



The Darul Islam Movement in the United States

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The 1960s were a time of great social upheaval in the U.S. Within the African-American Muslim population, young organizations trumpeted separation from mainstream American culture. Of these groups, Darul Islam “was the largest indigenous Muslim group until W. Deen Mohammed transformed the Nation into a more inclusive Sunni Islam.”¹ This article explores the evolution of Darul Islam.

The Islamic Mission to America and Darul Islam's Founding

Darul Islam's founding members came from the Islamic Mission of America, which was founded in 1924 by Sheikh Daoud Ahmed Faisal and based out of the State Street Mosque in Brooklyn, New York. His thinking, which derived “as much from Franz Fanon's anticolonialism as the literature of Islamic revivalism,” held that African-Americans “needed to totally transform themselves-their language, dress, customs, and even their daily interactions-in a ritual of purification that would cement them to the real foundations of the worldwide Islamic revival that was occurring across the Atlantic.”²

However, Faisal did not advocate for complete withdrawal from American society, nor disloyalty to it. Unlike some organizations that taught African-Americans that they were originally Muslim (such as the Moorish Science Temple), the Islamic Mission did not instruct followers to resist the military draft, but “permitted its male followers to join.”³ In this way, “Faisal thought that blacks should reclaim their Islamic heritage and also lay claim to an American allegiance.”⁴ Though the Islamic Mission originally brought together Muslim immigrants and American-born converts in one congregation, over time “the fraternal atmosphere” at the State Street Mosque “degenerated into two thinly disguised factions, the new Americans (Arab Muslim immigrants) and the new Muslims (African-American converts).”⁵

With this degeneration in social relations, Rijab Mahmud and Yahya Abdul Karim led a group of African-American converts away from the State Street Mosque, and founded a new mosque in nearby Brownsville, Brooklyn in 1962. This breakaway group's members relied on the religious counsel of a Pakistani religious instructor, Hafis Mahbub, who was affiliated with the Tablighi Jamaat. The new group “set out to build an urban community governed under the sharia,” calling it Darul Islam.⁶ Darul Islam is an Arabic term meaning “abode of Islam.”

Darul Islam's Religious Methodology

Darul Islam is ideologically influenced by “the teachings and writings” of Pakistani thinker Abu Ala al-Mawdudi.⁷ One of its founding themes was the experience of racism, with Islam viewed as “the liberating force.”⁸ Gutbi Mahdi Ahmed notes that “[l]ike many black movements of the sixties Darul Islam was a militant movement, with occasional outbreaks of violence.”⁹

Darul Islam emphasized a literal translation of the Qur'an, strict adherence to the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, and “the avoidance of assimilating non-Islamic influences”—all of which “translates into a sustained suspicion, if not hostility, toward American social, political, religious and educational institutions.”¹⁰

Membership in Darul Islam was not granted to everyone, but was instead “awarded on the basis of demonstrated ability to learn the information contained in the Fundamentals of Islam, a study book developed by Shaykh Dauod for the training of new members.” Once granted access, new members swore an oath of bayat to the group. This pledge stated:

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful; Allah is the greatest; Bearing witness that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad (peace be on him) is His Messenger, and being a follower of the last Prophet and Messenger of Allah, I hereby pledge myself to the Shariah and to those who are joined by this pledge. I pledge myself, by pledging my love, energy, wealth, life and abilities. I also pledge myself to the Majlis (Imamate), whose duty is to establish, develop, defend and govern according to the precepts of the Shariah.¹²

Immigrants were excluded from membership in Darul Islam for several years “in order to exclusively convert African Americans to mainstream Islam.”¹³

Darul Islam members were expected to widen their understanding of Islam through religious courses that included Arabic, and the study of the Qur'an and ahadith.¹⁴ Conservative rules of gender relations were enforced on the congregation, with men and women sitting separately during Friday prayers, women wearing full hijab, and male and female alike adhering to “moral dress,” wherein “men wear long baggy pants and shirts, women wear long, loose clothing with a veil.”¹⁵

The organizational structure of Darul Islam movement was hierarchical, with leadership “selected on the traditional criterion of being ‘most knowledgeable’ of the Qur'an and the hadith.”¹⁶ At the top of the organization, the majlis ash-shurah (governing body) would make decisions affecting the community as a whole.¹⁷ Under the majlis ash-shurah, Darul Islam was organized into several ministries, each with distinct responsibilities, including propagation (dawah), defense, information, culture, education, health and welfare, and protocol.¹⁸ The ministry of defense had its own paramilitary wing called the Ra'd, meaning “thunder” in Arabic. Members of the Ra'd performed a variety of activities, including acting as personal bodyguards, providing building

security and community protection, and “administering punishments to those who broke the laws of the community.”¹⁹

Imam Yahya Abdul Karim led the overall movement; individual communities had their own imams responsible for day-to-day operations. By the 1970s, the movement had “formed a federation of mosques around the country.”²⁰ There were around twenty Darul Islam mosques in the New York area alone,²¹ with affiliates in Canada and the Caribbean.

Prison Outreach

This issue's article “Jamil al-Amin” describes how al-Amin converted to Islam under the tutelage of Darul Islam. Indeed, the movement's prison education program was particularly active in New York state prisons.

In the 1960s, Sunni Muslims “began to worship openly in New York state correctional facilities.”²² Of particular importance to Darul Islam, Muslims in the Green Haven prison were not “recognized by the administration as a legitimate religious community deserving an area designated as a mosque.”²³ Thus, they reached out to Abdul Karim, the first spark that eventually led to Darul Islam's Prison Committee and its prison dawah activities.

With Darul Islam's assistance, the Green Haven prisoners created their own mosque, calling it Masjid Sankore. Sheik Ismail Abdul Rahman, who acted as Darul Islam's emissary to Green Haven, noted: “When you walked in there [Masjid Sankore], it was another world. You didn't feel like you were in Green Haven in a maximum security prison. Officers [prison guards] never came in. It was like going to any other masjid on the outside; you felt at home.”²⁴ The conditions of worship were transformed there, and over time the changes at Green Haven spread to other correctional facilities; it became the model for Darul Islam's prison work moving forward.

In 1975, the New York State Department of Corrections “offered to hire Muslim chaplains as direct employees of its Ministerial Services Division.”²⁵ Abdul Karim balked at the offer out of concern that direct payment from the corrections department would compromise the autonomy of Darul Islam's Prison Committee. The movement pulled back on its prison dawah for a short time, only resuming it in 1978.

Darul Islam Splinters

In 1978, Pakistani sheikh Syed Gilani began preaching at the Islamic Center in New Jersey.²⁶ His charisma led to a growing following that included Abdul Karim and other Darul Islam leaders. Al-Amin Abdul Latif, president of the Islamic Leadership Council of New York City and a former high-ranking Darul Islam member, said in 1993: “The brothers fell in love with [Gilani]. Yahya and the leadership accepted him. When he [Abdul Karim] did that, we had problems with that. For many of us, loyalties were very strong. That caused a split in the Dar.”²⁷ In 1980, Abdul Karim abdicated his leadership of Darul Islam to follow Gilani, and the movement fractured.

Sheik Gilani named his group Jamaat al-Fuqra, meaning “community of the impoverished.” Al-Fuqra is an incredibly controversial organization today; members have attacked ethnic Indians and Indian sects, and the group has also been linked to an attack against a Muslim leader in Tucson, Arizona. Al-Fuqra has bought and developed a number of properties in rural regions of the U.S., maintaining its headquarters in Hancock, New York. Al-Fuqra members are said to receive weapons and other military-style training on these properties. One analyst has warned that the group, now known as the Muslims of the Americas, is “capable of committing violence toward any proponent of a belief set that does not match their own.”²⁸

However, several mosques that were a part of the Darul Islam federation stayed loyal to the movement's ideology and organizational structure, including the Universal Islamic Brotherhood in Cleveland, the Ta'if Tul Islam ministry in Los Angeles, and the West End Community in Atlanta.²⁹ Jamil al-Amin ended up leading this group, which took on the moniker of the National Ummah, or al-Ummah.

Darul Islam has had a lasting impact on African-American Islamic organizations in the U.S. Moreover, its offshoots-like al-Fuqra and al-Ummah-are of continuing relevance today.

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