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W. Deen Mohammed, 74, Top U.S. Imam, Dies

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Imam W. Deen Mohammed, a son of the [Nation of Islam](#) leader Elijah Muhammad, who renounced the black nationalism of his father's movement to lead a more traditional and racially tolerant form of Islam for black Muslims, died on Tuesday in Chicago. He was 74.

The death was confirmed on the blog of Dawud Walid, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Michigan, where Imam Mohammed had recently led a convention. The Associated Press reported that no cause had been determined.

Imam Mohammed emerged from the cauldron of religious politics and internal rivalry that characterized the Black Muslims, as the Nation of Islam members were called, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Following [Malcolm X](#), who was drifting away from black separatism toward traditional Islam when he was assassinated in 1965, Imam Mohammed increasingly favored a nonracial approach to religion, without categorizing white people as devils, as Elijah Muhammad did. His father excommunicated him several times for this dissidence.

The son was nonetheless unanimously elected supreme minister of the Nation of Islam after his father's death in 1975. He pushed his followers toward a more orthodox faith, emphasizing study of the Koran and the five duties of a Moslem: faith, charity, prayer five times a day, fasting during [Ramadan](#) and pilgrimage to Mecca. A major change was rejecting the divinity of the founder of the Nation of Islam, Wallace D. Fard; a lesser one was relaxing the religion's strict dress code.

Eventually, the Black Muslims splintered, with the fiery [Louis Farrakhan](#) leading the faction favoring racial separatism. Imam Mohammed, soft-spoken and scholarly, led what is thought to be a far larger flock that appeals, in general terms, to middle-class blacks, according to Contemporary Black Biography, an online reference book. Over the years, estimates of the group's size have ranged from 500,000 adherents to more than 2 million.

In 1976, Imam Mohammed dropped the Nation of Islam name in favor of the World Community of al-Islam in the West; that was also the year he adopted the title of imam.

Two years later, he changed the name of his organization to the American Muslim Mission. Later, he encouraged each mosque to be independent under the leadership of the Muslim American Society, or the Ministry of W. Deen Mohammed.

Imam Mohammed moved decisively toward the religious mainstream. In 1992, he became the first Muslim to deliver the invocation for the [United States Senate](#). He led prayers at both

inaugurals of President [Bill Clinton](#). He addressed a conference of Muslims and Reform Jews in 1995, and participated in several major interfaith dialogues with Roman Catholic cardinals. He met with the pope in 1996 and 1999.

Imam Mohammed worked to bring American Muslims into the world's largest Islamic orthodoxy, the Sunni branch. He met privately with Arab leaders like President [Anwar el-Sadat](#) of Egypt and received a contribution of \$16 million from a sultan in the United Arab Emirates.

His leadership position in the American Muslim community was evident two years after he succeeded his father when he led what was then the largest delegation of American Muslims on the pilgrimage to Mecca. It was major news in the African-American press when Imam Mohammed and Mr. Farrakhan appeared together in Chicago in 2000.

"Twenty-five years later, I know that your father wanted this," Mr. Farrakhan said, Jet magazine reported. "I know it in my heart."

Wallace Deen Mohammed was born in 1933 in Detroit and was said to be his father's favorite of his seven children. He was named after Mr. Fard, who according to Black Muslim lore had predicted his birth and his eventual succession to leadership. He eventually changed the spelling of his family name, including changing "a" to "e" as a sign of independence. He took the first name Warith when he became an imam in 1976.

He grew up on the South Side of Chicago, where he attended religious school taught by immigrants from places like Jordan and Egypt. He learned to read Arabic. He later studied English, history and the social sciences at two Chicago area junior colleges.

In 1961, he refused the military draft and was sentenced to three years in prison. While incarcerated, he began to notice contradictions in Nation of Islam theology. That led to the ideological rift with his father.

Imam Mohammed continued the business enterprises long favored by Black Muslims, including importing clothing, real estate development and developing skin care products. He also kept social services like improving access to health care and helping convicts after their release.

Information on survivors was unavailable. In 1994, The Los Angeles Times reported that at that time Imam Mohammed was married to his fourth wife and had eight children and five stepchildren.

Imam Mohammed was almost preternaturally reserved compared with Mr. Farrakhan and sometimes appeared in public only once a year. His last appearance was in Detroit in August.

"We all," he counseled, "should try to be more Christ-like."

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