

Fasting as One Nation

Ramadan 1975 (1395 AH): A turning point in Muslim Americans' quest for unity

BY IRSHAD ABDAL-HAQQ

IN 1975, THE MONTH OF RAMADAN arrived on Sept. 7 with great anticipation among members of the original Lost-Found Nation of Islam (NOI).

Only in retrospect, however, can we fully appreciate that blessed day's transformative impact on this country's entire Muslim community. At the behest of their leader, Imam W. Deen Mohammed (*radiy Allahu 'anhu*), then known as Chief Minister Wallace D. Muhammad, the NOI's national network of over 100 temples began their annual fast during the authentic month of Ramadan for the very first time. By doing so, one of the largest contingents of Americans self-identifying as mainstream Muslims further demonstrated their genuine embrace of Islam's universal principles over their former proto-Islamic doctrine.

"Brothers and Sisters, henceforth the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America will be observing the month of Ramadan fast in the proper month and will be celebrating the victorious completion of this fast with our Muslim Brothers and Sisters the world over," proclaimed the imam in a full-page article (Muhammad Speaks, Aug. 29, 1975, p.15).

This declaration was one of the numerous authentic Islamic practices he had begun implementing after his father's death in February 1975. During the decades of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's leadership, the NOI had observed its annual month-long abstinence from daytime eating and drinking every December.

This was not predicated on a transcendent phenomenon such as the advent of the Quranic revelation, nor did it conclude with festive activities comparative to those of Eid ul-Fitr. And only reluctantly was it labeled "Ramadan" or even considered a legitimate "fast," since NOI members had always been encouraged to eat only one meal per day throughout the year. Rather, the NOI's December daytime "Ramadan fast" was essentially a social reform method for disengaging its members from identifying with and participating in Christmas-related activities.

At Expo '75 PUSH honors Nation of Islam

CHICAGO — The Honorable W.D. Muhammad and the Nation of Islam were recently honored by a major Christian organization, "People United to Save Humanity, (PUSH) chaired by the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson — for its leadership in saving the Black family. The Honorable W.D. Muhammad has received a number of prestigious awards since ascending to world leadership. Among them are the Four Freedoms Foundation Award and the Martin Luther King Jr. Movement Humanitarian Award. The Four Freedoms Award — presented to only a few world leaders since being established in 1941 — was received September 6 and the Humanitarian Award was received August 24.

Respected for His world leadership, the Supreme Minister was presented a Communications Award for communicating the high ideals and morals necessary for saving the Black family. The award was presented at the seventh annual PUSH Expo national communications luncheon and workshop September 24. Munir Um'rani accepted the award on behalf of the Honorable W.D. Muhammad and the Nation of Islam at the ceremony.

The Honorable W.D. Muhammad has taught on various aspects of family life in an article in the August 15 issue of Muhammad Speaks. He wrote that in order for a family to survive the man must realize that "he is to provide the material needs for his household — that burden is on him."

He wrote that if the wife want to share a part of the burden with her husband, it is to be considered as a gift. "She is not obligated to give to him because he is the maintainer. The Supreme Minister also wrote as partners in a marriage "we are committed to each other and we are obligated to do certain things for each other.

"We should keep the obligations in mind and not a lot of love talk. If the husband and wife remain open with each other, they do not hide anything from each other. If you keep everything out in the open, you will have a force working in your union to keep you united," the leader of the Nation of Islam has written.

The EID-ul-Fitr

EID - ul - Fitr marks the end of 30 day fasting and rigorous discipline, punctuated with additional prayers in the night. Muslims just after the completion of Ramadan, kneel before Allah en bloc, in thankfulness for enabling them to abide by one of His most important commandments. Muslims in most major cities or population centers will pray together the Prayer EID - ul - Fitr.

All Muslims in Chicago will Pray Together :

ELTUJANI ABUGIDEIRI will lead the prayer of **EID-UL-FITR** TUESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1975 9:30 A.M. AT MCCORMICK PLACE EXHIBIT AREA, CONCOURSE LEVEL UNDER THE AUSPICES OF CENTRAL EID COMMITTEE OF GREATER CHICAGO

SHUKRULFITR, \$2.00 PER PERSON SHOULD BE PAID BEFORE EID PRAYER

"We are about to enter our annual fast that is called 'Ramadan' in Arabic. This is not the actual month taken by the Arab Muslims; however, it comes in this month every few years. But ours remain in this month every year," read Elijah Muhammad's instructional guidelines and an annually published news column entitled "Ramadan" (Muhammad Speaks, Dec. 13, 1974, p.3. Also see Elijah Muhammad's dietary guide, "How to Eat to Live, Book Number 2," 1972, pp.48-52).

Thus, the NOI constituency that Imam WD Mohammed inherited from his father

already was accustomed to abstaining from daytime eating, perhaps more extensively than the mainstream umma. So in the summer of 1975 when he announced the transition from his father's modified December "Ramadan" to the authentic Ramadan, by all accounts the community did not resist or consider it a challenge.

If there was any apprehension, it was connected with the longer period from dawn to sunset in September, as compared to December. The more pertinent question regarding this historic transition probably should focus not so much on the ability of

the NOI's members — a particularly resolute people at the time — to fast, but rather on how the greater umma reacted to them entering the fold of mainstream [Sunni] Islam.

In some Muslim quarters, the NOI's rapid transition from primarily a social reform movement that had espoused several major tenets antithetical to Islam to one suddenly shedding those tenets and adopting the full measure of Islam's mainstream tenets, was met with skepticism by some, but with full

and brotherhood that so affected Malcolm's heart: "...he dropped on me something whose logic never would get out of my head. He said, 'No man has believed perfectly until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.'"


This expression is, of course, derived from Prophet Muhammad's (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) hadith that all Muslims are not merely to hope for, but must actually strive to achieve this goal ("Sahih al-Bukhari," Book

Ramadan included the imam's "Ramadan" (Aug. 29, 1975, p.15), in which he quotes from Hamidullah's "Introduction to Islam" and mandates the observance of the fast during the proper month, and "Ramadan Fasting and Zakat" (Oct. 3, 1975, p.18), an authorized reprint of a Muslim Student Association (MSA) pamphlet.

The imam's comprehensive article on God's unity and oneness, "God is One," perhaps best summarizes his motivation for directing his followers to observe Ramadan in 1975 along with the greater national and international umma. Further, that article also portended his lifelong focus on inter-faith outreach and understanding: "Brothers and Sisters, the Religion of Islam is the only religion that can bring the peoples of the world into unity because it is the only religion which correctly expresses the natural concept of unity which pervades all of creation" ("God is One," Muhammad Speaks, Oct. 3, 1975, pp.20-23).

Ultimately Imam Mohammed's efforts succeeded. On Oct. 7, 1975, the Central Eid Committee of Greater Chicago sponsored an Eid ul-Fitr service for 10,000 Muslims at McCormick Place (Muhammad Speaks, Oct. 24, 1975, pp.3, 22). Imam Mohammed and thousands of those in his Chicago-based association attended. The (late) Dr. Eltigani Abugideiri, a former MSA president, delivered the Eid *khutba*. During his tenure, he worked informally with Imam Mohammed to transition the NOI into the World Community of Islam in the West (WCIW) in 1976 (Islamic Horizons, May/June 2011, p.54)

The imam's viewpoint on unity, as expressed in his lectures, literature and activities, are rooted in the very essence of Islam's founding principles: "The believers are but a single brotherhood, so make peace and reconciliation between your brothers" (49:10) and "Know for certain that every Muslim is a brother of another Muslim, and that all Muslims are brethren" (Prophet Muhammad's Last Sermon).

Until the ideal of unity rooted in mutual affection is achieved, Islam cannot be fully realized. And though our struggle may seem daunting at times, we are slowly but surely on the path to fulfilling it. Consequently, we should cherish the impact of Ramadan 1975 (1395 AH) as a major historical turning point toward our quest for unity. 

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“UNITY AND HARMONY BETWEEN MUSLIMS IN AMERICA DEPENDS ON MUSLIM AMERICANS' ACTIVE OUTREACH TO ONE ANOTHER. MUSLIM AMERICANS MUST ACQUAINT OURSELVES WITH EACH OTHER'S PROBLEMS, ASPIRATIONS, AND HOPES.”

acceptance by others (See examples of both dispositions in Bilalian News, Nov. 14, 1975, pp.19, 22).

For those who welcomed the NOI's evolution, it seems as if they had been waiting for it eagerly. They readily celebrated and encouraged this event by lending moral and material support. Their reaction was reflective of the sentiment expressed in the prescient 1964 Eid ul-Fitr message of Dr. Mahmoud Yousef Shawarbi, then director of the Federation of the Islamic Association in the United States and Canada: "Unity and harmony between Muslims in America depends on Muslim Americans' active outreach to one another. Muslim Americans must acquaint ourselves with each other's problems, aspirations, and hopes" ("Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History," 2010, p.251).

Significantly, it is Shawarbi and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz's (aka Malcolm X) 1965 relationship that stands as a metaphor for Imam Mohammed and the NOI's 1975 transition and acceptance. Even though Malcolm was not acquainted with Islam's specific rituals, including salat, Shawarbi perceived in him a *sincerity* to embrace all aspects of the *Deen*. So, he was trustful and patient with Malcolm. In fact, he was the one who provided the required hajj approval letter endorsing Malcolm's 1964 visa application ("The Autobiography of Malcolm X," chap. 17, 1965). And it was his recitation of the expression of unity, love

of Faith; "Sahih Muslim," Book of Faith, chap. 24, "Deen is Sincerity").

In chapter 16 of his autobiography, Malcolm writes that he and Wallace (i.e., Imam Mohammed) shared an exceptional closeness and trust. In the next chapter he says that "Wallace" earlier had expressed to him his conviction that the NOI would survive only if it accepted a better understanding of Orthodox [Sunni] Islam. This was at least ten years before Imam Mohammed assumed leadership of the NOI. Thus, outsiders doubting the *sincerity* of the imam's intention of guiding the organization toward mainstream [Sunni] Islam in 1975 were probably being impatient or overly idealistic regarding the pace of his strategy.

In the months leading up to Ramadan 1975, the imam prepared the NOI's membership for the traditional fast and other aspects of the *Deen*. He conducted hours-long instructional telephone conferences that included all NOI temples. He arranged for the distribution of free books about the proper practice of Islam, among them Muhammad Hamidullah's "Introduction to Islam" (1957) and Hammudah Abdalati "Islam in Focus" (1975). Moreover, the NOI's national newspaper, Muhammad Speaks, often published transcripts of the guidance the imam had disseminated earlier via conference calls or internal memoranda.

Perhaps the two most notable Muhammad Speaks articles on the topic of