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Jihadis in the Hood Race, Urban Islam, and the War on Terror

Hisham Aidi

Street scene in New York.

EDWARD GRAZDA/POWERHOUSE BOOKS

In his classic novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed satirizes white America's age-old anxiety about the "infectiousness" of black culture with "Jus Grew," an indefinable, irresistible carrier of "soul" and "blackness" that spreads like a virus contaminating everyone in its wake from New Orleans to New York. Reed suggests that the source of the Jus Grew scourge is a sacred text, which is finally located and destroyed by Abdul Sufti Hamid, "the Brother on the Street." In a turn of events reminiscent of Reed's storyline, commentators are advancing theories warning of a dangerous epidemic spreading through our inner cities today, infecting misguided, disaffected minority youth and turning them into anti-American terrorists. This time, though, the pathogen is Islam, more specifically an insidious mix of radical Islam and black militancy.

Since the capture of John Walker Lindh, the Marin County "black nationalist"-turned-Taliban,¹ and the arrest of would-be terrorist José Padilla, a Brooklyn-born Puerto

Rican ex-gang member who encountered Islam while in prison, terrorism experts and columnists have been warning of the "Islamic threat" in the American underclass, and alerting the public that the ghetto and the prison system could very well supply a fifth column to Osama bin Laden and his ilk. Writing in *The Daily News*, black social critic Stanley Crouch reminded us that in 1986, the powerful Chicago street gang al-Rukn—known in the 1970s as the Blackstone Rangers—was arrested en masse for receiving \$2.5 million from Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi to commit terrorist acts in the US. "We have to realize there is another theater in this unprecedented war, one headquartered in our jails and prisons," Crouch cautioned.

Chuck Colson of the evangelical American Christian Mission, which ministers to inmates around the country, penned a widely circulated article in the *Wall Street Journal* charging that "al-Qaeda training manuals specifically identify America's prisoners as candidates for conversion because they may be 'disenchanted with their country's policies'... As US citizens, they will combine a desire for 'payback' with an ability to blend easily into American culture." Moreover, he wrote, "Saudi money has been funneled into the Ameri-

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can Muslim Foundation, which supports prison programs,” reiterating that America’s “alienated, disenfranchised people are prime targets for radical Islamists who preach a religion of violence, of overcoming oppression by jihad.”²

Since September 11, more than a few American-born black and Latino jihadis have indeed been discovered behind enemy lines. Before Padilla (Abdallah al-Muhajir), there was Aqil, the troubled Mexican-American youth from San Diego found in an Afghan training camp fraternizing with one of the men accused of killing journalist Daniel Pearl. Aqil, now in custody, is writing a memoir called *My Jihad*. In February, the *New York Times* ran a story about Hiram Torres, a Puerto Rican whose name was found in a bombed-out house in Kabul, on a list of recruits to the Pakistani group Harkat al-Mujahedeen, which has ties to al-Qaeda. Torres, also known as Mohamed Salman, graduated first in his New Jersey high school class and briefly attended Yale, before dropping out and heading to Pakistan in 1998. He has not been heard from since. A June edition of *US News and World Report* mentions a group of African-Americans, their whereabouts currently unknown, who studied at a school closely linked to the Kashmiri militia, Lashkar-e Taiba. L’Houssaine Kerchtou, an Algerian government witness, claims to have seen “some black Americans” training at al-Qaeda bases in Sudan and Pakistan.

Earlier this year, the movie *Kandahar* caused an uproar in the American intelligence community because the African-American actor who played a doctor was American fugitive David Belfield. Belfield, who converted to Islam at Howard University in 1970, is wanted for the 1980 murder of Iranian dissident Ali Akbar Tabatabai in Washington. Belfield has lived in Tehran since 1980 and goes by the name of Hassan Tantai.³ The two most notorious accused terrorists now in US custody are black Europeans, French-Moroccan Zacarias Moussaoui and the English-Jamaican shoe bomber Richard Reid, who were radicalized in the same mosque in the London ghetto of Brixton. Moussaoui’s ubiquitous mug shot in orange prison garb, looking like any American inner-city youth with his shaved head and goatee, has intrigued many and unnerved some. “My first thought when I saw his photograph was that I wished he looked more Arabic and less black,” wrote Sheryl McCarthy in *Newsday*. “All African-Americans need is for the first guy to be tried on terrorism charges stemming from this tragedy to look like one of our own.”

But assessments of an “Islamic threat” in the American ghetto are sensational and ahistorical. As campaigns are introduced to stem the “Islamic tide,” there has been little probing of why alienated black and Latino youth might gravitate towards Islamism. There has been no commentary comparable to what British race theorist Paul Gilroy wrote about Richard Reid and the group of Britons held at Guantanamo Bay: “The story of black European involvement in these geopolitical currents is disturbingly connected to the deeper history of immigration and race politics.” Reid, in particular, “manifest[s] the uncomfortable truth that British multiculturalism has failed.”⁴

For over a century, African-American thinkers—Muslim and non-Muslim—have attempted to harness the black struggle to global Islam, while leaders in the Islamic world have tried to yoke their political causes to African-American liberation. Islamism, in the US context, has come to refer to differing ideologies adopted by Muslim groups to galvanize social movements for “Islamic” political ends—the Nation of Islam’s “buy black” campaigns and election boycotts or Harlem’s Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood lobbying for benefits and cultural and political rights from the state. Much more rarely, it has included the jihadi strain of Islamism, embraced by foreign-based or foreign-funded Islamist groups (such as al-Rukn) attempting to gain American recruits for armed struggles against “infidel” governments at home and abroad. The rise of Islam and Islamism in American inner cities can be explained as a product of immigration and racial politics, deindustrialization and state withdrawal, and the interwoven cultural forces of black nationalism, Islamism and hip-hop that appeal strongly to disenfranchised black, Latino, Arab and South Asian youth.

Islam in the Trans-Atlantic

The West Indian-born Christian missionary, Edward Blyden, was the first African-American scholar to advocate an alliance between global Islam and pan-Africanism, the system of thought which is considered his intellectual legacy. After studying Arabic in Syria and living in West Africa, Blyden became convinced that Islam was better suited for people of African descent than Christianity, because of what he saw as the lack of racial prejudice, the doctrine of brotherhood and the value placed on learning in Islam. His seminal tome, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1888), laid the groundwork for a pan-Africanism with a strong Islamic cultural and religious undergirding.

Blyden’s counterpart in the Arab world was the Sudanese-Egyptian intellectual Duse Muhammad Ali. In 1911, after the First Universal Races Congress held at the University of London, Duse Mohammed launched *The African Times and Orient Review*, a journal championing national liberal struggles and abolitionism “in the four quarters of the earth,” and promoting solidarity among “non-whites” around the world. Published in both English and Arabic, the journal was circulated across the Muslim world and African diaspora, running articles by intellectuals from the Middle East to the West Indies (including contributions from Booker T. Washington). Duse would later become mentor to Marcus Garvey when the American black nationalist worked at the *Review* in London in 1913, and would leave his indelible stamp on Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, whose mission “to reclaim the fallen of the race, to administer and assist the needy” would become the social welfare principles animating myriad urban Islamic and African-American movements.⁵ In 1926, Duse created the Universal Islamic Society in Detroit, which would influence, if not inspire, Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple and Fard Muhammad’s Temple of Islam, both seen as precursors of the modern-day Nation of Islam (NOI).

Blyden's and Duse's ideas, which underlined universal brotherhood, human rights and "literacy" (i.e., the study of Arabic), had a profound impact on subsequent pan-Africanist and Islamic movements in the US, influencing leaders such as Garvey, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. The latter two inherited an "Arabo-centric" understanding of Islam, viewing the Arabs as God's "chosen people" and Arabic as the language of intellectual jihad—ideas still central to the Nation of Islam today. The NOI's mysterious founder, Fard Muhammad, to whom Elijah Muhammad referred as "God himself," is widely believed to have been an Arab.⁶ "Fard was an Arab who loved us so much so as to bring us al-Islam," Minister Louis Farrakhan has said repeatedly. For the past 35 years, Farrakhan's top adviser has been the Palestinian-American Ali Baghdadi, though the two fell out earlier this year when the Minister condemned suicide bombings.⁷ In the NOI "typologist" theology, Arabs are seen as a "Sign" of a future people, a people chosen by God to receive the Quran, but who have strayed, and so God has chosen the American Negro, who like the Arab is "despised and rejected" with a "history of ignorance and savagery," to spread Islam in the West.⁸

Malcolm X was probably the most prominent African-American Muslim leader to place the civil rights movement, not just in a pan-Islamic and pan-African context, but within the global struggle for Third World independence. In addition to his historic visit to Mecca, where he would witness "Islamic universalism" and eventually renounce the NOI's race theology, Malcolm X would confer with Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser and Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella, leaders of the Arab League and Organization of African Unity, respectively, and consider taking African-American problems to the floor of the UN General Assembly.

When the al-Azhar-educated Warith Deen Muhammad took over the Nation of Islam after the death of his father Elijah in 1975, he renounced his father's race theology and changed his organization's name to the World Community of al-Islam in the West to emphasize the internationalist ties of Muslims over the nationalistic bonds of African-Americans—leading to a split with Minister Farrakhan, who then proceeded to rebuild the NOI in its old image. Arab and Islamic states would persistently woo W. D. Muhammad, apparently eager to gain influence over US foreign policy. "But," lamented one scholar, "he has rejected any lobbying role for himself, along with an unprecedented opportunity to employ the international pressure of Arab states to improve the social conditions of black Americans."⁹

Targeting the Disaffected

Is there any truth to the claim that Muslim states or Islamist groups specifically targeted African-Americans to lobby the US government or to recruit them in wars overseas? *US News and World Report* notes that, just in the 1990s, between 1,000 and 2,000 Americans—of whom "a fair number are African-Americans"—volunteered to fight with Muslim armies in Bosnia, Chechnya, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Many were recruited by radical imams in the US. According to several reports, in the

late 1970s the Pakistani imam Sheikh Syed Gilani, now on the run for his alleged role in Daniel Pearl's murder, founded a movement called al-Fuqara (The Poor) with branches in Brooklyn and New Jersey, where he preached to a predominantly African-American constituency. Using his "Soldiers of Allah" video, Gilani recruited fighters for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Likewise, according to the FBI, working out of his "jihad office" in Brooklyn, the blind cleric Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman raised millions of dollars for the Afghan resistance and sent 200 volunteers to join the mujahideen.

According to a recent study, Saudi Arabia has historically exerted the strongest influence over the American Muslim community, particularly since the rise of OPEC in 1973.¹⁰ Through the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Muslim Student Associations, the Islamic Circle of North America and the Saudi-sponsored World Muslim League, the Saudis have financed summer camps for children, institutes for training imams, speakers' series, the distribution of Islamic literature, mosque-building and proselytizing. In addition, the Saudi embassy, through its control of visas, decides who in the American Muslim community goes on the pilgrimage to Mecca. But there is absolutely no evidence suggesting a connection between this influence and terrorism against the US, as has been alleged by several media outlets.¹¹

In the early 1980s, Iran attempted to counter Saudi influence over the American Muslim community and to gain African-American converts to Shiism. On November 17, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini had ordered the release of 13 African-American hostages, stating that they were "oppressed brothers" who were also victims of American injustice. In 1982, a study commissioned by the Iranian government to appraise the potential for Shiite proselytizing in black America attacked the Nation of Islam and Sunni Muslims for their "insincerity" and argued that Saudi proselytizers were in cahoots with the CIA. The report stated: "Besides being dispirited, the African-American Muslims feel that nobody cares about them. [Everyone] only wants to use them for their own personal reasons as they languish... The majority of African-Americans really want pure Islam. However, until and unless someone is willing, qualified and able to effectively oppose active Saudi oil money...the Islamic movement in America will plod on in a state of abject ineptitude and ineffectiveness."¹² But the Iranian revolution did not have much influence over African-American Muslims, with the notable exception of the aforementioned Belfield.

The majority of African-Americans, and increasingly Latinos, who embrace Islam do not end up wearing military fatigues in the mountains of Central Asia. For most, Islam provides order, meaning and purpose to nihilistic and chaotic lives, but even if most do not gravitate towards radical Islamism, why the attraction to Islam in the first place?

Exiting the West

Many blacks and Latinos in American metropolises live in poverty and feel alienated from the country's liberal political and cultural traditions. Repelled by America's permissive



Street scene in New York.

EDWARD GRAZDA/POWERHOUSE BOOKS

consumerist culture, many search for a faith and culture that provides rules and guidelines for life. Often they are drawn to strands of Christianity that endorse patriarchy, “family values” and abstinence. But many young African-Americans, and increasingly Latinos, reject Christianity, which they see as the faith of a guilty and indifferent establishment. Christian America has failed them, and stripped them of their “ethnic honor.” Estranged from the US, and in the case of Latinos, from their parents’ homelands, many minority youth search for a sense of community and identity, in a quest that has increasingly led them to the other side of the Atlantic, to the Islamic world. Sunni Islam, the heterodox Nation of Islam and quasi-Muslim movements such as the Five Percenters and Nuwaubians allow for a cultural and spiritual escape from the American social order that often entails a wholesale rejection of Western culture and civilization.

Family breakdown and family values come up often in conversations and sermons at inner-city mosques as explanations for the younger generation’s disenchantment with American society and liberalism. The decline of the two-parent household which preoccupies discussion of family values has economic and political roots. In the 1970s and 1980s, the middle classes left for the suburbs, investors relo-

cated and joblessness in urban areas increased rapidly. As one analyst observed, “The labor market conditions which sustained the ‘male breadwinner’ family have all but vanished.” Matrifocal homes arose in its place. The new urban political economy of the 1980s—state withdrawal and capital flight—led to “the creation of a new set of orientations that places less value on marriage and rejects the dominance of men as a standard for a successful husband-wife family.”¹³ But in the view of many inner-city Muslim leaders, family breakdown and economic dislocation result from racism, Western decadence and immorality—they are the effect of straying from the way of God. Raheem Ocasio, imam of New York’s Alianza Islamica, contends: “Latinos in the society at large, due to pressures of modern Western culture are fighting a losing battle to maintain their traditional family structure... Interestingly, the effects of an Islamic lifestyle seem to mitigate the harmful effects of the Western lifestyle and have helped restore and reinforce traditional family values. Latino culture is at its root patriarchal, so Islam’s clearly defined roles for men as responsible leaders and providers and women as equally essential and complementary, were assimilated. As a result, divorce among Latino Muslim couples is relatively rare.”¹⁴

By embracing Islam, previously invisible, inaudible and disaffected individuals gain a sense of identity and belonging to what they perceive as an organized, militant and glorious civilization that the West takes very seriously. One Chicano ex-convict tried to explain the allure of Islam for Latino inmates, and why Mexican-Americans sympathize with Palestinians: "The old Latin American revolutionaries converted to atheism, but the new faux revolutionary Latino American prisoner can just as easily convert to Islam.... There reside in the Latino consciousness at least three historical grudges, three conflicting selves: the Muslim Moor, the Catholic Spanish and the indigenous Indian.... [For the Mexican inmates] the Palestinians had their homeland stolen and were oppressed in much the same way as Mexicans."¹⁵

"Bringing Allah to Urban Renewal"

In the wretched social and economic conditions of the inner city, and in the face of government apathy, Muslim organizations operating in the ghetto and prisons deliver materially. As in much of the Islamic world, where the state fails to provide basic services and security, Muslim organizations appear, funding community centers, patrolling the streets and organizing people.

As the state withdrew and capital fled from the city in the Reagan-Bush era, social institutions and welfare agencies disappeared, leaving an urban wasteland. Churches have long been the sole institutions in the ghetto, but Islamic institutions have been growing in African-American neighborhoods for the past two decades. In Central Harlem, Brownsville and East New York—areas deprived of job opportunities—dozens of mosques (Sunni, NOI, Five Percenter and Nuwaubian) have arisen, standing cheek by jowl with dozens of churches that try to provide some order and guidance to these neighborhoods. In the ghettos of Brooklyn and Chicago's Southside and the barrios of East Harlem and East Los Angeles, where aside from a heavy police presence, there is little evidence of government, Muslim groups provide basic services. The Alianza Islamica of New York, headquartered in the South Bronx, offers after-school tutorials, equivalency diploma instruction for high school dropouts, marriage counseling, substance abuse counseling, AIDS awareness campaigns and sensitivity talks on Islam for the NYPD. The Alianza has confronted gangs and drug posses, training young men in martial arts to help clean up the streets of the barrio with little reliance on trigger-happy policemen.

One quasi-Islamic group, the United Nation of Islam, which broke away from Farrakhan's NOI in 1993, has adopted the slogan "Bringing Allah to Urban Renewal" and is resurrecting blighted urban neighborhoods across the country, opening up health clinics, employment centers, restaurants and grocery stores that do not sell red meat, cigarettes or even soda because they're bad for customers' health.¹⁶ The United Nation of Islam does not accept government funds, fearing that federal money would compromise their mission of "Civilization Development." Similarly, the NOI conducts "manhood training" and mentoring programs in

inner cities across the country, earning the praise of numerous scholarly reports, which claim that young men who participate in these programs for an extended time show "positive self-conception," improved grades and less involvement in drugs and petty crime.¹⁷

In addition to delivering basic services, the NOI today tries to provide jobs and housing. The NOI's Los Angeles branch is currently buying up homes for homeless young men (calling them "Houses of Knowledge and Discipline"), building AIDS treatment clinics and starting up a bank specializing in small loans.¹⁸ In 1997, Farrakhan announced a "three-year economic program" aiming to eliminate "unemployment, poor housing and all the other detriments that plague our community."¹⁹ Farrakhan seems to have reverted to the strategies of economic nationalism pursued by Elijah Muhammad. One scholar argues that under Elijah, the NOI was essentially a development organization emphasizing thrift and economic independence among poor black people, with such success that it turned many followers into affluent entrepreneurs. The organization itself evolved into a middle-class establishment, allowing W. D. Muhammad, after his father's death, to shed black nationalist rhetoric and identify with a multiracial *umma*—moves which resonated with his middle-class constituency.²⁰ In the 1970s, the NOI had owned thousands of acres of farmland, banks, housing complexes, retail and wholesale businesses and a university and was described by C. Eric Lincoln as one of the "most potent economic forces" in black America, but W. D. Muhammad liquidated many of the NOI's assets. When Farrakhan resuscitated the NOI in the 1980s, he revived Elijah's message of black economic empowerment (appealing to many poorer blacks) and began rebuilding the NOI's business empire. According to *Business Week*, in 1995 the NOI owned two thousand acres of farmland in Georgia and Michigan, a produce transport business, a series of restaurants and a media distribution company.

Islam Behind Bars

Over the past 30 years, Islam has become a powerful force in the American prison system. Ever since the Attica prison riots in upstate New York in 1971, when Muslim inmates protected guards from being taken hostage, prison officials have allowed Muslim inmates to practice and proselytize relatively freely. Prior to the rise of Islam, the ideologies with the most currency among minorities in prison were strands of revolutionary Marxism—Maoism and Guevarism—and varieties of black nationalism. According to one report, nowadays one third of the million or more black men in prison are claiming affiliation with the Nation of Islam, Sunni Islam or some quasi-Muslim group, such as the Moorish Science Temple.²¹ Mike Tyson, during a stint in prison in the mid-1990s, seems to have combined all three currents, leaving prison as a Muslim convert, Malik Shabbaz, but with Mao and Che Guevara tattoos. "I'm just a dark guy from the den of iniquity," the former heavyweight champion explained to journalists.

The presence of Muslim organizations in prisons has increased in the last decade as the state cut back on prisoner ser-



Rapper and Five Percenter Busta Rhymes.

MARCO DOS SANTOS/VELOCITY

vices. In 1988, legislation made drug offenders ineligible for Pell grants; in 1992, this was broadened to include convicts sentenced to death or life-long imprisonment without parole, and in 1994, the law was extended to all remaining state and federal prisoners. In 1994, Congress passed legislation barring inmates from higher education, stating that criminals could not benefit from federal funds, despite overwhelming evidence that prison educational programs not only help maintain order in prison, but prevent recidivism.²² Legislation also denies welfare payments, veterans' benefits and food stamps to anyone in detention for more than 60 days.

In 1996, the Clinton Administration passed the Work Opportunity and Personal Responsibility Act preventing most ex-convicts from receiving Medicaid, public housing and Section 8 vouchers. Clinton forbade inmates in 1998 from receiving Social Security benefits, saying that prisoners "collecting Social Security checks" was "fraud and abuse" perpetrated against "working families" who "play by the rules."²³ All these cutbacks affected minorities disproportionately, but African-Americans in particular because of the disproportionately high incarceration rates of African-American men. Disparate treatment by the criminal justice system—which has a devastating effect on the black family, the inner city economy and black political power, since convicts and ex-convicts cannot vote in 39 states—is another powerful factor fueling the resentment of minorities toward the establishment.

In this atmosphere, it is no surprise that Muslim organizations in prisons are gaining popularity. The Nation of Islam provides classes, mentorship programs, study groups and "manhood training" that teaches inmates respect for women, responsible sexual behavior, drug prevention, and life management skills. Mainstream American Muslim organizations also provide myriad services to prisoners. At ISNA's First Conference on Islam in American Prisons, Amir Ali of the Institute of Islamic Information and Education described the services and support system that his organization provides to Muslim inmates: regular visits to prisons by evangelists who deliver books and literature, classes in Arabic and Islamic history, correspondence courses in other subjects, 24-hour toll-free phones and collect-calling services for inmates to call families, mentorship programs for new converts and "halfway houses" to help reintegrate Muslim inmates into society after release.

Those who study Islam behind bars cast doubt on the assertions of Colson and Crouch. At ISNA's Third Annual Conference on Islam in American Prisons in July 2002, keynote speaker David Schwartz, who recently retired as religious services administrator for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, strongly rejected the notion that American prisons were a breeding ground for terrorists, and stated that Islam was a positive force in the lives of inmates. Scholar Robert Dannin adds: "Why would a sophisticated international terrorist

organization bother with inmates—who are fingerprinted and whose data is in the US criminal justice system?”²⁴

Islam and Hip-Hop

*The street life is the only life I know
I live by the code style it's made PLO
Iranian thoughts and cover like an Arabian
Grab a nigga on the spot and put a 9 to his cranium.
—Method Man, “PLO Style”*

“Now that Arabs are the new niggers, will Arab culture become the rage?” asked a columnist for *The Black World Today* some weeks after September 11. Arab culture has not become the rage, but if Rastafarianism and Bob Marley’s Third Worldist reggae anthems provided the music and culture of choice for marginalized minority youth two decades ago, in the 1990s “Islamic hip-hop” emerged as the language of disaffected youth throughout the West.

Arabic, Islamic or quasi-Islamic motifs increasingly thread the colorful fabric that is hip-hop, such that for many inner city and suburban youth, rap videos and lyrics provide a regular and intimate exposure to Islam. Many “Old School” fans will recall the video of Eric B and Rakim’s “Know the Ledge,” which featured images of Khomeini and Muslim congregational prayer, as Rakim flowed: “In control of many, like Ayatollah Khomeini...I’m at war a lot, like Anwar Sadat.” Self-proclaimed Muslim rap artists proudly announce their faith and include “Islamic” messages of social justice in their lyrics. Followers of Sunni Islam (“al-Islam” in hip-hop parlance), Q-Tip (Fareed Kamal) and Mos Def are among the most highly acclaimed hip-hop artists, lauded as representatives of hip-hop’s school of “Afro-humanism” and positivity. Mos Def, in an interview with *Beliefnet*, described his mission as a Muslim artist: “It’s about speaking out against oppression wherever you can. If that’s gonna be in Bosnia or Kosovo or Chechnya or places where Muslims are being persecuted; or if it’s gonna be in Sierra Leone or Colombia—you know, if people’s basic human rights are being abused and violated, then Islam has an interest in speaking out against it, because we’re charged to be the leaders of humanity.”²⁵

The fluidity and variegated nature of Islam in urban America is seen in the different “Islams” represented in hip-hop, and most poignantly in the friction between Sunni Muslims and Five Percenter. Today most “Islamic” references in hip-hop are to the belief system of the Five Percent Nation, a splinter group of the NOI founded in 1964 by Clarence 13X. The Five Percent Nation (or “The Nation of Gods and Earths”) refashioned the teachings of the NOI, rejecting the notion that Fard was Allah and teaching instead that the black man was God and that his proper name is ALLAH (Arm Leg Leg Arm Head). They taught that 85 percent of the masses are ignorant and will never know the truth. Ten percent of the people know the truth but use it to exploit and manipulate the 85 percent; only five percent of humanity know the truth and understand the “true divine nature of the black man who is God or Allah.”²⁶ In Five Percenter theology, Manhattan

(particularly Harlem) is known as Mecca, Brooklyn is Medina, Queens is the Desert, the Bronx is Pelan and New Jersey is the New Jerusalem. Five Percenter beliefs have exerted a great influence on hip-hop argot and street slang. The expressions “word is bond,” “break it down,” “peace,” “whassup G” (meaning God, not gangsta) and “represent” all come from Five Percenter ideology.

Orthodox Sunni Muslims see Five Percenter as blasphemous heretics who call themselves “Gods.” They accuse Five Percenter of *shirk*, the Arabic word meaning polytheism—the diametrical opposite of the *tawhid* (unitary nature of God) that defined the Prophet Muhammad’s revelation. Since Five Percenter often wear skullcaps and women cover their hair, Sunni Muslims will often greet them with *as-salam alaykum* (peace be upon you) to which the Five Percenter respond, “Peace, God.” Five Percenter refer to Sunni Muslims as deluded and “soon to be Muslim.” In the “ten percent,” Five Percenter include the “white devil,” as well as orthodox Muslims “who teach that Allah is a spook.”

Busta Rhymes, Wu Tang Clan and Mobb Deep are among the most visible Five Percenter rappers. Their lyrics—replete with numerology, cryptic “Islamic” allusions and at times pejorative references to women and whites (as “white devils” or “cave dwellers”)—have aroused great interest and controversy. Journalist and former rapper Adisa Banjoko strongly reprimands Five Percenter rappers for their materialism and ignorance: “In hip-hop a lot of us talk about knowledge and the importance of holding on to it, yet under the surface of hip-hop’s ‘success’ runs the thread of ignorance (*jahiliyya*, the Arabic term referring to the pagan age in Arabia before Islam).” Like “the original *jahiliyya* age,” hip-hop today is plagued by “*jahili* territorialism and clan affiliation,” a “heavy disrespect of women” and a materialism that “borders on *jahili* idol worship.”²⁷ Five Percenter Ibn Dajjal responded angrily to Adisa’s criticism: “No amount of *fatwas* or censorship will ever silence the sounds of the NOI and Five Percent *mushrik* (idolater) nations. The group will continue to rise in fame with customers coming from all walks of life: black, white and Bedouin. [F]ar from a masterpiece of style, the book (the Quran) is literally riddled with errors and clumsy style which yield little more than a piece of sacred music... Maybe there should be a new hip-hop album entitled *Al-Quran Al-Karim Freestyle* by Method Man and Ghostface Killa!”

Though it has nothing to do with the jihadi trend, the language of Islam in the culture of hip-hop does often express anger at government indifference and US foreign policy, and challenge structures of domination. The outspoken rapper Paris, formerly of the NOI, who galled the Establishment with his 1992 single “Bush Killer,” has raised eyebrows again with his single “What Would You Do?” (included on his forthcoming LP, “Sonic Jihad”) which excoriates the “war on terror” and the USA PATRIOT Act, and implies government involvement in the September 11 attacks. In early 2002, the Brooklyn-based Palestinian-American brothers, the Hammer Bros, “originally from the Holy Land, living in the Belly of the Beast, trying to rise on feet of Yeast,” released their *pro-intifada* cut, “Free Palestine,” now regularly blared at pro-

Palestinian gatherings in New York. One particularly popular and articulate artist is spoken-word poet Suheir Hammad, the Palestinian-American author of *Born Black, Born Palestinian*, on growing up Arab in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Hammad appeared on HBO's "Def Poetry Jam" some weeks after September 11, and delivered a stirring rendition—to a standing ovation—of her poem, "First Writing Since," on being an Arab New Yorker with a brother in the US Navy.²⁸

"No Real Stake"

Pan-Africanism and pan-Islam were fused together by African-American and Muslim intellectuals over a century ago to fight colonialism, racism and Western domination. Today that resistance strategy has been adopted by tens of thousands of urban youth (judging by NOI rallies in the US and Europe) in the heart of the West. The cultural forces of Islam, black nationalism and hip-hop have converged to create a brazenly political and oppositional counterculture that has a powerful allure. At root, the attraction of African-American, Latino, Arab, South Asian and West Indian youth to Islam, and movements that espouse different brands of political Islam, is evidence of Western states' failure to integrate minority and immigrant communities, and deliver basic life necessities and social welfare benefits—policy failures of which Islamic groups (and right-wing Christian groups) are keenly aware.

Rather than prompt examination of why minority youth, in the ghetto and its appendage institution, the prison, would be attracted to Islam—whether in its apolitical Sunni or Sufi, Five Percenter, overtly political Nation of Islam or jihadi varieties—the cases of Moussaoui, Reid and Padilla have led to arguments about how certain cultures are "unassimilable," hysterical warnings of a "black (or Hispanic) fifth column" and aggressive campaigns to counter Islamic influence in the inner city. Evangelical groups are trying to exclude Islamic institutions from George W. Bush's faith-based development initiative. Jerry Falwell stated that "it is totally inappropriate under any circumstances" to give Federal aid to Muslim groups, because "the Muslim faith teaches hate. Islam should be out the door before they knock. They should not be allowed to dip into the pork barrel."²⁹ Another Christian effort, Project Joseph, conducts "Muslim awareness seminars" in inner cities across the country, warning that Muslim leaders are exploiting the weakness of black churches, informing African-Americans that conversion to Islam does not imply "recovering their ethnic heritage" and publicly admonishing that "if the conversion rate continues unchanged, Islam could become the dominant religion in black urban areas by the year 2020."³⁰

The aspirations of the very poor and disenfranchised in America will continue to overlap with the struggles and hopes of the impoverished masses of the Muslim Third World, who will in turn continue to look towards African-Americans for inspiration and help. Minister Farrakhan's recent "solidarity tour" of Iraq and recent meetings between Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson and Yasser Arafat show that Muslim causes continue to reverberate in the African-American

community. By and large, African-Americans do not seem to share the hostility to Islam which has intensified since September 11. Akbar Muhammad, professor of history at SUNY-Binghamton and son of Elijah Muhammad, wrote in 1985 that because African-Americans have "no real political stake in America, political opposition to the Muslim world is unworthy of serious consideration."³¹ These words still hold true for many minorities in post-September 11 America. ■

Endnotes

1 Many say Lindh was corrupted by reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and his love of hip-hop. See Shelby Steele, "Radical Sheik," *Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2001. Lindh often posed as black online, going by the names of "Doodoo" and "Prof J." He attacked Zionism, once writing: "Our blackness does not make white people hate us, it is THEIR racism that causes hate... [The N-word] has, for hundreds of years, been a label put on us by Caucasians... and because of the weight it carries with it, I never use it myself." See Clarence Page, "The 'White Negro' Taliban?" *Chicago Tribune*, December 14, 2001.

2 Chuck Colson, "Evangelizing for Evil in Our Prisons," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2002. See also Mark Almond, "Why Terrorists Love Criminals (And Vice Versa): Many a Jihadist Began as a Hood," *Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2002; Earl Ofari Hutchinson, "Hispanic or African-American Jihad?" *Black World Today*, June 12, 2002; and *Christian Science Monitor*, June 14, 2002.

3 *Guardian*, January 10, 2002.

4 Paul Gilroy, "Dividing into the Tunnel: The Politics of Race Between the Old and New Worlds," *OpenDemocracy*, January 31, 2002. <http://www.opendemocracy.net>

5 Robert A. Hill, ed. *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 3 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 302.

6 Despite Farrakhan's claim to have renounced race theology, *The Final Call* still prints on its back page that "God appeared in the person of W. Fard Muhammad."

7 Ali Baghdadi, "Farrakhan Plans to Meet Sharon," *Media Monitor Network*, April 14, 2002. <http://www.mediamonitors.net>

8 See Theophus Harold Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations in Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

9 Ernest Allen, Jr. "Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Continuing Evolution of the Nation of Islam," in Amy Alexander, ed. *The Farrakhan Factor* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), p. 73.

10 Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

11 Gregory Gause, "Be Careful What You Wish For: The Future of US-Saudi Relations," *World Policy Journal* 19/1 (Spring 2002).

12 Muhammad Said, *Questions and Answers About Indigenous US Muslims* (Tehran, 1982). Unpublished manuscript.

13 "In 1993, 27 percent of all children under the age of 18 were living with a single parent. This figure includes 57 percent of all black children, 32 percent of all Hispanic children and 21 percent of all white children." William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 85. Elsewhere Wilson argues that the sharp increase in black male joblessness since 1970 accounts in large measure for the rise in the number of single-parent families. Since jobless rates are highest in the inner city, rates of single parenthood are also highest there.

14 Rahim Ocasio, "Latinos, The Invisible: Islam's Forgotten Multitude," *The Message* (August 1997).

15 *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 2002.

16 *Christian Science Monitor*, December 1, 1999.

17 Richard Majors and Susan Wiener, *Programs That Serve African-American Youth* (Washington: The Urban Institute, 1995).

18 *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2002.

19 *Final Call*, February 11, 1997.

20 Lawrence H. Mamiya, "Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Final Call: Schism in the Muslim Movement," in Earl H. Waugh et al., *The Muslim Community in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983).

21 *Newsweek*, October 30, 1995.

22 Josh Page, "Eliminating the Enemy: A Cultural Analysis of the Exclusion of Prisoners from Higher Education" (master's thesis, University of California-Berkeley, 1997).

23 Bill Clinton, radio address, April 25, 1998. Transcript available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

24 Quoted in Hisham Aidi, "Jihadis in the Cell Block," *Africana.com*, July 22, 2002.

25 Hisham Aidi, "Hip-Hop for the Gods," *Africana.com*, April 31, 2001.

26 Yusuf Nuruddin, "The Five Percenters: A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths," in Yvonne Haddad et al., *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

27 Adisa Banjoko, "Hip-Hop and the New Age of Ignorance," *FNV Newsletter* (June 2001).

28 The poem appeared in *Middle East Report* 22:1 (Winter 2001).

29 *Washington Post*, March 8, 2001.

30 *USA Today*, July 19, 2000.

31 Akbar Muhammad, "Interaction between 'Indigenous' and 'Immigrant' Muslims in the United States: Some Positive Trends," *Hijab* (March/April 1985).