’s NOI advocated a program of economic independence from the wider economy that helped bring congregants out of poverty and into the middle class. Furthermore, the organization itself became extremely affluent; by the 1970s it owned retail and wholesale businesses, a school, housing complexes, banks, and thousands of acres of farmland (Aidi 2002, p. 40). The NOI also benefited from the publicity that was generated from a handful of high profile members. Malcolm X, an ordained minister and leading figure in the NOI from 1953 until his departure in 1964, led the 1963 Harlem Unity Rally, one of the United State’s largest civil rights events, and was proclaimed “the second most sought after speaker in the United States” by the New York Times in the same year (Estate of Malcolm X). Moreover, the NOI’s cultural significance ballooned when Cassius Clay, the African-American heavy-weight boxing celebrity, joined the organization and changed his name to Muhammad Ali (Gardell 1996, p. 67).

In 1975, Elijah Muhammad passed away and the trajectory of the Nation of Islam changed dramatically when his son, Warith Deen Mohammed (born Wallace D. Muhammad), was appointed as his successor (Skerry 2005, p. 17). W.D. Mohammed was educated at al-Azhar University in Cairo, a centuries-old institution which is considered the highest site of learning of Islamic Sunnism. Upon assuming control of his father’s religious movement, he dropped the name “Nation of Islam” and brought his congregation towards something resembling Sunni doctrine (Aidi 2002, p. 38). Performing a complete U-turn, W.D. Mohammed abandoned much of the Black Nationalist rhetoric that had characterized his father’s tenure, allowed whites to join the former Nation, decentralized the organization and liquidated many of the group’s multimillion dollar assets (Skerry 2005, p. 20; Aidi 2002, p. 40; Gates 1996, p. 141).

Mohammed’s drastic changes would have marked an end to the traditional NOI had it not been for the initiative of Minister Louis Farrakhan, a member of the group since 1955 (Gates 1996, p. 140). Disenchanted with Mohammed’s “heretical” leadership, Farrakhan reestablished the NOI in 1977 and reorganized it according to Elijah Muhammad’s credo. The Nation reclaimed its place in America’s national consciousness when Minister Farrakhan became closely involved in civil rights leader Jesse Jackson’s 1984 campaign for the U.S. presidency (p. 142). In addition, he became the subject of enormous controversy and media attention when he made a series of extremely anti-Semitic comments in response to Jewish criticism of Jackson (p. 143).

Despite, or perhaps because of, Farrakhan’s vilification by the mainstream American media, the Nation of Islam has continued to prosper. Farrakhan has succeeded in rebuilding the NOI’s former economic magnitude with thousands of acres of farmland, a produce transport business, restaurants, and a media distribution company (Aidi 2002, p. 40). One of the Nation’s greatest victories occurred in 1995, when Farrakhan organized his Million Man March, in which 400,000 African American men demonstrated in Washington D.C. to symbolically challenge negative stereotypes of Black men and reaffirm their commitment to their families and communities (Singh 1997, p. 63). In 2000, undoubtedly influenced by his bout with prostate cancer, Farrakhan reconciled with W.D. Mohammed and briefly flirted with reorganizing the Nation along more traditional Islamic lines, but since he overcame his illness, he has shown no signs of abandoning the teachings of Master Fard and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad (Skerry 2005, p. 22).
Ideology

Throughout much of its eight decades of history, the Nation of Islam and its high profile members have exerted significant influence on the African American community and American society at large. The deeds and victories of the Nation, whose members are often referred to as “Black Muslims”, have been carried out in the name of “Islam”, “Allah” and “the Prophet”. But although the NOI certainly shares a common vocabulary with traditional Islam, the use of such terminology is rather misleading because the standard Islamic terms have profoundly different meanings and interpretations from the official theology of the organization.

In his short dissertation entitled “What The Muslims Believe” (1965), Elijah Muhammad explains that members of the Nation “believe in the One God whose proper Name is Allah”. Virtually all practicing Muslims would agree with his statement. However, the Nation’s God is of an entirely different character from the God revealed by Prophet Muhammad. Adherents to traditional Islam believe in an eternal, omnipotent, omniscient God who is keenly interested in human affairs, and avoids speculation on God’s shape. In stark contrast, the Nation’s ideology dictates that Allah is in fact a corporeal being and – needless to say – He is Black.

Elijah Muhammad preached that Black men and women were the Original People; the Black Race was responsible for the creation of the heavens, the earth, and all other life (Ansari 1981, p. 144). Black people are descended from these Creators, and therefore all people of African descent are inherently divine, i.e. tantamount to gods (p. 145). Among this race of gods, there is always one Supreme Being, a man who possesses such immense wisdom and might that he has “the Divine Power to will whatever He wishes and to bring into existence with His Divine Will” (p. 145). Because they are merely human, the Supreme Beings do not live forever; however, each epoch has its own God with divine powers, a man who is essentially the most gifted Black scientist of his age (p. 145).

The current Supreme Being, the most powerful since the Black God who led the creation of the world, is Master Wallace Fard Muhammad, also known as “the Messiah” or “the Mahdi” (Ansari 1981, p. 146). According to Elijah Muhammad, Master Fard was born on February 26, 1877 to Alphonso, a “Jet Black Man of the Tribe of Shabazz” (the mythical Black tribe from which African Americans supposedly descended) and a white woman named “Baby Gee” (Ansari 1981, p. 140; X & Haley 1965, p. 168). Fard came to America on July 4th 1930 in order to prepare the Black Race for the coming obliteration of the White race, but he left for Mecca in 1934, and he allegedly will continue to live for another 409 years (pp. 140, 146).

From the perspective of Sunni theology, the NOI’s conception of Allah is nothing but shirk, i.e. associating other divinities to God. Believing that there has been a succession of Supreme Beings and contending that an entire race of humans has divine properties could be considered a form of polytheism, which is an intolerable offense in orthodox Islam. The NOI’s belief in the messianic return of Fard is not entirely dissimilar to the centrality of the Mahdi in Shia Islam (also present – although in a more marginal way – in Sunni Islam1). Members of the Twelver branch of Shia Islam believe that the twelfth imam, the 9th-century leader of the Shiites and descendent of Prophet Muhammad, is not dead; he has merely hidden and will return with Jesus Christ before Judgment Day. Nevertheless, the Shiite’s conception of the Mahdi is completely different from that of the NOI; followers of Shia Islam believe that the Mahdi, the hidden twelfth imam, and the Messiah, Jesus Christ, are two distinct figures who will arrive concurrently, while the Nation
of Islam preaches that Wallace Fard Muhammad is God, the Mahdi, and the Messiah all in one (Muhammad 2008).

The NOI’s version of the creation of the Earth and the development of the human race is also markedly different from that of traditional Islam. While Muslims adhere to the biblical story of God’s week-long creation of the world and to the parable of Adam and Eve, members of the NOI are taught that the earth and the moon were originally one planet (Ansari 1981, p. 162). According to Elijah Muhammad, the Original People had been living on this planet for 12 trillion years when God, a powerful scientist, tried to get everyone to speak one language. When He failed in this endeavor, He attempted to wipe out humanity with a tremendous explosion, but instead of destroying the planet, the blast resulted in the separation of the earth from the moon. Despite God’s ploy to exterminate life, the Black Race prospered on earth; the “tribe of Shabazz” settled in both the Nile Valley and in Mecca, where they set up a scientifically advanced Utopia (p. 163). This idyllic society lasted for 66 trillion years until an evil but ingenious scientist named Yakub genetically engineered the White race (p. 164). Caucasian people are inherently wicked and inferior to African people in every way, but Yakub taught them tricks that would ensure their domination of the Black race for 6,000 years. It was prophesized that the reign of the White race would end in 1914, and the subsequent appearance of the Supreme Being, Wallace Fard Muhammad, in North America, signifies that a new Black Utopia is fast approaching (p. 167).

The NOI’s creation myth is heretical according to orthodox Islam because it completely contradicts the Qur’an’s version of events. Moreover, it suggests that only Black people are divine, whereas in Islam all humans are equal before God. The fundamental principle of the Nation’s theology is that Black people are inherently righteous and White people are inherently evil, but traditional Islam maintains that people of every color are welcome to join the Muslim ummah. When Malcolm X left the NOI in 1964 and converted to Sunni Islam, he made a life-changing pilgrimage to Mecca where he encountered “blonde-haired, blue-eyed men” whom he “could call […] brothers” (Estate of Malcolm X, Biography). Speaking to the American press upon his return to the United States on May 21, 1964, Malcolm explained how his Hajj radically altered his racial ideology:

My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In 2 weeks in the Holy Land, I saw what I never had seen in 39 years here in America. I saw all races, all colors, – blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans – in true brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshiping as one! (X and Haley 1965, p. 369)

As Malcolm’s transformation illustrates, the racial principles of the NOI and traditional Islam are diametrically opposed.

The Shahada, the fundamental declaration of faith and the first pillar of Islam, declares that “there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God”. Muhammad is the most important figure in Islam; he is the last Prophet, the personification of absolute virtue, and the perfect model of correct behavior. Members of the Nation of Islam also revere and celebrate Prophet Muhammad; however it is not the traditional Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah whom they venerate, but rather the “Prophet” Elijah Muhammad. Remarkably, when members of the NOI interpret the Qur’an, they assume that passages that mention “Muhammad” are references to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, not to the founder of Islam (Ansari 1981, p. 152). Furthermore, Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah is a figure of minor importance in the NOI’s theology. Although it is acknowledged that Prophet Muhammad received the Qur’an, Elijah Muhammad frequently asserted his own
superiority in comparison with his 7th century namesake, and at least on one occasion he declared that Muhammad was in fact Caucasian, and thus a White devil (pp. 148–150). Disparagement of Prophet Muhammad is one of the gravest crimes imaginable in Islam, and therefore Elijah Muhammad’s views concerning the Prophet should be considered absolute heresy.

The NOI’s beliefs about the afterlife are also quite distinct from those of traditional Islam. Orthodox Muslims believe that on Judgment Day, all humans will be judged by God and, based on their actions and faith, they will enjoy eternal bliss in heaven or they will face perpetual damnation in hell. Black Muslims also believe in a Judgment Day; however, the consequences of this event will be earthly, not spiritual. The Nation of Islam’s theology contends that there is no life after death; heaven and hell only exist in this world. Elijah Muhammad taught that heaven is “the condition the white man now has”, and thus hell is the plight of African Americans (Ansari 1981, p. 158). The White race has enjoyed paradise for 6,000 years, but the time when Black people will create their own heaven on earth is imminent. On the Day of Judgment, Master Fard, “Allah”, will return to completely decimate the White race with the Mother Plane (aka “Ezekiel’s Wheel”), a planet-sized spacecraft capable of dropping bombs powerful enough to raise mountains (Gardell 1996, p. 159). The annihilation of all Caucasians was scheduled to take place in 1914, but Fard delayed his delivery of justice in order to give Black people time to separate completely from the White race (Ansari 1981, p. 157). The NOI’s Judgment Day is thus unrelated to the rewarding of good deeds and the punishment of sins; it is merely God’s way of purging the evils of White civilization from the Earth (p. 160).

The Nation’s Foreign Relations Under Elijah Muhammad

After examining the key theological aspects of both the Nation of Islam and orthodox Islam, it becomes abundantly clear that the two share very little common ground. The Nation of Islam is a religious sect masquerading in Muslim clothing; on a purely superficial level, the NOI maintains the guise of Islam, but its core theological principles are completely divorced from the traditional Islamic faith. One would assume that adherents to orthodox Islam would be disgusted by a group that claims to be Muslim yet rejects their conception of God, generally ignores Prophet Muhammad, propagates an elaborate racial hierarchy, and preaches the divinity of a 20th century silk merchant. But, surprisingly, relations between the Muslim world and the Nation of Islam have been overwhelmingly positive.

During the last 30 years of Elijah Muhammad’s leadership of the NOI, the organization forged political relationships with the leaders of a number of Muslim countries (McAlister 1999, p. 632). As the minister of the NOI’s Harlem mosque, Malcolm X established contact with many Arab and African leaders at the United Nations and, in December of 1957, he organized a conference on colonial and neocolonial issues that was attended by representatives from the Egyptian, Sudanese, Ghanaian, Iraqi, and Moroccan governments (pp. 632, 633). At the conference, Elijah Muhammad sent a cable to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, then concurrently hosting the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference in Cairo. Addressing Nasser as “your long lost Muslim brother here in America,” Muhammad affirmed his support of the Egyptian president’s mission to bring about “freedom, justice and equality for all Africans and Asians” (p. 633). Nasser responded warmly to Muhammad’s cable, and the diplomatic contact between the two “nations” led to Malcolm X’s visit to Egypt in 1959. This close relationship with the
Muslim world would ultimately lead to Elijah Muhammad’s trip to Mecca in 1960 (p. 633).

African and Arab dignitaries allied themselves with the Nation of Islam not because of a shared religious faith, but rather a common enemy: Western imperialism. African and Arab nations had been victimized by a long colonial history, and in the 1950s and 60s important African American leaders, such as Malcolm X, began to conceive the plight of Black Americans as “internal colonization” (McAlister 1999, p. 644). Malcolm placed the struggle for African-American civil rights in the context of the Third World independence movement, and therefore members of the NOI viewed the quest for Arab Nationalism as analogous to their own fight for Black Nationalism (Aidi 2002, p. 38; McAlister 1999, p. 632). Gamal Abdel Nasser, in particular, was viewed as an anti-colonial hero for his unwavering defiance during the Suez Crisis of 1956, in which the Egyptian President stood up to a tripartite invasion from Britain, France and Israel (McAlister 1999, p. 632).

But the alliance between the NOI and a number of Third World nations against the West was not simply viewed as a struggle between the victims of colonization and the imperialists; it was also perceived as a conflict between non-Whites and Caucasians. In his autobiography, Malcolm X praises international resistance to the tyranny of “white nations”:

> Today we are seeing this revolution of the non-white peoples, who just a few years ago would have frozen in horror if the mighty white nations so much as lifted an eyebrow. What it is, simply, is that black and brown and red and yellow peoples have, after hundreds of years of exploitation and imposed “inferiority” and general misuse, becomes, finally, do-or-die sick and tired of the white man’s heel on their necks. (X & Haley 1965, p. 280)

Unsurprisingly, there was a profound racial component to the NOI’s solidarity with Africa and the Arab World. The NOI’s theology dictates that Black people lived in the Nile Valley and the Arabian Peninsula for 66 trillion years before the creation of the white race, so there is an alleged historic and ethnic link between the Arab people and African Americans (Ansari 1981, p. 164; McAlister 1999, p. 627). Although the Nation’s genealogical history is a bit muddled, its perceived connection with Arab society has actually fomented the introduction of Arabo-Muslim cultural elements within the organization. For instance, NOI religious services typically begin with the traditional Arabo-Muslim greeting of *As-Salamu ‘Alaykum* (peace be upon you) and the response *Wa ‘Alaikum As-salam* (and also upon you), and children who attended schools run by the Nation in the late 1950s and early 1960s allegedly received Arabic language instruction beginning at age three (McAlister 1999, p. 628).

Even though the Arab leaders who allied themselves with the NOI practiced – or claimed to practice – a more-or-less orthodox form of Islam, the political, ethnic, and cultural commonalities between the two groups pushed the significant religious differences between them aside. Brown-Black international solidarity against imperialism was certainly an appealing vision to the leaders of Arab states. Furthermore, Arab political figures recognized that it could be very advantageous to have ties to an influential anti-American movement active on U.S. soil.

**Reform and Revival**

When Warith Deen Mohamed took over the Nation of Islam in 1975, he also maintained significant contact with the Arab and Islamic World, but the basis for his alliances differed greatly from those of his father (Aidi 2002, p. 38). Renaming his Nation the
“World Community of al-Islam in the West” (later the “American Society of Muslims”) and reorganizing the group along quasi-Sunni Islamic lines, W.D. Mohammed moved his organization much closer towards the Islam practiced in the Muslim World, but paradoxically the group’s political agenda moved away from the anti-Western rhetoric that had made Elijah Muhammad’s Nation popular with the likes of Nasser and his ilk (Aidi 2002, p. 38; Skerry 2005, p. 18). No longer a revolutionary movement demanding Black separatism, Mohammed’s organization sought integration in American society (Skerry 2005, p. 18).

W.D. Mohammed’s relations with the Muslim World reflect the organization’s relatively pro-American stance and increased religious legitimacy. For instance, Mohammed’s friendly relations with Anwar el-Sadat were very appropriate, as both leaders were trying to ingratiate themselves with the United States. Beginning in 1980, the Saudi government entrusted Mohammed with significant religious authority: He was appointed the “sole consultant and trustee” for the allocation of Islamic missionary funds in the U.S. and was assigned the task of deciding on the American Muslims who applied for Saudi visas in order to perform the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). For about 20 years, Mohammed’s organization received an annual stipend of roughly $70,000 from the House of Saud and, in return, Mohammed voiced his support for foreign policy decisions that would benefit the Saudis, such as the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 1990. However, W.D. Mohammed purportedly broke off relations with Saudi Arabia in 1994, alleging that he was tired of the Saudis “choosing his friends” for him (Skerry 2005, p. 23).

For his part, as the leader of the revived Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan has also pursued international relations with the leaders of Middle Eastern and African countries. Following in the footsteps of his mentor Elijah Muhammad, Farrakhan has sought friends from the Muslim World with strong anti-Western agendas. By and large, his global Muslim allies have been brutal dictators such as Sani Abacha, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi (White 2011). During his 1996 tour of repressive regimes in Africa and the Middle East, the Honorable Minister compared Abacha to Moses, promised to help Iran overthrow the “Great Satan” (the U.S.), and lauded Saddam Hussein’s struggle against UN economic sanctions (White 2011).

In particular, Farrakhan and Colonel Gaddafi shared a long and close relationship. In 1972, Gaddafi lent the NOI $3 million to convert a Greek Orthodox Church on the South Side of Chicago into Mosque Maryam, the Nation’s current headquarters. And in 1996, Gaddafi presented Farrakhan with a $250,000 human rights award that the United States government did not allow him to keep (Lepeska 2011; White 2011). Despite their religious differences, Gaddafi and Farrakhan were ideological soul mates; they were both fierce critics of Western imperialism and ardent champions of Pan-Africanism (Lepeska 2011)². Most importantly, in their heyday Farrakhan and Gaddafi both courted controversy; they were at their most successful when using outrageous criticism of America to garner attention and bolster their own popularity. Gaddafi’s patronage of the NOI and Farrakhan’s extravagant praise for the Libyan dictator were both successful ploys to provoke the U.S. and bask in the limelight. Recently, Farrakhan used the revolution in Libya to propel himself back onto the national stage by defending his dear friend Col. Gaddafi (Lepeska 2011). During his appearance on a radio program in October of 2011, Minister Farrakhan contended that his “brother” Muammar Gaddafi was a martyr who “died in honor, fighting for the Libya that he believed in”, and that NATO strikes in Libya were part of an international conspiracy to seize the country’s assets:
We were in Libya; we saw Libya being built from the ground up! We witnessed what this man did for the Libyan people! And for NATO to have bombed it like this: Watch for Halliburton, watch for Bechtel [American contractors awarded billions of dollars by the U.S. government to do work in Afghanistan and Iraq]; watch for the vultures of London, England, and France and others, trying to rebuild the infrastructure that they purposely destroyed, which is against international law. You went for “humanitarian” purposes, yet 50,000 Libyans lie dead because the West wanted access to the wealth of Libya! (Farrakhan 2011)

**Conclusion**

Given the fact that many people would agree with religion scholar C. Eric Lincoln’s assessment of the Nation of Islam as a “proto-Islamic cult”, the NOI’s long history of significant domestic influence and high profile international relations is quite impressive (Skerry 2005, p. 17). Emerging from the ghettos of Depression-era Detroit, the NOI’s message of Black superiority and the evils of the White race resonated with America’s disenfranchised victims of racism. Positing itself as the “natural religion for the black man”, the ideology conceived by Wallace D. Fard and championed by Elijah Muhammad has had remarkably long-lasting appeal and consistency (X & Haley 1965, p. 159). Although the traditional Nation of Islam was dissolved by W.D. Mohammed in 1975 after his father’s death, Minister Louis Farrakhan picked up right where Elijah Muhammad left off when he resurrected the organization in 1977. Not only has Farrakhan accurately preached Elijah Muhammad’s gospel; he has also maintained the global vision pioneered by Malcolm X during his period with the NOI. Since the 1950s, the leaders of the Nation of Islam have conceived their mission as part of an international struggle against White imperialism, and they have consequently formed friendships and alliances with Middle Eastern and African leaders who share their anti-Western convictions.

While the name “Nation of Islam” is essentially a misnomer, the group’s mere association with the name Islam has had enormous ramifications for its relationship with the Muslim World. Aside from the political, ideological, and cultural bonds between the NOI and the international Islamic community, leaders from the Muslim World have generally tolerated and often supported the Nation because, despite its heretical dogma, it popularized the name of Islam and promoted pride in Muslim identity in the U.S. Although members of the Nation are in actual fact Muslims in name only, such designation was not an inconsequential factor in fomenting international solidarity with the Islamic World.

With membership of the Nation of Islam on the wane, an aging Honorable Minister, and most of Farrakhan’s allies in the Muslim World either dead or damned, the future of relations between the NOI and the Middle East remains uncertain (Lepeska 2011). However, as long as members of the Nation continue to call themselves Muslims, it is likely that they will find friends and allies somewhere in the ummah.

**Short Biographies**

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Notes

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1 The Sunni and Shi’ite perceptions of the advent of the Mahdi and the second coming of Christ are not dissimilar, although among the Shiites that belief is a central part of their theology, whereas for Sunnis it is placed sometime in the indeterminate future. However, probably due to the internal state of affairs in many Muslim countries and the international situation, often perceived as a series of conspiracies against Islam, millennialism is becoming common even among Sunni Muslims. It is not uncommon to find in Sunni countries books entitled “10 signs that Judgment Day is approaching” or variants of that theme, and they seem to be very popular.

2 Gaddafi became an ardent defender of Pan-Africanism after his attempts at Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism were ignored by his fellow Arab and Muslim leaders. Incidentally, already Abdel Nasser had spoken of the “three circles” theory for Egypt’s case.

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