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W.D. Mohammed; Changed Muslim Movement in U.S.

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W.D. Mohammed, 74, the son of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad who took over after his father's death and for the next 30 years led tens of thousands of American Muslims away from separatist ideology and into mainstream Islam, was pronounced dead Sept. 9 at his home in Markham, Ill., a south suburb of Chicago.

A spokesman for the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office in Illinois said determination of the cause of death is pending further tests.

Mr. Mohammed, who became the chief minister of the black separatist Nation of Islam in 1975, shunned his father's fiery style and quickly forced changes that remade the nation's largest Muslim community.

He disbanded the militaristic security force called Fruit of Islam and decentralized the rigidly structured religion. He removed chairs from mosques so its members would kneel in prayer five times a day. He advocated that observant members read the Koran in Arabic and urged the African American-centric organization to exhibit racial tolerance.

The changes won the respect of Sunni Muslim leaders worldwide but startled longtime Nation of Islam members who were used to a philosophy of black supremacy and the practice of unquestioning loyalty to Elijah Muhammad.

Those rapid changes caused a split in the old Nation of Islam. W.D. Mohammed changed the organization's name, reforming it as the American Society of Muslims. In 1977, his rival Louis Farrakhan revived the Nation of Islam and, with it, the often anti-white and anti-Semitic message.

Although less well-known to the public than Farrakhan, the soft-spoken Mr. Mohammed led a far larger congregation. No one knows exactly how many Muslims are in the United States or how many of them are African American. But the largest group, an estimated 50,000 followers who practice in 185 mosques, belonged to Mr. Mohammed's organization, according to a 2005 article in the *Wilson Quarterly*.

He continued to appeal to black pride, renaming the Nation of Islam's former Harlem temple after Malcolm X, and told mosque members 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."

Born Wallace D. Mohammed in Hamtramck, Mich., on Oct. 30, 1933, he was the seventh of the eight children of Elijah and Clara Muhammad. The son later changed his name to Warith Deen Mohammed. At the age of 7, he showed early skepticism toward Nation of Islam orthodoxy that claimed his father was ordained from above.

"I had common sense, and my common sense told me this was ridiculous, the idea that God is a God that wants one people to dominate others," he told the Seattle Times in 1997. Master W.D. Fard Muhammad, the mysterious founder of the Nation of Islam, "was not God, and I knew he was not God, Elijah Mohammed was not a prophet."

His education was at the nation's school in Chicago, and he later attended Wilson Junior College and Loop College, now Harold Washington College, both in Chicago. His father hired a tutor to teach his children Arabic so that they could read the Koran in its original language. That reading reinforced Mr. Mohammed's opinion that his father's theology was at odds with Islam. Hearing of his father's sexual indiscretions didn't help.

He became a student minister in the Nation of Islam, preaching his first sermon at age 17 or 18. But, as he told the Chicago Tribune in 2002, his closing words of that sermon shot through the Nation: "We give more attention to the Devil than to Allah."

In 1961, he refused induction into the Army and served 14 months in federal prison in Minnesota. Like his father's generation of Nation of Islam followers, who had refused induction during World War II, Mr. Mohammed said he would not defend a country where lynching, segregation and virulent racism thwarted and killed his people.

He used his prison time to further study the Koran and became even more convinced that the Nation of Islam had to change its message. Upon his release, he returned to Chicago and drove a cab, became a welder and did odd jobs. He became close to one of his father's former acolytes, Malcolm X, who had fallen into disfavor, and that friendship caused his father to banish him for the first of three times. Friends and relatives shunned him.

When he was readmitted to the Nation of Islam in 1974, his father had six months left to live. After Elijah Muhammad's death, the family coalesced behind the seventh son. Some 20,000 Muslims in a hall roared their approval when he was proclaimed the supreme minister. Years later, he dropped that title for the more modest "imam."

As he opened the movement to the world, he accepted money from the United

Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, published accounts said. He embraced the American heritage of his group, becoming the first imam to deliver the prayer and invocation on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1993. That same year, he served as the Muslim representative at President Bill Clinton's inaugural interfaith breakfast. He met with Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama.

Mr. Mohammed, who wrote many books on Muslim teaching, retired from the American Society of Muslims in 2003. He then started a charity, Mosque Cares.

According to a Chicago Tribune profile in 2002, he was married four times, twice to the same woman, his first wife. He had nine children, the article said, ranging from teens to middle age.

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