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Oral History Interview with Imam Siraj Wahhaj
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.06
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on February 19, 2018
at Masjid At-Taqwa in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

ALI: I’m Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian at Brooklyn Historical Society. And today is Monday, February 19th, 2018. I am here at Masjid At-Taqwa in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn interviewing Imam Siraj Wahhaj for the Muslims in Brooklyn project. Brother Imam, if you can introduce yourself to the recording, giving your full name and your birthdate.

WAHHAJ: Yes. My name is Siraj Wahhaj. I’m the Imam of Masjid At-Taqwa. I was born in Brooklyn, [date redacted for privacy], 1950.

ALI: Okay. And what was your birth name?

WAHHAJ: Jeffrey Kearse.

ALI: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your family growing up.

WAHHAJ: Yeah, I remember -- we were born -- the first about five years of my life in Fort Greene Projects. And believe it or not -- you can’t imagine at the age of five I remember being involved in a gang fight with some -- some -- some kids around the corner. We lived on Monument Walk. And I -- I had the audacity to go around the corner. Some -- some little guys, they got me and kind of, you know, beat me up a little bit. Can you imagine? Five years old? Because I was around -- I was around the corner, you know, out -- you know, out of the -- you know, out of my territory. And I’m going to tell you if you remind me later on something interesting about one of those guys who beat me up. There’s a very interesting story about that.

ALI: Okay.

WAHHAJ: We would have a relationship years later.

ALI: Now, did you have any siblings?

WAHHAJ: So it -- yeah. So I was -- I was continuing.

ALI: Oh.
WAHHAJ: I started there to tell you that we moved from there to Classon Avenue. I had a brother Gregory, Gregory Kearse. He was one year older than me. And one morning we’re in the kitchen on Classon Avenue. My father told me and my brother that, “Your mother and I are about to get a divorce. And we’re going to let you make a decision who you’re going to stay with.” For me and my brother -- we talked about it years later -- there was no decision. We’re going to stay with our mother. It -- it -- it’s not even close. So we elected to stay with our mother. So my mother and father divorced. We were young. And -- and -- and my -- my mother married this unbelievable man named Lloyd Sage. He was a dietician at Kings County Hospital. My mother was a nurse at Kings County Hospital. And he was a great guy. And both me and my brother loved him as much as we loved our father. In fact, when we moved on, I think, St. -- St. Johns place in Brooklyn, it was him who encouraged me and my brother to go -- “Go visit your father.” So every Sunday, me and my brother would get on the bus and come on the same Classon Avenue and visit my father.

So we grew up -- me and my brother, we competed in everything. We -- over who’s going to be the be-- the better basketball player. The better chess player. We played handball together. We did everything. But we competed. So that was the, you know -- at the age of -- I went to Walt Whitman Junior High School. Very interesting. It was an integrated school. That wasn’t the school we were supposed to go to. You were supposed to go to the school in your district. But my mother was like, “Uh-uh. I’m going to send you to the best schools.”

Even -- believe it or not -- I was about 12 years old. We lived on St. Mark’s Place. Literally, the elementary school was feet away where we lived. If I walk out of my -- our house and walk right and take about 50 steps, that’s the school we’re supposed to go to. But my mother, no, no, no. She sent us in Brownsville at a -- in a school where my grandmother worked. And it was a better school. And then, when we graduated from there to go to junior high school, the junior high school was right across the street from

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there. And my mother didn’t want us to go there. So she sent us to Walt Whitman Junior High School. Gave the address of our -- of her sister. So we had that address. And Walt Whitman was very, very -- more than integrated. Like, maybe the Black people, Black students -- maybe five, six, seven percent of the population.

And when I graduated from there -- I was on the basketball team. I played basketball. I loved basketball. And at one point in the summer, literally I went to the park every day. Like, five o’clock in the morning, stay late at night. Because I wanted to make the basketball team. And I made the basketball team. I had a -- I had a -- a talent of art. So I went to a specialized school across the street from City College, 136th Street and Convent Avenue, called the High School of Music & Art. Specialized in art. That school, I had to specialize in -- in -- in either art or -- or musicians. So I was an artist. And I graduated from there, went to New York University. My first year, I majored in art and minored in -- in math. And then the next year, I -- I majored in math and -- and -- and minored in art.

ALI: What -- what kind of art did you do?

WAHHAJ: It was impossible to come to my house unless I paint your portrait. Watercolor, charcoal, oil, pencil. Every kind of medium you can -- you can think of. So I loved painting portraits. So I painted a lot of important people. I painted their portraits. Of course, I painted Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X. And I did a lot of self-portraits. And family members, painted their picture.

ALI: Before we get back to your university, tell me, where was your family from?

WAHHAJ: Both my mother and father from New York. I think my father might have some roots in South Carolina. I think he was born in New York. But I’m not even 100 percent sure. My mother, definitely New York City.

ALI: And you said your father who -- your stepfather was a dietician.

WAHHAJ: Yes.

ALI: And what was your mother?

WAHHAJ: My mo-- a nurse.

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ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: She was a nurse.
ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: I remember she went to school -- we -- remember all of that. She went to school.
   And she passed. And it was a great celebration in our house.
ALI: So you enrolled at NYU. What year was that?
WAHHAJ: I would think -- I’d like to say 1972? But I can -- no, no, no. New York University
   had to be ’6- ’68, I think it was.
ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: Sixty-eight. I graduated from -- from High School of Music & Art in ’68 it was.
ALI: Okay, 1968 was a big year --
WAHHAJ: A big year.
ALI: -- in this country.
WAHHAJ: Major.
ALI: On April 4th, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.
WAHHAJ: My favorite person. I loved Martin Luther King Jr. more than you can ever
   imagine.
ALI: Tell me where you were when you heard about this news and -- and how you responded.
WAHHAJ: Of course, I would have to be playing basketball. I was at the St. -- St. John’s
   Recreational Center, a center on Schenectady Avenue in Brooklyn about seven blocks
from my house, playing basketball. And they made an announcement that Martin
Luther King Jr. was just now assassinated. And they closed the gym. And I remember
crying. I went home crying. Because this was the man. This was the man that we
respected, my parents respected. My parents went to Washington DC, the March on
Washington. So he was -- Martin Luther King Jr. was loved and respected in our -- in
our household. Of course, I’m a Christian at that time. And he was my favorite.
ALI: And how -- how did you -- how did that impact you in -- in -- in [inaudible].
WAHHAJ: I remember saying I believed in -- in the philosophy of Malcolm. In Martin
   Luther King, nonviolence and all of that. But I -- I remember becoming a little bit bitter.
And when we found out that he was assassinated by a White man, I kind of said, “Well, listen, man. That’s not -- that’s not the direction we need to go to. We need to be more militant.” And I said to my -- I remember saying to myself, “I’m going to either be a Black Muslim or a Black Panther.” Which is interesting, that movie about the Black Panther just came out. So that was my thinking. That was my mentality at that moment.

ALI: What had you known about the Black Muslims or Muslims in general at that point in time?

WAHHAJ: You know, we kind of hear about it a little bit. I didn’t know it -- about it in detail. But I -- I began to learn, then, more about Malcolm X. And I remember after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., I started studying Malcolm X. And be- I got every record album. All the speeches. And I was running around the house imitating Ma-- Malcolm X. And so that was the beginning of my moving toward becoming more militant. As you know, now I’m 18 years old. And I’m -- I’m beginning -- I’m beginning to change my attitude.

ALI: Okay. So you are enrolling at -- at NYU. You said you were studying --

WAHHAJ: Mathematics.

ALI: Math --

WAHHAJ: Math and art.

ALI: Math and art. Tell me how your political consciousness developed from that point.

WAHHAJ: I started to read more and get -- develop a Black consciousness. And you got to remember what happened in 1968. A song came out, was number one for eight weeks, “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud.” So at that time was the kind of social revolution among Black people. I became part of it. I wore -- I wore an Afro. I wore dashikis. So it was a kind of, you know -- thinking about Black people -- remember, the - - the junior high school was -- was integrated, mostly White. High school was integrated, mostly White. So NYU, mostly White. So I wasn’t around a whole lot of Black folks, though in the neighborhood, it was Black. But I -- but so now this
consciousness, the love of self, the -- the thinking about Black history and -- and things like that, that began to develop in me.

ALI: So how did you formally begin the process of encountering the Nation of Islam?
WAHHAJ: Would you guess? It had something to do with basketball. The captain of the basketball team was a brother in the Nation of Islam. Jerry 10X. So when we went to basketball games together, I sat next to him. And he would proselytize me. Would tell me about the Nation of Islam. So the -- the irony is that almost through basketball I began to learn about the Nation of Islam. Also you had a lot of the brothers from the Nation of Islam who'll come to the college campuses. They would sit down next to us and talk to us. I remember we were sitting in Loeb Student Center. They would sit next to me. And I would joke with them. And they'd say, “How you doing, my brother?” I’d say, “Yeah, well, I’m going to get -- I’m about to get me some pork.” So I was kind of messing with them, you know. And -- and -- and -- so -- so the brothers from the Nation of Islam came. And it's -- it's ironic. Not one Sunni Muslim ever [knocking on door] talked to me in the Na-- when -- when I was in -- when -- when I was in NYU. Come in! I'm sorry.

[Interview interrupted]

ALI: Okay. Go ahead. You said --

WAHHAJ: Not one -- not one Sunni Muslim ever came to me when I was in New York -- New York -- NYU. Perhaps had they done that, things would have been differently. But the brothers from the Nation of Islam, they came. They spoke to us. They sold their newspapers. So I remember at that time I would -- I would get two newspapers every week. The Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. The Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. And -- and I really thought about both of them. Because again, you’ve got to remember, this young guy now is coming to manhood. He’s coming to a Black consciousness. And, like, okay, now, what am I going to do with my life? You know. So that’s -- and I think the -- the edge came to the Nation of Islam, because I think they were more persistent.
And then one year, I think it was ’69, I decided that I’m going to go to one of these
temples. I found the nearest temple in Brooklyn. And it’s funny. One of my neighbors
named Gayle -- we were -- we were good friends. We went to High School of Music &
Art together. And she was about a year -- a year younger than me. So I’m talking to her
one day. And I’m saying, “You know, I’m thinking about joining the Nation of Islam.”
And I kept going on and on. And she looked at me and said, “Jeffrey, who you trying to
convince, me or yourself?” And I knew it. So one Wednesday night, I went on Bedford
Avenue and Madison. And my first visit to Muhammad’s Mosque, No. 7C. With
Minister Arthur 14X was the minister. He gave a lecture that night. And -- and I’m
telling you, I remember the exact suit that I wore. The exact suit. And -- and my -- the
shoes. I can see them right now in my mind’s eye.

ALI: Describe them.
WAHHAJ: Huh?
ALI: Describe it.
WAHHAJ: Oh man. The suit was -- was wool -- wool, brown with blue pinstripes. And -- and
the shoes were -- were -- were brown, medium brown, and with a -- with -- with buckles. I
remember. And I had a big afro. So I -- I went there and listened to the speech. If you
asked me today what was the subject, I can’t remember. But I do remember feeling --
okay, good, I like this. And that very day -- they -- they -- you know, they would ask you,
“How many of you believe what you heard to be the truth?” I said, “Yes, I do.” “How
many willing to accept your own and be yourself?” And I said, “Yes.” And I -- I joined
that day.

And I came back Friday, as I -- I mentioned to you before. I came back -- the -- the -- the
-- two days later. And I -- I got inspired to take 100 Muhammad Speaks newspapers. I
ain’t never sold anything in my life. And -- but I was -- you know, I’m the kind of guy, if
I’m with you, I’m -- I’m really with you. And so I -- I found myself, you know, growing in
the theology of the Nation of Islam. And I went and sold those papers. I don’t know
how many I sold that week. I don’t think it was many. Because I told you, I -- I didn’t
know how to sell. So I would see a man, and take a paper, and say, “You don’t want one of these, do you?” And he said no. I said, “Okay.” So I was very -- I was very shy. Kind of shy person. Never sold anything, you know. So that -- that began it.

And -- by the way, just for the record, I -- I went on to become one of the best sellers of Muhammad Speaks newspaper in America. I sold 1,000 a week. And I really sold them. I didn’t stack them. I went and knocked door to door. Had 1,000 customers. So it came to a point where I wasn’t selling the paper every week. I was merely delivering it to my customers. And I became, like, their little minister. They would invite me in. I’m -- I’m telling you, they -- these non-Muslims, my customers, invited me to their -- to their weddings. To the grad-- their children’s graduations. To their funerals. I became their little minister. Many of them I brought to the temple. A lot of them became -- joined the Nation of Islam through me.

ALI: What -- when did you complete the official process? And what -- what was your number X? Because I’ve seen different numbers.

WAHHAJ: Yeah, I was the 12th Jeffrey in New York --

ALI: Okay.

WAHHAJ: -- to join the Nation of Islam. So I was Jeffrey 12X. And I knew Jeffrey 13X, the one who came after me. He became a good friend of mine. So we got X’s according to how many people in that city had the first -- same first name.

ALI: There was some significant events in the early ’70s in the Nation of Islam in New York. I don’t know if you can -- if you had any experiences with them. One was when the police in 1972 -- I don’t know if this is before or after you joined. Or even what you’re aware of --

WAHHAJ: This is -- this is after I joined.

ALI: Oh, this is after you joined.

WAHHAJ: I’m in -- yeah. I’m in the Nation. Because it’s -- you know, I joined ’69.

ALI: Okay, okay.

WAHHAJ: So this is ’72.
ALI: Okay.

WAHHAJ: And so you got to remember, like, New York City, Harlem was the headquarters. That’s where Minister Farrakhan was. So I was in one of the satellites, Temple No. 7C. So Temple No. 7 was in Harlem, 116th Street. 7B was in Corona. 7C was in Brooklyn. 7D was in the Bronx, headed by a minister named James Shabazz. We called him the son of thunder. A mighty, mighty preacher of Islam, and so forth, and so on. You know, we had gotten down to almost 7R, if I’m not mistaken. Or even 7--7T, I’m not mistaken. So we -- we had heard that the police came and tried to invade Temple No. 7. So all of us, myself included, went down -- went down there to stand in front of the -- the -- the temple to -- protect the -- the temple. So not only did the Muslims in the Nation of Islam stand in front of the temple, the people in the community did the same thing. We said, like, “You’re not -- you’re not coming in here. Because we are peaceful people.” And we were taught -- and this the truth. We were -- God’s honest truth. We were taught we don’t ever carry weapons. I never carried a weapon. So we went there, you know, to protect the temple with our lives without any weapons.


WAHHAJ: I -- I -- I might have sold more tickets than anybody. Because whatever -- you’ve got to remember this about the Nation of Islam, right. I decided -- when I was going to school, I was going to school full time and working full time. When I understood the value of that newspaper, a 25-cent newspaper, I quit my job to sell Muhammad Speaks newspaper full time. Anything that the Nation did, I was involved with it. We got fish, whiting fish, from maybe Morocco. I’m not 100 percent sure. I sold fish. We had -- we got sardines. I sold sardines. Because all of us, we were trying to build the Nation. And these are our products. We’re going to get these good products in the hands of our people. So I did that.

When we had this big family day, I don’t know how many tickets I sold. I sold a lot of tickets. Probably more than most people, if not everybody. So I sold tickets. Just for the record, I sold the book Message to the Blackman. I won in New York City. I sold more
books, and I won a -- I think a hi-fi set. A hi-no, not hi-- yeah, what do you call those things? A hi-- yeah, hi-fi, right? And-- and I sold the-- the most record albums, The Judgment is Now, something like that. So I was very, very engaged. So we bought the people to -- I think it was Randall’s Island, if I’m not mistaken. I think -- maybe 75,000 people. And of course, the Minister [Louis Farrakhan]’s eloquent as always and took care of the business. And so I was there. It was an unbelievable experience. The people loved it. And I think we-- I think we did something major every year.

ALI: So in describing how many customers you had, in describing the turnout to this Black Family Day in 1974, 70,000 or so people, it sounds like there was a -- a -- a widespread resonance of -- of the Nation of Islam in New York City or in the community. Tell me -- tell me what that -- what the air was like that -- that this was happening?

WAHHAJ: Around that time -- around that time, as I understood it, Mr. Elijah Muhammad was getting a new brand of followers. In the past, most of them weren’t -- weren’t educated. But around that time, late ’60s, ’70s, a lot of students from colleges, universities, started coming. Why? Because Minister Farrakhan went to those colleges. He went to New York University. And he was so intelligent. So the message, you know -- - it -- it resonated with us.

And then especially now you’re talking about now, again, with this cultural revolution, now Black people are different now. They’re wearing African names. They’re wearing dashikis. They -- you know, they’re wearing Afros. In the past, it’s true, Black people hated themselves. Go back to the movie Malcolm X. In the early days, Malcolm conked his hair. Like a lot of Black men, they straightened their hair. Why? Because of this hatred for -- for -- for the -- for ourselves and the love of the -- of the former slave masters. So I-- I think it was the right time. It was peaking. The -- the -- the Minister Farrakhan would attract a lot of people. And -- and it was the -- the -- I think a great growth in the Nation of Islam and among the awareness of Black people became -- became very-- very, very special.
ALI: So a turning point occurred in 1975. Tell me -- tell me about that year and what happened.

WAHHAJ: You know, you got to remember, it was always taught that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad would be here a long, long, long time. So 1975, we're listening to the news. And they're announcing Elijah Muhammad has died. And so -- no way. That's just the devil trying to deceive us. This was our -- this was our thinking. And my wife said, "You know, why don't you go to headquarters and -- just to check things out." So I went to 116th Street. And they told us, "No. You know, Elijah Muhammad's not dead." So we were relieved. But again, we go back home, and it's -- it's all in the news.

Just so happened the next day, Saviour's Day. We're on our way to Chicago. So we go to the Temple 7C, Minister Arthur. And only then do they tell us that he has in fact died. I remember. We went to LaGuardia Airport on the way to Chicago. And I remember flying in that plane saying, "The world has to end." It's -- I'm looking -- I'm literally looking -- looking for the world to end. And it didn't. I think -- I think Minister Akbar Muhammad was on that same plane, if I'm not mistaken.

So when we went to Chicago, you got -- you can -- you have to imagine that this is the man we believe is the messenger of God, has just died. And yet, only -- it just so happened, as God would have it, all of us are in Chicago. Now, we've been hearing about Imam Wallace Muha-- Minister Wallace Muhammad at that time. He, in fact, came and gave a speech weeks before at -- at Mosque No. 7 when I was there, Fri--Saturday. And we were always taught part of the theology that his son Wallace would help him. There's some mystical things. Fard Muhammad writing his name on the back of the door. Something like that.

And so I'm like, what's going to happen now? Just so happened I'm on front duty, front rostrum duty. So I was there. Everything was going on. And I'm being 100 percent honest with you, I sat there listening to speech after speech, and I remember saying, "I
don’t care what nobody say. I ain’t going nowhere until I hear from my minister, Minister Farrakhan.” Minister Farrakhan was about the last person to speak. And at that point, the leaders in the Nation of Islam had appointed Minister Wallace Muhammad to lead the Nation. And when Minister Farrakhan said -- he gave his approval and said basically that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was the will of Allah. And Minister Wallace Muhammad is the will of Allah. Only when he said that, I said okay. Be honest with you, if the Minister had said, “No, I’m not with that,” I would have stood with him.

ALI: Why?

WAHHAJ: Because he was our minister. You’ve got to understand, he was our link to Elijah Muhammad. We didn’t know Wallace Muhammad. We heard, you know, he was in Philadelphia. But we didn’t know Wallace Muhammad. But we knew Minister Farrakhan. He was our minister. He was the face of the Nation of Islam. He’s the national spokesman of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. So he’s no regular guy. He ain’t just a minister. The minister of the -- the most powerful temple in -- in America. Some people say it was Chicago. We say it was New York, right. And national spokesman. Elijah Muhammad said so many beautiful things about him. And I trusted him. So that’s why it was important to me for him to say, “Okay, I approve of this.”

When that happened, reluctantly, slowly, we began to change. Minister Wallace Muhammad, he now had the articles in the newspapers. And I remember one of the first things he said is that, “We’re going to let White people in.” “What?! You’re going to do what? You’re going to let -- you’re going to let the devil -- what? What are you talking about?” You know? And so for a lot of us, that was like -- yo, man, what’s this? What’s going on with this? But he began slowly to teach us about Islam. I remember he had some sheikhs, scholars, from around the world. He had Sheikh -- Shaikh -- Jaafar Sheikh Idris from Sudan. He -- he sent him to help us. Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, I think, from Sudan. Sheikh from Nigeria, Sheikh Rafi -- Ahmad Ruafi. So these Black images of these great scholars, now they’re teaching us Islam. Salat, for instance.
I’m -- I’ll be honest with you. In the Nation of Islam, I prayed the way we were taught to pray, we -- we faced the east. We stood up. And that -- that was our prayer. Now we’re learning about Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessing be upon him. And the Prophet said, “Pray as you see me pray.” Since 1975, I’ve made over 78,000 prayers. Seventy-eight thousand. Because now we’re learning. I remember when -- when -- when Imam Mohammed first instituted jummah prayer. I was the minister there on -- on Bedford Avenue. I remember the first jummah prayer I gave, man. They were laughing at me. The congregation was laughing. They were laughing because, like, what do you think you’re doing? I remember telling them, you laugh today. One day, you’re not going to be laughing. They’re not laughing anymore. So -- so it was a slow turn.

I remember we first fasted the month of Ramadan. You know, we used to fast in December. So Imam Mohammed said, “No, we’re fasting now in Ramadan.” And he introduced us to orthodox Islam. And I must say now, one of the greatest things ever happened to me in my life. Now I -- I -- I thank Allah from, you know, where we came from, our history. But I really thank Allah now -- now I’m being guided right according to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessing be upon him.

ALI: When did you become -- and how did you become the minister or Imam of -- of the -- at -- at -- I guess at this point it was called Masjid Muhammad 7C. In -- Bedford --

WAHHAJ: I was the assistant imam of Imam Ali Rashid in Harlem. This is after the transition. Let me go back. Minister. I was in a minister’s class. And Minister Farrakhan would teach us every -- every Saturday. And I was part of that class. And I became the Assistant Minister of Minister Arthur 14X.

ALI: Here in Brooklyn.

WAHHAJ: Here in Brooklyn at that same temple, Temple No. 7C. When Imam Mohammed became the Minister of the Nation, I became the assistant to Imam Ali Rashid. Assistant Imam now, because now we -- we’re learning about Islam. I become his Assistant Imam.
ALI: And who was -- who was Ali Rashid? And -- yeah.
WAHHAJ: Oh, okay. Ali Rashid was very interesting. Was a captain in the Nation of Islam in the West Coast. He was a regional captain. He was a big, big, big man. When I say big man, you know, he was an important man. I forgot his name, what his name used to be. But it became Ali Rashid. Captain Edward was his name. He became Imam Mohammed -- Imam Mohammed didn't want to throw anybody away. So a lot of the captains he turned into Imams. Captain Yusuf Shah. Captain Yusuf Shah was the biggest captain in the United States of America. He was over the Muslims in New York City. Well, Imam Mohammed put Yusuf Shah as the minister maybe in Dallas somewhere. But Ali Rashid -- and I became his assistant.

ALI: So Ali Rashid was installed in New York?
WAHHAJ: In New York.
ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: Over -- where -- where Minister Farrakhan was.
ALI: And what happened to Minister Farrakhan?
WAHHAJ: Minister Farrakhan at that time -- the Imam took -- brought him to Chicago. And the first Minister there after Minister Farrakhan was Jeremiah Shabazz from Philadelphia. He stayed there maybe two years, three years. And I don't think -- I don't think it worked out. So the -- so the Minister [Wallace Mohammed] brought Ali Rashid there. And I became his assistant. And at some point, the -- the Imam in 7C -- I'll think of his name in a minute -- was going to study. So the -- Ali Rashid recommended me to be the -- the imam there. And they sent it to Imam Mohammed. Imam came. Imam Mohammed installed me as the imam of Masjid -- where I -- where I took -- if you would -- shahada, where I became a Muslim. So I became the Imam there. Maybe -- oh god -- you probably know better than me.

ALI: I have it down as '76.
WAHHAJ: I think so.
ALI: Yeah.
WAHHAJ: I think around '76.
ALI: Yeah.
WAHHAJ: I think so, yeah.
ALI: Now, you said when you did the first jummah prayer, people responded by laughing.
WAHHAJ: Was that because they felt you weren't doing it right? Or this was something new that
they were like, “Why is this happening?”
ALI: Right.
WAHHAJ: Because they didn’t know themselves. They're learning just like me. And I was
always a step ahead of them. So one thing about me, my passion is not teaching. My
passion is research and study. So I study. I read. I research. So I’m learning. I’m always
a little ahead of them. So I think it's a combination of both.
ALI: So what kind of learning or training did you have to -- to be an imam during this time?
WAHHAJ: None. Other than -- other than self study. By 1978, you know, the
Muslim World League, I think it was, had an Imam training program. It was a -- you
know, it was a 40 day, I think, imam training program. If I’m not mistaken, 40 days. And
they brought about 100 imams from around the country to Naperville, Illinois. Fifty of
them from Imam Wallace -- Wallace Mohammed’s community. And 50 from the Sunni
Muslim community. And we studied for those 40 days. It was really intense. Really,
really intense. And of the 100 imams, they chose five to continue to study in Saudi
Arabia. I was one of the blessed five to go and study in Saudi Arabia. So I went to Saudi
Arabia for about four months. A little more than four months. King Abdulaziz
University, now Umm Al-Qura. And we had really intense studying every day. And I
loved it. I think for some of the imams in Imam Mohammed’s community were so busy
challenging the teachers -- because “Imam Mohammed taught us this. And Imam
Mohammed taught us that.” They didn’t take it maybe as seriously as I did. Because I
wanted it all. I wanted everything that they had to offer. These were scholars. And so I
drank it. I drank. I loved it. And I fell in love with the Qur'an. I fell in love with the
Arabic language. I fell in love with Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessing be upon
him. Now I'm learning -- I'm being enlightened about Islam, the religion that's practiced by one billion, 700 million Muslims around the world.

ALI: Was this your first time traveling out of the country or to that part of the world?

WAHHAJ: It was my first time traveling outside of the country, I do believe. Except for like, Bermuda, Barbados and stuff like that. That was the first time in that part of the world. So 1978 when we went to Mecca, I actually made -- I made -- I made hajj. That was my first hajj. First of six, I believe. And it was quite an experience. A unique thing. Going out the country, really for the first time in that part of the world, studying, and then making hajj. I -- I had an incredible high. Spiritually, I -- I could not have gotten any higher.

And then -- you know, and then meeting people. Meeting people around the world. I -- I -- I met some of the greatest teachers. One teacher we had, we called him -- we called him “Big Fiqh.” Sheikh [Hassan] Hussein Hamad from Egypt. Oh, man, this guy -- this was -- I’m going to tell you. I’ll give an example of the kind of scholarship he had. We ask him a question. He says, “You know, we have three opinions. There’s three opinions. Your -- about your question, there’s three opinions. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, this is his opinion, and this is the evidence that he gave. Imam Malik has a different opinion. This is his opinion, and this is the evidence that he gave. Imam Shafi’i had a third opinion. And this is the evidence he has. I think that this is the best opinion.” He taught us the meaning of scholarship. Because it ain’t always black and white. The -- the -- some -- there’s -- it’s a -- it’s a matter of opinion.

So one of my favorite books became Al Fiqh ‘ala Al Madharahib Al Arba’ah, The School of Thought of the Four Imams. It’s five volumes this thick. And that’s my -- that’s one of my favorite books. Because not only did it show you difference of opinion of these imams, more importantly, I think, the evidence that they gave. Everything should be based on evidence. I’m not going to follow you because I like you. I’m not going to follow you because you’re a good guy. I’m going to follow you based on the...
information and evidence that you give. And this is the Qur’an. Obey Allah. Obey the Messenger. And those charged with authority among you, if you differ, refer back to Allah and the Messenger if it is you believe in Allah and the Last Day. I took that to heart.

ALI: So tell me what happened when you came back.

WAHHAJ: I came back -- I’ll never forget this. Everything I learned, I taught. I set up a class. Because now I’m enthusiastic. By the -- I didn’t tell you that I had a regimen when I was in Mecca. That’s where the class -- that’s where the school was. I would go to the masjid, like, at least an hour before fajr prayer. So three or four o’clock in the morning I’m there. They gave me a key to the masjid. Now, this is not Masjid Haram. I don’t want you to think it’s that. No, where we were staying, there’s a masjid there. And they gave me a key there, because I was always the first one there. And I prayed, and I studied. After the prayer, I would sit with one of the -- the teachers there or some of their students and read -- recite the Qur’an. Let them correct me. Meanwhile, everybody else was back to the dorm, went back to sleep. After that, I didn’t go back to the dorm. There was a track, you know, on campus. I ran around that track training myself. When I come back to America, I’m going to really -- I’m going to do all this. I’m going to teach this message, right. So I went back to the dorm and took a shower. At that moment, the other students are just waking up. I didn’t go to breakfast. I went straight to the class and sat. I was the first one to class every day with my recorder, ready to take notes. I was -- I was the teacher’s pet. All the other brothers went for breakfast. So that was my regimen there. Very, like, you know, you know, focused. I came back. I’m the -- remember, I’m the Imam of Masjid 7C, which is now Muhsi Khalifa. Almost everything I learned, I taught. And all those students, by the way -- well, [inaudible] is another conversation later on. But I -- I -- I felt good because, you know, we have -- we have all this knowledge now. And I’m sharing the knowledge that I have.

ALI: What kinds of -- so what kind of program did you do as an imam that reflected your -- your learning, but that was still responding to the community?
WAHHAJ: You’ve got to remember that the imam has a -- has a lot to do. A lot of it is teaching, counseling. It’s -- you know, performing marriages, classes. So now, how are you going to implement this into the -- into the society? One thing that you’ll see in my early ministry is that I was always involved in -- in social activities. Any issue in New York that dealt with social issues, Black people seeking justice, police brutality, we were there. We marched. Howard Beach -- I don’t know if you remember Howard Beach. I forgot -- Yusef Hawkins, was it? Yusef Hawkins was killed. We were there on the front lines with Reverend Daughtry and -- and all the other civil rights workers. So we were very -- we were a very engaged community, very engaged. I -- I don’t think we were heavily engaged politically as I -- as I -- I got to -- I got to recall. But definitely social issues, we were there.

ALI: How -- how long were you the imam at Masjid Muhammad, or at Masjid 7C? And -- and what happened in, you know -- to change that?

WAHHAJ: I think what happened -- and this is kind of sensitive. Because I’m always sensitive to -- to the community and my love for Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. So I always want to say it in context. Now that I’m growing and my primary teacher now is the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad. Everything else is secondary, even Imam Mohammed. And -- and I notice -- I started to notice what I believe to have been maybe inconsistencies or whatever. I would always write Imam Mohammed and say, you know, “Imam Mohammed, for instance, I notice that when we have funerals, we -- we suck peppermints. Peppermints, we did that in the Nation of Islam and someone died.” I said, “Well then, brother minister, why -- are we -- why are we doing that? Can you” -- and my question never was, like -- it was, like, to know. Make -- make me understand why -- no, I said, “Should we continue doing that?” That’s what I -- sometimes -- should we continue doing that? So a lot of questions I had to -- you know, with -- with -- with the -- with the Minister.

And then he -- he put out a book, I think called the teachings of W. D. Mohammed. I remember getting nervous. What’s the teachings of W. D. Mohammed? Is that different
from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad? Because now Prophet Muhammad has taken center stage in my life. He's the man. He's God's messenger. Ain't no prophet after him. So now -- and -- and I -- I've come to the conclusion that Islam doesn't come to make us soldiers. Come to make us slaves of Allah. Soldiers -- you know, in the army, they have, like -- I think there's, like, 10 week basic training. First thing they do, they cut off all your hair. Everybody look alike, right. Then everybody sleep in the same dorm. We get up together, go to sleep together. We train together. And we have to obey orders. And now it's like, ain't going to obey your order if it ain't right, or if I don't believe it to be right. I'm a man of principle.

I remember once reading that the Prophet Muhammad sent an expedition out and put a man of the Ansar and said, “Obey him.” And they said okay. So they went out. And this leader got angry at them. And said, “Did the Prophet say obey me?” They said yes. He said, “I order you to get some firewood.” And they -- they went and got the firewood. He said, “I order you to light it.” So they lit it. Then he said, “I order you to go jump in the fire.” So everybody started looking at each other like -- one guy said, “We came to follow the Prophet to avoid the fire. How should now we go?” Some of them considered it. But the -- but the flames went out, and his anger subsided. Word got back to the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him. And he said, [Arabic]. “Had you gone in that fire, you would not have come out.” Because obedience is only towards that which is right, and just, and fair. One narration said, had you gone in that fire, you would never come out. One said you'll never come out until the day of judgment. So it makes you think that you don't -- things -- there's some things you don't give up. So if I'm wrong you tell me. But I'm going to tell you as my leader, I differ with this.

So I had some things I differed with Imam Mohammed. I wrote him. We talked about, and things like that. At that time, Imam Mohammed said in our community there is -- there -- we wouldn't practice polygamy. I said, “Okay, fine. I'm fine with that.” Which -- polygamy was permissible in Islam. But Imam said it's not -- maybe it's not a good idea.

This transcript is hereby made available for research purposes only.

So I said I was good with it. A brother came to me. I’ll never forget. Muhsin was his name. And he said, “You know, Imam, I’ve been married to my wife.” Her name was Jamila. “She never had -- she can’t have children. And there’s a sister who has agreed to marry me. And Jamila’s okay with it. And the sister’s okay with it. I’d like to marry her.” I said, “Let me write the Imam.” So I wrote the Imam. I said, “Well, Imam, I think that this is a case of extenuating, you know -- I think -- I’m recommending that, you know, we allow them to get married.” I didn’t get an answer from the Imam for about a month. Brother came back to me and said, “Imam, what happened?” I said, “You know what? The Imam, you know, he didn’t get back to me yet. Let me write him again.” So I never got an answer. So I performed the ceremony. And I called Imam Mohammed. I spoke to his secretary and said, “I want the -- the -- the Imam to know that we had a case of polygamy. And I married the couple. I want you to hear it from me.” Because now it’s like, Imam Siraj is not teaching the teachings of Imam Mohammed.

I remember -- being honest with you and frankly with you, I prepared for my khutbah. And I would put my khutbah together from the Qur’an, from the Prophet. And then after it’s together, I’d say, “Okay, where can I mention Imam Mohammed?” So it wasn’t real. You know, it wasn’t -- wasn’t real. So I -- I -- I called again and said to -- to the secretary to ask the Imam for an appointment. The secretary called me back and said, “Imam is not available.” I called the secretary and said, “Let the Imam know I’m coming to Chicago. I’m not going to leave until he sees me.” So they called me back and said, “Okay, the Imam will see you this Friday.” Imam gave the khutbah. I was there. It was a good khutbah.

And me and him spoke afterwards. And I said, “Imam, I thank you for all that you’ve done. You have put me on this path. I thank you for it. However, your community in Brooklyn now is divided. I’m the cause of the division. Because I’m not teaching the teachings of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. I’m teaching the Qur’an. And I would like to resign as your imam and from your community. He said, “What are some of the
differences?" So I told him some of the differences. He said, "Imam, with these differences you can still be my -- you can still be my imam, still in my community." And I remember saying, "Imam, I can't. I know my spirit. You know, because again, when I'm with you, I'm with you all the way. But if I'm not, I'm not going to fake it. I don't want to fake it.

This is my -- my love is the" -- you know, I had a nickname when I was in -- we were in the World Community of Islam in the West when Imam Mohammed named us. He said, "Imam Siraj Wahhaj, the -- the Sunni Muslim imam in the World Community of Islam in the West." Because everybody knew my inclination. Everybody knew it. People in the -- if people in -- Sunni Muslims, when I have -- have a public address, they would all come. Because they knew. They can't -- they can't argue with me. And so some of the issues of Imam -- Imam Mohammed had that he said that maybe I differ with, I took the side according to what I -- and did it on purpose, I think, to -- to put a wedge, right. But it was my love for Allah and the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessing be upon him. Later on I -- I come to respect the fact that Imam Mohammed was bringing it in his time. Because he went on to say, "Imam Siraj was right about this."

You know, that kind of thing. And -- and by the way, my decision to leave wasn't like -- "Oh, I'm leaving!" No, no. It was years of struggle, to such a degree -- I asked some of the scholars I was studying with, "Do I have the right to stay?" I was nervous about, you know -- I wanted to teach. I don't want to -- I don't want to compromise. In my -- in my mind, I did that before, with your dad [Elijah Muhammad] when I didn't know. I can't do it now, and I know better. So me and Imam Mohammed had a great relationship. After that, you know, we talked, you know. Reconciled, if you would. Love his community. Have been invited to just about every community in his -- in the association. So we have this really -- and it ain't fake. This, like, really genuine love.
When we started this organization called MANA, the Muslim Alliance of North America, Imam Mohammed was part of it. He came. He spoke. So we had this, you know, tremendous love. I did. I really genuinely love the imam. When the -- when the Imam died, and I heard it -- when I first heard about it, I’ll never forget. I was in Atlanta, Georgia. And I was on my way to the masjid. And they’re having a janazah for somebody. And someone said, “You heard that the Imam died?” I said, “What Imam?” “Imam Mohammed.” “Imam Mohammed didn’t die.” Then when I learned Imam Mohammed died, I got on the plane and went right to Chicago for the janazah. That’s, you know, the respect that I had, the love that I have for Imam Mohammed. And -- and will do anything for his community and his legacy. And I got some very big plans. But I don’t want to talk about them now, what I’d like to do for Imam Mohammed, for his legacy.

ALI: So before we talk about the next stage, when did you become known -- because you talked about your nickname. But when did you become known as Siraj? Or how did you go from Jeffrey 12X to Siraj Wahhaj?

WAHHAJ: [laughter] Funny. I was -- I was assistant minister in Mosque No. 7. A brother -- I can’t -- I -- I see his face. Light skinned short brother. I can’t remember his name. But he was the first one studying Arabic among us. And one day, I was talking to him. He said, “I -- I got a name for you.” I said, “What?” He said, “Siraj.” “What that mean?” “It means light.” “I like it.” So for a long time, I was just Siraj.

ALI: This is prior to ’75?

WAHHAJ: No, no, no, no.

ALI: Or after ’75?

WAHHAJ: No, no, this is after ’75.

ALI: After ’75.

WAHHAJ: No, no, no, this is after ’75. This is after ’75. So for a long -- so everybody’s calling me Siraj. One day a couple months later he said, “I know your name.” And he quoted an ayat [verse] from Qur’an, “Waja’alna sirajan wakhaja,” “We sent siraj wahhaj.” He said, “You’re Siraj Wahhaj. It’s in the Qur’an, ‘we sent siraj wahhaj’.” So -- so in Arabic, you --
unlike English -- in English, you put -- you know, you put the adjective first then the noun. But in Arabic, you put the noun then adjective. So Siraj is a light. Wahhaj describes the light as a bright light. So that's how I became Siraj Wahhaj. It wasn't because -- I didn't pick it out myself. It was a brother who -- you know, whose opinion I respected. And I became Siraj Wahhaj. It had -- there had to be late '75, early '76, maybe.

ALI: Were -- were a lot of people changing their names at that point?

WAHHAJ: They were. They were. They were. Some of them waited for Imam Mohammed to give them a name. And I realized nobody had to give me a name. I have to wait for no one to give me no name. I was like -- you know, independent. I'm growing now. I'm growing up. I ain't no soldier no more. I'm a thinking human being. You've got to deal with this. If you ain't going to deal with this, man, I ain't going to -- you know, you're not going to intimidate me. You're not going to scare me. I'm going to do it, you know, according to my understanding. Now, I'm going to -- I -- I love leadership. I love the idea of leadership. But you've got to come right. Yeah.

ALI: So you have this meeting with him. And tell me how soon after did you start --

WAHHAJ: I said --

ALI: Did you -- when you -- when you met with him, did you think at that point that you were planning to start your own community?

WAHHAJ: Never. I'm going to tell you about that, which is interesting. I said, "Brother -- Brother -- Brother Imam, how should I do it?" He said, "Well, next week, let Friday be your final jummah." Word started spreading. Imam Siraj -- leaving the community. Imam Siraj's last jummah. This place was packed. I'm saying thousands of people. Because Sunni Muslims were there. Everybody heard about it. It was packed. So I'm supposed to give my last -- my final sermon. And then Sunday, I'm going to -- I'm supposed to, you know, officially resign.

Well, something strange happens. Instead of me giving the khutbah, Imam Ali Rashid comes. And he says, "I'm giving the khutbah. You sit down." And he went on that khutbah. He lambasted me. He beat me up. He never said Siraj Wahhaj. Everybody
knew who he was talking about. “Who you think you are, you Johnny-come-lately?” He
was and I’m sitting there like this. And he beat me up. So Imam Mohammed didn’t
know that I knew that Imam Mohammed was coming himself for my resignation on
Sunday.

So he came with his entourage. And I spoke. And I remember telling them that there
was an Imam who was married to a woman. And -- and -- and people, you know, felt that
he had an issue with his wife. And so the imam said, “I’m not in -- I don’t talk about my
wife.” And so he didn’t say anything. And that imam divorced his wife. And so when
they came to him and said, “Now you can tell us.” He said, “I’m not in the habit of
talking about strange women. She’s no longer my wife.” So I said that, to say that Imam
Mohammed taught us -- blah, blah, blah. I leave as a friend. I don’t say, Imam
Mohammed is wrong, and I’m right. I said I have differences, you know. And I left it
like that.

Imam Mohammed spoke after me. He said he’s -- “Some of you may have problems
with what Imam Siraj has done. What he has done is the honorable thing. He did it the
right way.” Then he looked at Imam Ali Rashid. He says, “As far as you, you’re not even
imam material.” And he whooped him so bad. I felt bad for him. He whooped him.
“How you do this to our Imam Siraj? He don’t deserve that.” That was, like -- that was
the message. And but to this day, to this -- we -- Imam Mohammed -- Imam Ali Rashid
one of my most beloved brothers. We were on hajj together one year. And both of us
were blessed to go inside the Kaaba. And this man, Ali Rashid, he was a captain in the
Army. He was a football player at his college. That man cried like a little girl inside the
Kaaba, you know. So he -- he’s since died. I forgot the year he died. But anyway, I loved
him. We always had a good relationship. We had the Majlis Ash-Shura of New York. I
invited him. He came. He participated. And he was great. So that began -- and it’s
interesting. If I’m not mistaken, I left -- I resigned that day, maybe July 3rd. I remember
it was close to Fourth of July.
ALI: Do you remember -- you remember what year this is?
WAHHAJ: It -- '80-- '80-- '70-- 80-- '81? Maybe even '82. I'm not sure. I can -- I'll look. But --
and that -- I think that day the -- maybe the next -- either that day or the next day was
the first of Ramadan. So this -- this spiritual thing, now, right? Fourth of July, freedom. I
didn't plan it that way, by the way. [laughter] I know -- I know -- so you -- you brothers
are scientists. I know you.
ALI: No, no.
WAHHAJ: Yeah, you --
ALI: You know, it's interesting. Because, you know, of course the -- the Fourth of July has
also that meaning in the Nation of Islam's history, right?
WAHHAJ: That's right.
ALI: Because that's when Fard --
WAHHAJ: That's -- that's -- that's right. Right? Right? Right? So -- and -- and -- and -- and I
remember -- oh, another important thing. I said, "Imam" -- that's what I was going to tell
you about, the classes. I said, "You know, Imam, there are others in the community who
think like me. What should I do?" He said, "You could, like, all go." Right? So people
came to me and said, "Imam, we're leaving with you." I said, "I ain't opening up no
masjid." The -- the -- the least on my mind was opening up a masjid.

So what I was doing the last few weeks, I was going around to different Sunni Muslim
masjids to see where I'm going to take my family. Because I'm leaving now, right? I'm
going to tell you the three masjids I went to. Ikhwa, Eastern Parkway, Khalid Yasin. I
went there. Yasin Masjid, Herkimer Place, Imam Yahya Abdul Karim. And MIB, Masjid
of Islamic Brotherhood. Imam Tawfiq. And -- and basically I went to each one of them
and telling them, "I don't know where I'm going. But I'm just checking. I'm looking.
And Imam -- Imam Khalid Yasin is interesting. He wanted me. He said, "Imam, come
here. When they see you, they see me. They see me, they see you." He recruited me.
Yasin Masjid, Imam Yahya never met with me. He would always send some -- you know
what I'm saying? Never -- no -- no --
Imam Tawfiq is responsible for change of history. I said, “Imam, I’m not making you a promise. But I’m checking to see whether I’ll be coming here or wherever” -- I’ll never forget this conversation. He said, “Imam, don’t join any of us. There’s some imams out there that are unscrupulous. You don’t know them. I know them. Don’t join us.” He said, “Get with those people with you. And next year or after you come as an equal under no imam.” For the first time in my life, I said -- I thought about opening up a masjid. Because again, people coming to me anyway. “Imam, we want to be -- be with you.”

That -- only then did I tell -- I said, finally, okay. And that’s about -- we had about 25 members or 25 families. And -- and so that’s Sunday. That Friday, we had the first jummah at Brother Salim Abdus-Saboor’s place. Hancock, 915 Hancock, 950 Hancock, something like that. And where he moved the furniture out of his room. I’ll never forget that. Let me tell you something interesting happened, again historic. Salim asked me permission, “Imam, can I -- can I tape you?” I said yes. “Can I sell your tapes?” I said yeah. You got to know one thing about me. I was never a money-- money hungry person. He -- he -- he made copies of my -- my khutbahs and sold them. I never asked him for anything. Never offered it. Never say, “You know, Imam, you -- you’re making, you know -- I’m making a couple dollars. Here’s some.” Never. The irony is that after a while people started complaining, “Salim ain’t doing the job. He, you know -- he’s -- he -- he, you know -- he’s missing,” or whatever the case may be. Only then did I decide to do it myself and took over my own tapes. And when I went -- because now I’m being invited -- I’m going to tell you about that later, maybe. I’m being invited to other places. So I will take these cassette tapes with me. People today talk about those cassette tapes, what it meant to them. And I would say something like you buy 10, get 10 free. So my cassette tapes went all over the world.

I remember one year -- I used to go to ISNA conferences every year. And -- and -- and to -- to -- to pa-- you know, to -- to witness it. To participate in it. Not as -- not as a
speaker. And so somebody told the -- the -- the people, ISNA -- Islamic Society of North America -- “This guy, you know, he can -- he can teach a little bit. You might want to invite him to one of your conferences.” This year, the first year -- and I can’t remember -- I’ll try to get the date. The first time I was invited as a speaker at ISNA conference, I was a throw-in. Their darling was Yusuf Islam, Cat Stevens. Headliner. [inaudible] I remember giving that ta-- my first talk at ISNA conference. When I finished my speech, maybe 30 people came on stage. “Give us your contact. Wait, wait, give -- how we going to contact with you?” And that began it.

ALI: What -- what do you think explains -- because for ISNA -- Islamic Society of North America is not a predominantly Black community.

WAHHAJ: At all.

ALI: What do you think explains the reception that you received?

WAHHAJ: What’s the reception when Minister Farrakhan comes anywhere? Right? Nisa told me something. Nisa Muhammad told me something. She said, “You know, Imam, when I first heard you, I didn’t know who you were.” But she said, “There’s something about” -- said, “This -- he ain’t sounding like no regular Sunni Muslim. There’s something different about him.” Then she found out I was in the Nation. So whatever -- the Malcolm, the Farrakhan, the kind of, you know -- so the -- so the brothers in the Nation ain’t like -- they -- they’re live, you know. They -- they -- you know, like that. So I think there was an attraction.

ALI: So that’s interesting. So even as you moved from the theology of the Nation, there was some cultural things that kept --

WAHHAJ: A hundred percent. Not only -- not only cultural things, but even -- maybe even style, the way we-- we didn’t talk like the regular Sunni Muslims talked. But it resonated with them. Definitely resonated with the youth, right. So that began it. And then the rest is history. [phone rings] So you know, kind of like people --

ALI: Do you want me to pause the recording?

WAHHAJ: No, no. It’s okay.

ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: So people kind of--
ALI: Can you silence--
WAHHAJ: Kind of like--
ALI: Is there a way to silence--
WAHHAJ: Kind of get--yeah, yeah.
ALI: Or turn the ringer off?
WAHHAJ: Kind of got, like, a reputation. Trying to--[ringing stops] they got like a reputation. Let me see how you turn this--oh, I got to do this first.
ALI: So you're traveling, you're speaking. You are holding jummah in an apartment. How do you go from that to--
WAHHAJ: It took a while. It wasn't--it wasn't immediate. I think for maybe even a couple years I'm just developing a community. A lot of training. We--we--we--we were very particular about that. Want to make sure that people understand what the religion is.
And I think maybe--so--so you say '82, '83, '84--gee, I wish I can give--
ALI: Well, I know that--
WAHHAJ: Maybe--
ALI: I--
WAHHAJ: Maybe '85, maybe. I'm still--I'm--I begin to go out a little bit.
ALI: Right. But you--this building was purchased in '82.
WAHHAJ: Eighty-two, yeah.
ALI: Yes.
WAHHAJ: Yeah.
ALI: What was--tell me about arriving to the decision where you needed a building.
WAHHAJ: Yeah. You know, our training was, even in the Nation--you've got to have a place. Right? Can't--can't be in a brother's apartment forever, right? And you want to grow. So I'm looking around. And I see this building for sale. So I'm the one that discovered this building, just for the record, right. And found out it was owned by the city. You know, how much it costs and stuff like that. And said, really, it would be good to get this place. And this was, I think, our first choice. And from the beginning we
wanted to buy and not rent, which was a great decision. I told you about that masjid, Masjid Aqsa, the brothers from Africa in Harlem. They got a masjid for $1,000. And it went up to $20,000 a month. So we wanted to avoid that kind of thing. So we -- we got it at a auction. And --

ALI: What was this building before?

WAHHAJ: A few things. Some brothers said a factory. Some a restaurant. I think the Jesse’s Restaurant. The I forgot the name of it. But the Nation it was a Nation of Islam at one point. On Bedford Avenue it was -- it was not a Steak-N-Take. It -- it was -- you know, if you go to some of those old brothers, Lawrence and some of those older brothers, and Jessie, there was a -- it was a restaurant. Your Restaurant or something like that. Clothing store. Somebody said in the past alcohol was sold in one of the -- one of the places. So it was -- it was a -- it was a big nut for us.

ALI: What was this -- what was this area like in 1982?

WAHHAJ: [laughter] Oh! Whoa! According to the command of the 79th precinct, this was the worst part of the city. Drugs, 15 crack houses, abandoned buildings. It was the worst of the worst. And -- funny story. We went to the auction, right. So I’m sitting there. Got there early in the morning. And, you know, they -- they’re auctioning off parcel after parcel. And stuff is going $100,000, $200,00, $300,000. I’m saying, 25-- are you crazy? So we -- we had said something like we would go up to $60,000.

So in the afternoon, you know, the afternoon session, I said, “You know what? I don’t think 60 is going to be enough. We went to say, well, we’ll go as far as $90,000 or $100,000, something like that. So when our piece came up, divine intervention. Divine -- I don’t know what else to say. And the auctioneer said, “So-and-so parcel.” And I’m the spokesman. I said, “Minimum upset.” The man said, “Minimum upset, $25,000. Going once, going twice, sold.” He didn’t give nobody a chance. It was like, did you all see what just happened? Right? A Black man came to me. He said, “You know, sir? I was going to bid on that property. But I saw when the Muslims were bidding on it, I
don’t want to bid against the Muslims.” [claps hands] We got this paid off $25,000. The rest is history. We’ve been renovating, and renovating, and renovating ever since.

ALI: So I’m interested. What do you think he meant when he said he didn’t want to bid against the Muslims?

WAHHAJ: I have no idea. I have no idea. You know, ma-- maybe he had a soft spot in his heart. Muslims have done so much good. How am I going to bid against these guys? It ain’t right. He probably had deep pockets. Because I think he -- he bought a couple parcels. And I can see that. I can see him saying, you know, let the brothers -- let the brothers get it.

ALI: So when I asked you what the neighborhood was like, you reached very strongly. Did you have any --

WAHHAJ: Reservations?

ALI: Why come here if it was that bad?

WAHHAJ: Yeah. Good question. Something about our spirit, you know. One of two things. Either we’re just naive and ignorant so don’t realize what we’re doing. Or we like -- we are the slaves of Allah. Allah will help us. And He did. He did through the fact that our biggest mistake was we didn’t document what it looked like, so that people can see before and after. Big mistake. Because if people -- because, like, we have -- we have people coming all over. We have people coming all over. [knock on door] And --

ALI: Do you want to --

WAHHAJ: Come in!

ALI: I’ll pause it.

WAHHAJ: He’s doing taping, Ali. Come on -- come on -- come on. He’s -- he’ll turn it off.

ALI: I’ll -- I’ll --

[Interview interrupted]

ALI: Okay.

WAHHAJ: We -- we were -- one thing I can say about our early community, very faithful. Very, like -- we can do anything. There’s nothing that we can’t do without -- without -- with -- with, you know -- with Allah’s help. So -- and -- and not only that -- listen, to say --

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to say it was bad is one thing. Was horrible is one thing. I mean, prostitution, dope, drugs, everything. Criminal activity, everything. But there was nothing there. There was nothing there. So now -- now, when you come here, there’s 40 Muslim businesses on this block when there wasn’t even one. There wasn’t one. One Muslim business. Now there’s over 40. On this block alone. Then the next block, and the next block. Five Muslim restaurants. Unheard of. Cleaned it up. You know, by Allah’s permission. And -- and -- and -- so and -- so yeah. So now when -- when -- when people see Masjid At-Taqwa, like -- so we have visitors. And they say, “Wow, look at this.” And I say, “You ain’t seen nothing, man. Because you don’t know what -- you -- there’s no context for you. You don’t know what this used to be like.”

ALI: So tell me what were some of the -- we’ll start with the structural changes. What were some of the things that you did structurally to transform what you purchased into a masjid?

WAHHAJ: It was a lot of junk to clean this place out. You know, I mean, to slowly get an area where we can pray. And then -- so what happened -- so people started coming, right. We never recruited, which is interesting. But people started coming. And we noticed that when we got one area, we filled it up. People on the outside trying to get in. So we expanded. We kept expanding. Every time we expanded, more people come. We get 1,300 people here now for jummah. And now people, again, outside.

So we got to expand it. So we had a meeting with an architect. We plan to renovate it to go up. Maybe even many -- as many as eight stories. So we’re going to -- I mean, a massive job. We -- we -- we’ve had three developers already give us proposals. So soon we’ll make a decision which one we’re going to be. This area here is known throughout Brooklyn -- especially in this area is like -- look, the Muslims cleaned it up.

I don’t know if I told you. I -- I’ll never forget, 1988, ’89, we had a anti-drug campaign. And we closed down these 15 crack houses. I got a phone call by an owner of some property on Nostrand Avenue, Avenue D, something like that. He said, “Listen, I heard

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what you did. You did a great job. I want to know, can you do it to my -- in my area? And how much will it cost?” They were willing to pay us. And I said, “This is not -- we don’t -- we don’t go in business for that. We’re not -- no, I’m not doing that. I’m saying we want to clear the area that we live in.” My -- my hope was that this would -- this would happen all throughout the city. People would catch -- say, “Wow, look what the Muslims do. Let’s do the same thing.” Not that they would come to us. Some brothers started business like that, security business and stuff like that.

But I ain’t in no security business. I didn’t do it for that. I did it because this is the house of worship. And we painted our block. We painted the area around our masjid green. And told people, “You -- you can’t do nothing in this-- not in this area here that you can’t do anything. Anything negative in this area.” And so we were very, very, very strong in our faith, always. That -- that was the hallmark of -- of Masjid At-Taqwa.

Those brothers there, man, they ain’t afraid of nothing but Allah. And Allah blessed us.

ALI: When you first opened up the Masjid, who -- who were its members?

WAHHAJ: One hundred percent African-Americans. These were those who was with me at Masjid 7C. Hundred percent of our congregation was those who was with me there that Imam Mohammed said, “Let them go with you.” And my assistant, my first assistant was my assistant over there, Sheikh Iddin, older brother. He became my first assistant imam. I think that’s it basically. Brothers, their wives, and that became the -- the -- the foundation of our community. As years went on, we began to attract a wider, a broader, you know, congregation. Immigrants started coming. Which now meant that I’m the imam not just of the African-American. We got to a point now that the African-Americans may be 20, 25 percent of our jummah. So I’m actually African-American imam over an immigrant community.

ALI: And immigrants from where?

WAHHAJ: Everywhere. Africa -- we have a strong African presence from -- from -- my assistant imam is from Sudan. So we have some brothers from Sudan. Brothers from Guinea. And Senegal, the biggest and -- and -- and the -- the Bangladesh. Then others.
Then we got Egyptians. We got Yemenis, you know. You know, a -- a wide variety. Many ethnicities. But I think the bulk of it, African and Bangladesh. Yeah.

ALI: So let's -- let's talk about what were some of the programs that you needed or you felt you needed to institute when you first opened up the masjid. You said you needed a place for prayer. What were some of the other kinds of things that you had --

WAHHAJ: Well, we had -- we had martial art training. All different kinds of classes. We're always into classes, right. Training and classes.

ALI: Why martial arts?

WAHHAJ: Because you have to defend what you have. What you have built, you have to defend it. In the Nation, we always had -- we always would train under Moses Powell and some of the great martial artists. So I guess we continued that tradition. You got to remember the foundation of us was from the Nation. Many of us was from the Nation, not all. And so we kind of continued that -- that -- that tradition. So that -- you know, and, again, mostly -- mostly classes. I taught -- I taught Arabic classes. I had -- I had to teach on Thursdays, five classes. My first one began at fajr prayer. My last one began ten at night and ended at midnight. So when I went home, it was always a discussion with myself. Am I hungry or more tired? And -- but that was it. That -- that was my life. My -- this is -- my life is in this -- in this -- in this place here. Classes, classes, classes.

ALI: So I want to talk about the patrols. And tell me about the year before the patrol started in 1987, where members of the masjid, including yourself, helped a landlord with his property on Tompkins Avenue? Tell me about that story.

WAHHAJ: Wednesday night, we're having a special occasion in this masjid. It's called an aqiqah. One of our family members had a baby. Who was that family member? Salim Abdus-Saboor. The first Masjid At-Taqwa -- I'll never forget that night. I'm in my office. And I'm preparing my khutbah for Friday. This is Wednesday, right. I know what I'm going to talk about. So I started writing notes. I know the verses from the Qur'an I'm going to use. Help one another in righteousness in the fear of Allah. Do not help one another in enmity, fear Allah. That's my talk. Help one another.
So the brothers say-- I was in my office. Say, “Imam, there’s -- there’s a brother here to see you.” I said, “Send him in.” He’s -- Maher [phonetic] is his name. I saw a different name that you had? Maher from Palestine. He is not from our congregation. Never met him before. He ain’t Black like us. But he’s a Muslim. He said, “Imam, I got a problem. We have a building. And we were gone sick or whatever. Came back. Some drug dealers took it over. Our apar-- one of our apartments, took it over. Like a three family house. And I went to the cops. The cops did nothing.” He was crying. And I made a decision that night. I’m going to do one of two things. If I’m not going to help him, I’m not teaching help you one another. And if we help him, I’m going to teach the khutbah Friday, help you one another. And that here’s an opportunity to do it.

I got together with the brothers, took shura. What do you think? “Yes, Imam, we should help him.” We went home and changed. It was about, at that time, maybe 40 of us. We went in a number of cars. And I went with him. About seven of us was in front of the door. [knocks] I knocked on the door. They said, “Who is it?” I said, “It’s the Muslims. And we’re here to take back the apartment of-- from -- of our brother.” One of them said -- the leader to the people there, “Hey, man, it’s the Muslims. Don’t do nothing stupid.” He opened the door. And I said, “You’ve got to go.” He said okay. They said, “Listen, we got, like, TVs. Can we” -- “Yeah, take them and go.” About nine or ten of them came out. Ask me today, would I do the same thing? I’m not sure. But we were just full of faith. That’s just how we were, how we rolled, man, in those days. And the irony of ironies, the drug dealers, when they got out, they called the police on us. Hah! Can you imagine? They called the police on us! And so I guess our reputation preceded us. And so the police came. I told all the brothers, “Go back to the masjid.” And the police came. We were on our way back to the masjid. There was five of us in a car. Abdul-Rauf [Shakir], myself, Askia [Umrani], Salim Abdu-Saboor, and Mustaf Abdullah. And some of the brothers in the car had stuff.

ALI: When you say stuff --
WAHHAJ: Weapons. So Salim was licensed, right. And two of the brothers were not licensed. So the police followed us and put their siren on. And arrested us, you know. I had a -- I had, I think, a knife. One brother had a baton. One brother had a pistol. Salim had a pistol, but he's licensed. Another brother had, maybe, a shotgun, maybe. So that's another thing. We went -- we went to that. And we were -- we were given a conditional release. So you don't get in trouble for -- because really, the DA, was saying, “Great job.” The police was saying, “You did a great job.” You know what I’m saying? But yo, we can't -- you know, we got to obey the law. That’s why I say today, I wouldn't do the same thing. Because I think we’re a bit -- we’re -- we’re -- we’re better now. You know, we were like -- we don’t care. So we -- we -- we’re better now. We don’t -- we don’t break the law.

[laughter] So that was it. So --

ALI: So -- so they cleared out. And this was -- did that -- did that solve the problem for the -- the landlord?

WAHHAJ: One hundred percent. Never had a problem again.

ALI: So a month -- not a month. A year after, I think one of the cases from that was going forward or about to ha-- go to trial. And you made an announcement for patrols.

WAHHAJ: We had --

ALI: Tell me where that idea for the patrols came from.

WAHHAJ: We had -- we had -- we had a meeting in this area. I think it was Restoration Plaza. Community Board 3, I think. And everybody was up in arms about the drugs. The drugs was crazy. And we found out at that meeting -- it could have been at Boys and Girls High School. We found out -- they had the police, the city administration. And the thing that we learned, we came away from that meeting -- they don't have an answer. They don't have an answer. So I'm thinking. What can we do? That's when Allah blessed me with the idea. You know what? Let's have a 40-day anti-drug campaign. Almost like revelation. It wasn't revelation. I don't think I [inaudible].

ALI: Well, I was -- I was going to say, why 40 days? What was the --

WAHHAJ: Talk of the significance. Forty days, 40 nights. Rained 40 days and 40 nights.

And, you know, that kind of significance. And the Qur'an says -- Allah says that a man
reaches his full strength at the age of 40. So kind of symbolic 40, right. And we thought that’s enough time to really do some real stuff. Because if we did it five days, it’s a joke. Even a week, they’ll be back. So I went and spoke to the commander of the 79th. And borough president -- the -- Brooklyn North. Rayford, Chief Rayford, I think it was. And I said, “You know, I’ve gotten an idea. What we can do, something real. And that is I propose that we have on January 21st this big anti-drug rally. And at that point, we had 15 drug houses. We want you to raid -- you raid those 15 drug houses and get them out.” I said, “In the past, the problem hasn’t been raiding these joints and getting them out, but they come back.” I said to them, “If you get them out, we’ll keep them out. We’ll be your partners.” They liked it. And we met with the highest brass.

So they did it. We had this big rally. I gave them the signal. You could have seen it -- you should have seen it all. All at once, they raided all 15 of those drug houses. As soon as they raid them, they arrested them. We put our men in front of them. Told people, “No more drugs being sold here.” So first the drugs dealers say, “Yeah, they’ll do that for a couple of days.” But when they saw we were serious, 40 days and 40 nights in the cold, freezing cold -- sometimes the numbers got real low, like three or four brothers. I remember one -- one Saturday morning, man. We had a handful of brothers here. The brothers were kind of getting demoralized a little bit. So I went to a masjid called Masjid Makki Jami on Coney Island Avenue at fajr prayer. And I told them what we were doing. Pakistani Muslims. I said, “I want some reinforcements.” They came with me. They followed me. About 30 cars, 30 carloads of brothers. And when the brothers saw them -- only for a little bit. Part of a day. But can you imagine what it did to them, their spirits? And every once in a while we’d get an influx of people coming. Everybody want -- now everybody want to become part of the -- you know, the patrols. It’s historic. You know, they -- the media’s covering it.

And what happened -- again, divine intervention. Those crack houses closed and never opened up again. Sister comes in for jummah. Told me a number of occasions, said,
“Imam, I used to be mad at you.” I said, “Why?” She says, “You know you had those anti-drug control? I used to cop my drugs from one of these houses.” Now she’s a Muslim. See, the good -- when Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala blesses you, it adds good, upon good, upon good, upon good. There was a drug dealer there, I’ll never forget. He was one -- a very Black guy. Looked African. During the end of the patrols, maybe a day after, two days after, he’s across the street on Fulton Street and Bedford on the north side, sitting down. And I sit down next to him and said, “What’s happening?” Because that’s how -- I -- I talk to people. You know what I’m saying? I -- I talk to my people. He said, “You know what? You guys put us out of business.” I said, “Let me tell you something better than that business is Islam.” The man took shahada. He said, “La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasul Allah” -- he took shahada.

So -- and then slowly, you know -- and we -- we blew it. Because we should have bought up everything in this neighborhood. Smart people saw it. And they saw what happened. What we did was -- was so famous, as it was on -- major newspaper, every newspaper. Every newspaper in the world, they came. They covered it. And -- and every once in a while, one or two police would be on our patrols with us. So they taken our partnership. People used to -- we have the bus comes down to Fulton Street. You got the Fulton Street bus. And you got the one who -- the one that comes around -- I think comes around and -- I don’t know which bus that is. But anyway, people -- when they used to pass us by, everybody on the other side of the bus would come on this side and say, “There they are! There they” -- you could see it. The pride, you know.

A Jehovah’s Witness -- old woman, never forget -- one day she came into the masjid. She said, “I’m a Jehovah’s Witness. I used to -- I used to hate Muslims. But now I love Muslims.” And she sat there and talked to me. And she talked to me. I said, “Madam, I’ve got to go.” But you know what? The -- the pride -- the businesspeople came to us and said, “I thank you, what you did.” The -- the spirit of that area and the city was -- was special, because everybody was talking about it. And we were on the radios, and
TV, and stuff like that. And talk about what we did. One of the g-- I think one of the
greatest things that we did -- that -- and everybody talked about it. In fact, Muslims all
of the -- all over the country said, “Yeah, you saw what we did? We -- we -- we closed
down those -- we closed down those crack houses.” It was like -- which is -- they did.

ALI: I’m interested in a couple of things. When you brought this idea to the -- the
congregation, how -- how did you convince them? And -- and what was the response
initially?

WAHHAJ: In our community, imam has a very high rank. Though I told you we’re -- we’re
not -- we’re not soldiers, we’re slaves. But if you bring it to them in a way that they can
understand it, that we’re the slaves of Allah, and this is what Allah would want us to do,
it was sold. I didn’t have any opposition. Everybody agreed with it. Because you’ve got
to remember at that time, again, high faith, a lot of faith. You know, we -- we -- we could
have been -- probably was lacking a lot of knowledge in a lot of areas. But we didn’t
lack faith. So when I brought it to them and showed them what it -- what it could be like
when we fight back, then they -- they -- it -- they -- they were sold. And we get no
opposition. And Allah blessed us. Could have -- could have been -- now, I insist when I
talk to our -- our community, I never make a big -- a major decision without taking
shura, or consultation. I -- I -- I really want from them the best of their thinking. I don’t
want you to rubber stamp it just because I’m saying it. But I really want your input. And
because I gave them input, you know, they accepted it. And -- and then they -- they
took ownership of it.

ALI: Were there -- so the patrols were only brothers?

WAHHAJ: Yeah.

ALI: Were there members of their families who grew concerned or expressed concerns to
you about their safety or anything like that?

WAHHAJ: No, no. They -- the -- the women, may Allah bless them, they prepared food for
us. You know, coffee, and tea, and stuff like that. They were very supportive. I didn’t -- if
there was some negative somewhere, I never -- it never came to me. So I don’t know.
They -- we got the support of our sisters. We got support of -- even non-Muslims, right.
I went to several churches to get them involved from the very beginning. They would have nothing of it. They said it was a great idea. But, sorry, we can’t -- they were -- the -- the ministers were honest with me. “We’re afraid. We’re scared.”

ALI: And so what -- what do you think is the difference?

WAHHAJ: Of? The difference of?

ALI: In the response between the churches and the Muslims?

WAHHAJ: I think a lot of them were scared. That’s what they told us. They’re scared. But, see, the thing is -- what -- about -- we’re taught to fear no one but Allah. We believe that. You don’t scare me. I don’t care who -- you don’t scare me with your weapons. You don’t scare me with -- you don’t scare me. So I think that’s part -- part of our orientation. And then other things, you know. A number of our members come from prison. So a lot of them, you know, they’re used to that kind of rough. Maybe some sophisticated people, you know, doctors, and lawyers, and stuff like that, they ain’t going to do that, right. But brothers from the street -- a lot of brothers from the street. Not all of them. So there’s a better chance you’re going to get a better response with something like that.

ALI: So the other question is, as you worked to keep drug dealers and drugs away from the vicinity of the mosque, did you have as a community to respond to -- you know, this is the period of the crack epidemic and other social crises. Did they affect people in the mosque? How did you -- or did you have to respond? Did you have to deal with that?

WAHHAJ: I told people, you know, after reflection -- there are two ways to deal with this drug epidemic. I said one of them is the way we did it. And we got rid of the drugs in the area. But I said there’s something better than that, if you get rid of the desire for drugs. That’s really the program. So we had -- you know, we -- you’re going to always have people in your community that are affected by the drugs. Some of them -- some of them was aided with AA, Alcohol Anon-- Anonymous and stuff like that. Some brothers are part of that. Some brothers formed their own -- I think they call it the -- I forgot. There’s -- there’s a name that they have, the Muslims have. But they adapted some of the ways of the AA. So we’re always dealing with it that way. I think a lot of Muslims, because of their shame, hid it. Some of them beat it. Some brothers and sisters had
drug problems, and Allah blessed them to beat it. And -- and -- and some maybe had it
and hid it, too ashamed to admit it. You know, so -- but we -- but again, we had always
addressed it. We addressed it in our sermons and our classes and things like that.

ALI: The other social crisis that -- or public health crisis that affected certainly communities
like this one in central Brooklyn in the ’80s and -- and -- and early ’90 was HIV. Was
that felt in this community?

WAHHAJ: [sighs] You know, it was interesting. Basically in -- in -- in Muslim communities,
it’s like -- almost pretending that it doesn’t exist. Doesn’t exist with us. That’s -- that’s
not our problem. So there was a kind of -- I forget the word. The kind of -- it’s like
reluctance to admit. So I knew people in the community -- you know, it was a big
stigma in those days -- who had the -- who had the virus. And I loved them, hugged
them. I never shunned them. So I think especially in the immigrant community, it’s like
denial. Denial. Don’t deal with it. So we dealt with it. And alhamdulillah we got -- we go
them help. Got them -- it was all the help that we can get. So I never got the feeling that
in our community it was really pervasive and, you know -- I -- I -- I always felt there was
some. But not -- not tremendous amounts. And only Allah knows. Because maybe
some, they just hid it.

ALI: What are some of the changes that you’ve seen in the masjid over the 40 -- 30 -- 35, 36
years of its existence here?

WAHHAJ: I think we all have attracted a broader segment of the community, educationally.
A lot of educated brothers and sisters, both Black and non-Black immigrants. Though --
though again, we still have some -- almost every week, somebody’s coming from a
prison. So we still have that segment. So -- but it’s -- it’s -- it’s a nice mixture. And again,
with the -- the major change in our jamah, our community, is the influx of immigrants.
Again -- again, they’re coming, not because we’re going out and say, “Yo, yo, come over
here.” No. We never -- we never do that. But our door’s always open. People hear about
it. They hear about Imam Siraj. They say, “Oh, you know what?” They’ll hear about
Masjid At-Taqwa. And this is a -- a well known and respected masjid. People around the
country tell me. If we come there, we’re going to visit Masjid At-Taqwa.
And so some come. They -- they -- they find a home here. We -- we are -- you know, one of the things that I had to deal with -- Allah mentioned to the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, he says, “Say I am the messenger of Allah to all of you.” I now could not be just the imam for the African-Americans. I had to be the imam for everybody who comes. So therefore, the Bangladesh community, I had a personal dinner with them to say, “Listen, what -- what are -- what are some of your needs? What are some of your concerns? Because right now we’re leaning. We’re learning about each other. And so then I had to reflect the board and bring leadership other than African-Americans. Now -- and we have leadership even among the women. So I think we’re becoming -- you know, most -- most communities were, like, very conservative. Like the sisters, you know, you’ll stay over there. But not in our community. Our community, our women part of the leadership of this community. We need them. And we need the people for all the community, all the ethnicities, all of the nationalities, that kind of thing. So that was a major change, getting more educated. I would say that’s -- that’s --

ALI: What are -- what are some of the ways that the role of women’s leadership is reflected in -- in the masjid?

WAHHAJ: When we have meetings with the leadership, the direction of the masjid -- like, we’re talking about the -- the -- the renovation of this masjid, they’re there. We have a group of sisters called the Medina Sisters. My wife is part of it. That -- and they meet with us any -- there’s not a major decision that I make just with the brothers. They’re there. So that’s -- I think that’s the most critical thing. We need their voices. I’ll be honest with you, man. I’ve been all over England. I’m shocked that there are many masjids in England -- women are not even allowed to come to the masjid, which makes no sense to me. And then -- and few masjids have women on the leadership who make any -- you know, any decisions. So most -- most masjids you go to, you see the sisters with some little dinky little corner, if they got that. So we -- we -- again, so when we’re planning, we talked about the renovation, we gave the sisters a big space. Now, of
course more brothers come, so they get a bigger piece of the space. But we -- we -- you
know, we consider them, too. Consider their concerns. Yeah.

ALI: What kind of programs do you have for young people?

WAHHAJ: We have a thing called -- they call it Real Talk on Fridays. And we get -- get an
opportunity to, you know, talk some relevant issues to them. Hear their -- hear their
concerns. We have a young group called Young Muslims. So they're meeting. We -- we
-- we did have girl scouts and boy scouts. We haven't done that in a while, but we're
starting that again. And so just trying to -- to talk with them. We have -- sometimes we-
- we have programs. Like, for instance we had suicide awareness. Brought them to talk
about that, because we had a lot of suicides. Not in our community, but among
youngsters. So we -- we talk about that. Even the, like -- sometimes they -- we took -- we
took them to, like, the movie Malcolm X. I think Friday they're taking them to go see
Black Panther. So kind of thing, mentorship and stuff like that.

ALI: What else -- what are some of the concerns that the young people have that you think
are the -- the -- the most important to address?

WAHHAJ: Not just here, but everywhere it's like -- like, give an example. Whenever I went
to Washington DC, I had a program. There's a group of Muslims, about five of them,
men, would always after the program take me out to a Muslim restaurant. And we'd
hang out. We had a good rapport. And one of them moved to California. And he came
back to see me recently. He said, “Imam, I'm going to be honest with you. I hate going
to the masjid for jummah.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because it's -- it's not relevant.” So I
think relevancy is a -- is a -- is a great issue.

So you have in a lot of communities -- a little bit less here -- there's no -- the -- the -- the
sheikh, he -- he's -- he's knowledgeable. But he can't reach them. We reach them. They--
all of them will tell you Imam Siraj plays basketball. I take them to court. I'll whoop
them. Yeah, man. We had -- let me tell you something. Years ago in Washington DC,
we had the like -- like a -- they called it MYNA, Muslim Youth or North America camps,
right? I went there one -- one year. And -- and their -- and the teacher said, “Imam, this
group here, boy, they won’t listen. They just bad. We can’t do nothing with them.” I said, “Listen, put your books away. We’re going to play basketball. You’re going to play the counselors -- counselors.” We played them. Like, we beat them, like, three games in a row. We never had a problem with them again.

They will tell you. They’ll -- they’ll tell you. Because there’s something about -- you know, and then the material, you got to -- you got to be relevant to them. So I think that’s the most -- the -- the biggest issue. If it ain’t, you know, rel-- especially immigrant community. Woefully missing. Unless you got some guys like Nouman Ali Khan and Omar Suleiman. And the people like the younger generation, they got it better now. They can -- they know how to relate. And they got a lot of it from the African-Americans. We just -- I don’t know what the -- we just -- Allah blessed us. I think maybe it has to do with the fact that we ourselves were in the dunya. So we can relate that way. And their mothers and fathers were never in the dunya. And they don’t know what it’s like, the struggle. To go to a -- a school where it’s dominated by non-Muslims. And you got to interact with them. And it ain’t easy. It’s not easy at all. So.

ALI: So when I asked you what this area was like when you first moved here, you reacted very strongly. How would you describe it now? And how -- how has that impacted the relationship that the masjid has with the community?

WAHHAJ: I’ll -- the bus stop is across the street. But the people usually wait on our side of the street when they’re waiting for the bus on the other side of the street. Because it’s -- it’s -- it’s safe. No place is 100 percent safe. But I think the people feel safe here. They feel like these Muslims care. So now we’re part -- we’re part of the planning board in the area. We -- we -- we -- you know, when they had the snowstorm a couple weeks ago, I am -- I dug myself out. And then I started digging my neighbor out. Non-Muslim. Didn’t do all of it, but some of it. So to this day, I never told him it was me who did it. But a couple days later, I had to dig my car out. And I’m digging. I’m digging. It ain’t working. One of my other neighbors, he came. He got me out. I thanked him. And then I went -- I went back to the house. I didn’t have no money. I went and put an envelope,
$20. Knocked on the door. He said, “What’s this?” I said, “This -- this -- this -- thank you.”

So when I got to the masjid, I asked the masjid keeper, I said, “You -- you shovel that snow?” He said, “Yes, and I got our neighbor, too.” I didn’t tell him to get the neighbor. So this is who we are. So they know -- it -- they know that. We talk to the neighbors, you know, around the corner. The issue -- we’re always engaging them. That’s just who we are. So we’re not standoffish. We -- we speak. We have -- we have open house. They come. We feed them. We have -- sometimes our doctors come. They, you know, examine the diabetes, high blood pressure, and stuff like that. During the beginning of the school year we give out school bags. And all those kind of things. So we have a really good rapport here with the people in this neighborhood.

I think that the White folks who move in this neighborhood are kind of, like -- they -- they’re invisible. And they treat us like we’re invisible. No real interaction. And I thought it was -- first I thought it was me. And then brothers told me the same thing, and sisters, that they don’t look at you. You know, when we see people come, we look directly -- now, we -- listen, I’ll be honest with you. We ain’t like the South. North and South is different. No, no, I’m serious, man. North and South are different. Because in -- in the North you -- you know, we got like an unwritten law. Don’t talk to me. Like, right? So I was in Canada, right? We had a -- I’m sorry. I was in London. We had a conference. And this -- this Muslim imam from Canada, he was telling all this -- “Yeah, you got to be friendly with the people. You know, and if you’re in the elevator with a person, you know, speak to the person.” And I got up and said, “You know what? You’re going to cause me a big problem.” I want you to imagine an elevator in Brooklyn with a White woman, and I’m there alone with a White woman, start talking to her. She may shoot me, right? Because it’s an unwritten law, basically. And everybody know it.
And the South is different. I’m going jogging, man. And I’m going jogging. And I know I’m -- I’m -- I speak to everybody now. Because when I go to -- when I go to Atlanta, Georgia, I speak to everybody. Because that’s what people do. So man, we -- when I’m jogging and a -- and a person is coming the opposite way -- so we speak. “How you doing?” Right? Fine. We meet again, and they -- they greet me again. I ain’t going to greet you twice now. I got you already. And a third time. I said, “This is ridiculous.” Come on, man. You understand? So here, it’s like, we actually -- at least nod. We can do that in -- in -- in the East. Nod. Right? But, like, the kind of disrespect. I don’t -- you know what I’m saying? It’s kind of -- it’s disrespect.

And this is the way it is now. And we -- we met with the -- with the commissioner of community affairs the other day in my office. And we talked about the gentrification. And he said, “Everybody’s talking” -- he’s -- he’s Hispanic. He said, “Everybody’s talking about it.” We got Black churches. We met, I remember, with the reverends of the Black churches. They all said the same thing, man. They’re coming almost like they’re invading. And everybody’s saying the same thing. They’re not -- they don’t feel part of the community. So I’m saying, like, you’re complaining because we calling the adhan. You never come to us. You never even ask us. I lived in -- I lived in -- in Jamaica, Queens, 168th Street, for years across the street from a church. And they rang their bells all the time. They rang their bells. This is the -- you know, I mean -- so -- so it’s like that. And -- and again -- and like -- like I told the -- the -- the commander of the 79th Precinct, they didn’t have to come to you. They can come to us. And so at least, like I explained to you before, at fajr prayer, like, now we make our prayer -- we call the adhan at 5:30 a.m., make the prayer at 6:00. So when -- whenever we have the adhan in the morning, I told the brothers, turn it down. You don’t want to disturb the neighbors. See, I -- I don’t have to call the adhan loud. So we’ll turn it down. Because we really care about the people. We did -- like the brother, he -- he cleaned his neighbor’s side -- I didn’t tell him to do that. I didn’t have him no order. He said, “Yeah, Imam, we -- we” -- because this is what we are taught. We’re taught to honor and respect our neighbors.
ALI: Do you want to break for prayer?
WAHHAJ: Yeah, we got about another 15 minutes. So we can -- we can keep -- I’m good.
ALI: Okay, all right.
WAHHAJ: Oh, wait a minute. Three -- eight --
ALI: It’s -- yeah.
WAHHAJ: He’s -- he’s supposed to make -- give me a second.
ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: Let me -- let me check.
[Interview interrupted]
ALI: So one of the things that came about from the notoriety that the -- the mosque received as a civic institution --
WAHHAJ: Right.
ALI: Right. Was your invitation -- invitation to you to open up prayer in Congress in 1991, which you were the first Muslim --
WAHHAJ: Yes.
ALI: -- to do this. Tell me -- tell me how that came about and what that was like.
WAHHAJ: I -- I want to -- I want to say this first. Because a lot of people just -- they just don’t know. A session of Congress never opens except an invocation by a Jewish rabbi or Christian minister. That’s -- that’s the way it has always been. And -- and 1991, I was the first Muslim to do that at a session of Congress. I was invited by a congressman from West Virginia. I forget his name. But he thought it was good that I would open up a session of Congress. And the Congress agreed. They had to have a vote or something like that. So they agreed. And so I did it. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed -- I did the House of Representatives. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, later on, the next year, year after, I’m not sure -- but he was the first one to open up the session of the Con-- the Senate.

Two interesting notes. When I opened up the session of Congress in 1991, you should have seen the -- the media in -- in Saudi Arabia. They covered that on TV almost every
15 minutes. That’s how big it was for them. Like, what? Did you see this? A Muslim op-
this is, like, big news. Second thing, 700 Club, I’ll never forget, Robertson, Pat
Robertson -- the next day he said words to this effect. “You know, they had a session of
Congress. And a Muslim opened up the session -- session of Congress? Next, they’ll let
witches do it.” That’s how big it was. For Muslims in this country, it was big. Because it
was a signal that, see we are legitimate. We’re like everybody else. We are Americans.
It was a big deal.

ALI: How -- how did you feel that weight? Or did you?

WAHHAJ: I -- I -- I did. I felt that it was -- it was good for the Muslims. Me, like -- you got to
know something about me. I’m like a regular guy. You know what I’m saying? I don’t
think I’m big -- big shot or anything like that. But for Islam, I wasn’t like, “Oh man, I’m
honored. Man, look what they did.” I’m not -- I don’t roll like that. Right? I’m, like, man,
this is a -- this is a good thing for the Muslims. So I felt good for the Muslims. But for
myself, it was like no big deal. Yeah.

ALI: Do you remember the particular prayer? Did you -- did you craft it in any particular
way?

WAHHAJ: I -- I -- I did a combination of Al-Fatiha. And a -- a prayer saying somehow
bless this nation. It’s -- it’s in Congressional records. You can go -- I -- I can’t -- I can’t
remember exact words. But guide -- guide us on the straight path, you know. But I
didn’t want to do Al-Fatiha directly. I wanted to do some elements of Al-Fatiha and --
and some other stuff. But I remember thinking like that. What am I going to say? But it
wasn’t a long prayer.

ALI: The growing recognition of Muslims continued in that decade in 1992 under mayor
David Dinkins, the Eid holidays were added to the alternate side suspension. And for
people who -- people who aren’t from New York, why is this a big deal?

WAHHAJ: You see, this -- our country prides itself in religious freedom. Malcolm used to
say, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If other people have the alternate
side of the street suspended for their holidays, then why can’t the Muslims? So we
fought for it. And we got it, under David Dinkins. And -- and it was -- it was a big deal. Muslims celebrated.

ALI: And for people who don't understand what that means, suspension, what is -- what is it?
WAHHAJ: Yeah, yeah. E-- every -- every -- usually the streets are cleaned. And when the streets are cleaned, you have to move your car so that the street cleaner can come and clean it. And this happens, like, five days a week. And -- but during the holidays it's suspended. You don't have to move your car. Those of us who have to move their car know what it means. Like, I have to move my car here every morning from eight o'clock to 9:30. We got to double park our car somewhere and then park it back an hour and a half later so the street cleaner can come and clean it. But when we have these holidays, they don't come. And you can keep your car there. It's a big thing for us. We love -- like today, I -- you know, I get to the masjid -- I get here, like, five o'clock in the morning, right. And everybody here is hustling trying to get their spot, right. But a day like today, everybody's happy. Because everybody's got their spot. And I'm like -- I'm -- when you see me on days like this, I'm happy. All the other days I'm hustling, trying to get out, trying to get my spot.

ALI: And -- and for those who -- who won't know, today is a holiday that we're recording. So that's why you don't have to --

WAHHAJ: Yeah, yeah, this is Presidents Day, I think.

ALI: So I -- I guess one could say by 1992 there was a great degree of optimism. Right? The -- the -- the attention that Masjid At-Taqwa had gotten for its role in cleaning up this neighborhood, you opening a Congressional session in prayer, the Eid holiday being recognized by the city in terms of the Department of Transportation, what -- what were your -- if I were to talk to you in '92, what were you thinking about the future of Islam in America?

WAHHAJ: Very optimistic. Right? We're growing. Listen, we're part of the fabric of this society. We ain't strangers. You know, we ain't enemies. We're here like everybody else, man, trying to survive and grow and thrive in this society. And we're doing a great job. We've got a good relationship with our neighbors. We've got a good relationship with
the politicians. We have a good relationship with the churches and synagogues. We have a good relationship. Everything is going fine.

ALI: And what happened in 1993?
WAHHAJ: Nineteen ninety-three?
ALI: Mm-hmm. With the World Trade Center.
WAHHAJ: Oh, yeah. We got to stop now.
ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: [inaudible] ready for salat.
ALI: Okay.
WAHHAJ: I forgot about that, yeah.
ALI: All right.
WAHHAJ: Yeah.
ALI: We'll -- we'll pick this up after.
[Interview interrupted]
ALI: So before we -- we took a break for a prayer, we were talking about a level of optimism about -- that you had about Islam in New York City and in the United States --
WAHHAJ: Right.
ALI: -- in '92. And then in '93 there was an attempted bombing of the World Trade Center.
WAHHAJ: Yes.
ALI: Tell me, you know, how you heard about it, what your response was to it, and how it impacted your -- your community.
WAHHAJ: I'll -- I'll be honest with you. I am always saddened, disappointed, whenever I hear about supposedly some Muslim doing something that is, in my -- in my estimation, anti-Islamic, against Islam. Attacking innocent people, killing innocent people, stuff like that. It -- it sickens me. There's nothing worse to me. So -- but you know, the way we've been taught, we hold our judgment until the facts present itself. So while we may be -- you know, because we're going to feel bad because Muslims are being blamed for something. Even if Muslims did it, Islam didn't do it. All the Muslims didn't do it. And I -- and I -- and I felt that in all of the -- you know, the good feeling that
we have gotten from the good work that the Muslims are doing, it can be erased with some bad movement. So this is my thinking. Some bad deeds by some other -- some other person.

And then let me tell you something. It’s really interesting. I learned a lot, unfortunately, about our society. The World Trade Center happened. One day, I’ll never forget, I came into the masjid. And headlines was like -- especially in New York City -- “Other Unindicted Conspirators.” Imam Siraj Wahhaj is on that -- on that list. So I read the words of Mary Jo White. She’s a United States Counsel. And she was saying that, “It’s not just Sheikh [Omar] Abdel-Rahman. There are others.” So the defense said, “You keep saying that. Who are the others?” “I’ll get you a list.” So she comes up with a list of 171 Muslim leaders in this country and around the world. And she said, “The following unindicted may be alleged as co-conspirators.” Anybody knows that don’t mean anything.

So come -- the newspaper in New York City, “Imam Siraj Wahhaj, one of the indicted.” So I get a call from ABC. “Imam Siraj, we’d like to come to interview you.” I said, “Sure. But just remember you got to finish at a certain time. I’ve got to give a lecture tonight. And I have to leave at a certain time.” They said, “Fine.” This particular day I was being interviewed, I was on it. If you know what I mean by on it. You know, sometimes you’re interviewed, and you didn’t -- it didn’t go that well, right. The media, you know. This day I felt like -- Allah -- Allah was with me. And they interviewed me. I was two, three hours. And -- and they said -- I said, “Okay, I got to go now. And I’ve got to go to my lecture.” They said, “Imam, we want to get one more shot of you as you -- as you leave and go into your car.” And I said okay. So people telling me they’re announcing, ABC Tonight, Imam Siraj unindicted co-conspirator, ba ba ba ba. So -- so everybody turned it on. To my shock -- I’m not shocked anymore. But all those three hours of interviewing, they had one shot of me with my back running to my car as if I have nothing to say. That’s criminal.
So you -- you know what you’re doing. First of all, you -- you -- you won’t tell the truth. You won’t tell the people that this is nothing. And it’s not just Imam Siraj. A hundred and seventy-one different imams or leaders. And what they said is nothing. So I would rather be charged, so I can fight it in a court of law. I can’t defend myself. Because you aren’t saying nothing. You -- you -- I can’t even sue you. Because you’re saying unindicted, may be, alleged co-conspirators. But what happens is the do-- is the tag team. Now news media pick it up. One -- one books said -- called -- they called it, Muslim Mafia. “Imam Siraj Wahhaj implicated in the first World Trade Center.” Implicated? “Suspect in the World Trade --.” Suspect? “Co-conspirator.” Co-conspirator? So I -- then I know -- I said, “I understand what’s going on. It’s a smear campaign. It’s clear.” So you would think that the -- that good media would just say, “Listen, this ain’t nothing. Why don’t you go to her and ask her why she put -- what the-- what the -- what’s the basis of it? They don’t have to give no basis, no nothing. And you take it. You repeat it. You augment it. You add to it. And you make it look like something that it’s not.

ALI: Why do you think she included you --

WAHHAJ: I have no idea. I -- I have -- the -- did they put -- did they put the most activist Muslim leaders to, like-- you know, because, listen, man, we can’t-- you’re too -- too powerful, maybe. You know, too -- you know, too many people listening to you. So we got to cut that off.

ALI: How did -- how did the community respond?

WAHHAJ: [knock on door] Come in. Thanks [inaudible]. Thanks. Many of them -- that’s your water by the way.

ALI: Oh, thank you so much.

WAHHAJ: You thought I forgot. [laughter] Huh? Because my secretary was -- I don’t know where she was. She wasn’t around nowhere. I don’t -- I’m not talking to you. I don’t know where my secretary was.

ALI: Thank you so much. How -- how did the community respond?

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WAHHAJ: A couple of ways. I think most of them were outraged. They -- they know me. And -- but -- but, see -- and really outraged, because they realized you’re not saying anything. But they realized that’s not how it’s going to be picked up, perceived. You know, as -- as character assassination of the highest level. And -- and -- and so instead of putting the pressure on Mary Jo White -- so what is the basis of you putting all these names? You say they may be alleged co-conspirators. There must be some -- some rationale putting their -- what -- what’s the rationale? They didn’t ask that question. But they just take it. And as if -- as if gospel. Even if she said I was an unindicted co-conspirator, you’ve got to prove it in a court. You’ve got to prove it. There’s -- you -- you can’t just say that this -- you’d wound someone’s reputation.

But see, the thing about me, I ain’t afraid. You don’t -- you don’t scare me. And all of these years -- just recently, it was funny that -- that I know of. Muslim community in Long Island invited me to all their programs, interfaith, and then talk to the community. I agreed. The day of the program -- I had prepared. The day of the program, maybe two hours before the program, I get a phone call from that same masjid. “Imam Siraj, I don’t know what I’m going to do. Because the board said there’s some media calling them and asking why you invited Imam Siraj.” And I said, “And?” “Well, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do. Let me call you back.” He called me back. He hemmed and hawed. I said, “Brother, let me tell you. I’ll make it easy for you. I withdraw me from -- I withdraw my name.” Because that’s what they wanted. They wanted -- they don’t -- they -- they don’t -- they don’t want to be the ones who say, “We don’t want you to come.” It was clear, right? They got scared. The immigrant community got scared. The people who found out were outraged. Mus-- all the Muslim leaders. They called -- what the -- Imam Siraj? You kidding me? What did the media say? How -- how -- why you letting them -- so tell them why! He’s one of our respected leaders. That’s why we invited him. Why -- why shouldn’t I invite him? Why would -- and instead of defending me, they buckled.

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Interesting today, or last night, I get a text from the one who invited me. The same place. “Imam, I’d like to come to meet with you.” I was outraged, offended, that you would -- you -- you so scared. All they got to do, ask you a question. Why are you inviting Imam Siraj? It all stems from that. And I have to carry that the rest of my life. Paul Sperry, Infiltration. All these books, all of them mention -- and there’s no one who -- I thought my name was changed to unindicted co-conspirator. Because there’s no one who mentioned my name except they mention that. Which is a nothing. It’s nothing. But yet -- and I have to -- I have to --

ALI: During that time, there was a -- in ’93 there was also an attempted -- what seemed to have been discovered is an attempted plot to -- to -- to target New York City landmarks. Some of the members of that plot allegedly had been either members of Masjid At-Taqwa, had come and prayed here. Do you -- do you --

WAHHAJ: Is that -- you sure?

ALI: Like, Rodney Hampton-El and --

WAHHAJ: That was --

ALI: No?

WAHHAJ: I thought that was for fighting in -- I thought it was fighting -- I could be wrong.

ALI: I mean, I -- so there are a couple things. There was that. Then there -- you testified as an expert --

WAHHAJ: Yeah, yeah.

ALI: -- in the Kenya bombings.

WAHHAJ: Yes, I did. I was -- I was --

ALI: Right, and that was in 2001, right.

WAHHAJ: Yeah.

ALI: So --

WAHHAJ: On behalf of the court, by the way. [laughter] The court is saying, “You’re an expert on -- about Islam.”

ALI: Right.

WAHHAJ: So tell me what you -- is this correct? No, that’s incorrect. We don’t do that. No.
ALI: Okay, so tell me -- tell me about that then. Let’s -- let’s go to that. In 2001. You were a witness for Islam.

WAHHAJ: Yes.

ALI: In the case against people who were involved in the bombing of the embassy -- is it the embassy in Kenya?

WAHHAJ: I think so.

ALI: Yes.

WAHHAJ: I think so, yeah.

ALI: Okay. So tell me how did you get involved in that, and what was that about?

WAHHAJ: I think I was recommended by -- if I’m not mistaken -- two prominent African-American lawyers who deal with federal cases. Gee. You'd think I'd remember their names, right? I'll -- I'll try to think of their names. Sheesh. And -- and so -- so they did. I agreed. You know, I remember it was -- it was a very interesting testimony. I mean, the people were laughing. Because I was like -- you know, I -- I -- you know, I -- I -- I gave perspective to it. I made it -- made it light. I said, “No, we don’t -- we don’t do that. No, that’s not -- that’s not acceptable.” And then the -- the -- the -- the lawyer tried to give me some scenario. “What if, you know, nobody -- nobody’s left and you got to do the” -- I said, “That -- that sounds just like a movie I saw a couple years ago. And it was like, come on, man. Don’t -- that -- come on, man. You -- that’s what -- that’s what you -- that’s what you’re going to do?”

ALI: So what was the message of your testimony? Do you remember?

WAHHAJ: Yeah, that Muslims don’t have a right to attack innocent people. That was the primary message -- message. That it’s not -- it’s unacceptable. It’s un-Islamic. Cannot be justified. No. And then they asked the question, “But don’t they have to obey the leader?” And I said, “Not if the leader is wrong.” And I think I may have given the example where the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, when the -- he had put an -- put someone in charge of an expedition and said to obey him. And they said okay. And so this person, I believe from the Ansar, he said -- he -- he said to the -- he got angry at them. He said, “The Prophet said obey me?” They said, “Yes.” He said, “I order
you to get firewood.” And they got the firewood. “I order you to light it.” They lit it.
Then he said, “You go -- go in it. Jump in it.” And -- and they waited until the -- you
know, the anger dissipated. Word got back to the Prophet. And he said, “Had you gone
in that fire, you wouldn’t have come out,” like I explained to you before. “You wouldn’t
have come out.”

So you’re not -- you’re not soldiers. You’re slaves of Allah. The same -- the same kind of
thing I told you before. So it was -- it was clear, no, that -- you -- you -- you keep your
mind. You ain’t no -- no, that’s wrong. Not -- I’m not doing that. And I think people
today, man -- I’m, like, saddened when I read crazy things that Muslims do. You get in
the truck, and you run over innocent people, and you think that’s okay? From what?
Where? How could you? So.

ALI: So just a few months later, that same year, 2001, September 11th happened. Can you tell
me what your -- what that day was like for you? Just -- how did you find out? What were
you doing?

WAHHAJ: We heard something -- I’m in my office. This -- [microphone] is rubbing -- okay.
I’m -- I’m in my office. And we hear something about a little plane crashing into the
World Trade Center. This is how it was coming across. And we -- oh, you know, no big
ing, no big thing. And then it becomes, like, the United States is under attack. And
wasn’t no little plane. It was the big planes. So we’re hearing about it. Then we’re
hearing it’s Muslims. I said confidently, “Muslims don’t do that.” And I’ll be honest with
you, I’m ashamed to say it. Especially immigrants don’t have that kind of -- they don’t --
don’t have that sophistication to do something like that. And I told people, “No, I
don’t believe Muslims did it.” That was my initial response. And of course everybody
had their own ideas about who did it, inside job.

One thing about me, I’m not going to accuse anyone unless I have the facts. I can say,
emotionally, I don’t feel like a Muslim did it. Nah, I -- I don’t -- I don’t see a Muslim
doing that. I know Muslims can do bad things. But I didn’t think they did that. But then
it became almost as the -- I mean, if Muslims did it, I couldn't have think -- I couldn't have thought of a better plot to destroy Islam than do something like that. So that -- that image was played millions of times over, and over, and over again. That's in the minds of all the people around the world. You see what those Muslims did? And I said, "Somebody -- somebody's playing some kind of game." That's been my -- that's been my position. Even today.

ALI: What was your -- what were your instructions to the members of your community?

WAHHAJ: Be vigilant. Because we knew now there's going to be some pushback. There's going to be some people that's going to want to maybe attack Muslims. And -- and there were, around the country. Because you can't -- see, if you believe that, now you think, well, these Muslims are a threat. We got to -- we got to do something. So -- so they -- so I told them, be careful. The sisters, you know -- don't go by themselves. And, you know, that -- those kind of things. Kind of security thing.

ALI: And -- and how did the community here, the non-Muslim community, your neighbors, the people in this community, respond to you after 9/11? Did you notice a change?

WAHHAJ: Me-- media, radio stations -- you mean how did they hear about --

ALI: Oh no. How did they respond to you? How -- was there a change? Did you notice a change --

WAHHAJ: Yeah.

ALI: -- in how people responded to the community?

WAHHAJ: I think so in general. It could have been part of our paranoia. But it seems like they ain't smiling like they used to smile. They looking what seemed to be suspiciously at the Muslims. I've seen that kind of look before. And I can't -- I can't prove it. But just kind of -- and again, maybe -- it could have been our own paranoia. But I -- I just don't think things were -- were the same after that.

ALI: In line with that, in 2011 the Associated Press ran a series of articles that reported on NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities. When -- tell me when you learned about this and what your response was or what your reaction was?
WAHHAJ: I -- I -- I think before I read it in the papers, I think we got a call maybe from some of the Muslim activists that told us about it. We had meetings. We met -- met with some of Muslim lawyers. And to be honest with you, just something that we suspected. We’re like, you’re surprised that they’re surveilling us? You know, I read a book, and you may have read it. Clayborne Carson, FBI Files, is it? And all those documents of the FBI’s and the -- you know, and the surveillances on Malcolm and -- and King, the FBI and King, stuff like that. Why wouldn’t they? If they suspect that we are some -- some -- a threat to this -- to this country. So I wasn’t surprised.

ALI: And --

WAHHAJ: I wasn’t like -- like -- like Mus-- oh, what did they do to us? I said yeah, and?

ALI: Did you have any -- besides history, [laughter] did you have any reason to believe that this mosque was under surveillance?

WAHHAJ: Nothing concrete, no. No. I just think that -- see, people are people. My mother used to always say, “People are people.” So you got some people in law enforcement just prejudiced against Black people. Some against immigrants, some against Muslims. So I assumed that we -- you know, we -- we called it in those days institutionalized racism. So I’m just assuming that in -- in some offices, you know, in these -- these law enforcement offices, there’s some people that think that Muslims are a threat. I was shocked to learn -- I would do some research. I was shocked to learn that experts believe -- and these are -- this is not my opinion or the opinion of Muslims. But experts believe that 85 percent of the cases adjudicated in the courts of -- courts of -- in a the courts of law are won and lost in the very jury selection process. Ain’t nothing to do with facts, anything like that. The jury selection. We get the right pool of people, we’re going to find that they’re -- right? So if it’s judges, law enforcement, said, “Listen, these Muslims really are dangerous.” “Yeah.” “They need to -- you know we need to -- we need to check them out.” “Okay.” So.

ALI: One of the cases that you -- that this masjid was a part of was the Raza case. The Raza vs. City of New York. Can you tell me about your involvement with that case?

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WAHHAJ: Yeah. We -- we were represented by some very prominent lawyers. What’s the name of that group? I just can't think right now, the name of this -- the -- a number of prominent lawyers, right. They represented us. And they talked about --

ALI: The ACLU?

WAHHAJ: Hmm?

ALI: ACLU?

WAHHAJ: ACLU.

ALI: Yeah.

WAHHAJ: And others, right.

ALI: Yeah, CUNY CLEAR.

WAHHAJ: CLEAR and all --

ALI: Yeah.

WAHHAJ: Yeah, all those folks, right.

ALI: Yeah.

WAHHAJ: And so they said, “Listen, this is -- this is what they’ve been doing. Associated Press is releasing -- or has, you know, revealed these things. And, you know, this is what they’re doing. And we're going to -- we're going to sue.” So we did. We had meetings. We have discussions. All the plaintiffs, you know, agreeing together what we’re going to do. And at some point, the police said, “We’re going to make a settlement.” So they made a proposed settlement. We went back and forth, and back and forth until we finally agreed to -- to the settlement. And one of the aspects of the -- and there’s other people can tell you more -- more informed. The lawyers and whatnot. I think it’s important to talk to them to get clarity. One of the things that -- they wouldn’t admit to doing any wrongdoing. But there will be oversight. Can't do it again, blah, blah, blah. And those -- those -- those kinds of things.

ALI: Why -- why was it important for you to be a plaintiff in this? For you to participate in this?

WAHHAJ: I’m just a fighter, man. I’m just a fighter. I’m -- you know, we fight back. You know, the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, was asked, he said, “What happens
if somebody fights you and trying to take your property?" He said, “Don’t give it to
them.” He said, “What if they fight you?” He said, “Fight them back.” He said, “Well,
what if they kill you?” He said, “You’re a shaheed, you’re a martyr.” “What if you kill
them?” “Then they’re in the hellfire.” So we are people who -- who -- who fight back. We
ain’t scared. Oh, man, you know, if we do that, they’re going to retaliate against us. I
keep telling you, man. We don’t eat no rabbit meat. You know what rabbit meat is,
man? Rabbit meat is, what -- what cows eat. They scared. You can smell them,
they’re so scared. But we just -- you know, we -- we fight back, man. What you’re doing
is wrong. So since Masjid At-Taqwa is one of the ones, then we would stand up. Some
people didn’t want to fight back like that. Afraid of retaliation and all those other kinds
of things. So we fought back, because that’s what we do.

ALI: One of the, I guess, high points in the last few years in terms of the city’s relationship to
Muslims was in 2015 when the Department of Education added the Eid holidays to the
calendar. Tell me what that mean-- meant to --

WAHHAJ: Big, huge -- you have no idea. Whenever we mention anywhere in the country
that during the two Eid holidays all the public schools are closed, massive celebration.
Because you know what that means, right? It’s one thing for a Muslim to say, “You
know, the school’s closed today because the Eid holiday.” That’s one thing. But when a
Jewish or a Christian child comes home, and their parents say, “What you doing
home?” “It’s the Muslim holiday.” “What holiday?” “It’s the --” so they’re going to learn
more and more about Islam. Again, it makes the religion legitimate. Sure it’s legi--
legitimate. It’s the religion of Allah. But when the people begin to see and understand --
same thing with me opening a session of Congress. It makes the Muslim legitimate in
the eyes of a lot of people. So the Muslims, they’re okay. Yeah, they had one of them
open up a session of Congress. And by the way, after that and Imam Warith Deen
Mohammed, all the state legislators all over the city councils had Muslims open it up.
That was a signal that the United States government was sending to the rest of the
country. Listen, man, you need to bring them in. Because, you know, they’re -- they’re
relevant.

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Wahhaj, Siraj, Oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, February 19, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories,
2018.006.06; Brooklyn Historical Society.
According to the study Columbia -- Columbia -- University, Columbia, they said 12 percent of the population of the public school system are -- in New York City are Muslims. Twelve percent. That’s a lot of folks. That’s a lot of folks. So we deserve it.

Now, I’m telling you, all over the country now Muslims are lining up to do the same thing in their cities. And they look to New York. They say, “See, New York did it.” And all over the world, I’m telling you -- I was in Scotland last week. And I -- I was telling them. And they’re like, “Wow. Really?” Yeah. We need to do things like that.

ALI: So I think that --
WAHHAJ: Yes.
ALI: That’s a good place to --
WAHHAJ: Absolutely.
ALI: -- to stop.
WAHHAJ: Yeah, man.
ALI: Is there anything else that you want to add that we didn’t get to?
WAHHAJ: No, sir.
ALI: All right.
WAHHAJ: No, sir.
ALI: [laughter] All right, well, thank you again very much.
WAHHAJ: Thank--