

# New York City: Right-wing Zionist witch-hunt ousts principal of new Arabic school

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A reactionary campaign based on anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry in New York City has forced the resignation of the Muslim-American principal of a newly created charter school that offered education in Arabic language and culture.

Debbie Almontaser, the principal of Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA), scheduled to open in September in New York City, was hounded out of her job by means of a media furor whipped up by right-wing and Zionist groups. The immediate pretext for her ouster was her failure to immediately condemn another Arab-American group, with no connection to the school, for producing a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Intifada NYC." The word Intifada is associated with the Palestinian campaign of popular resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Almontaser's resignation has done nothing to dampen the campaign to demonize the school, with the aim of forcing its shut down even before its doors have even opened. Set up in partnership with the nonprofit New Visions for Public Schools, funded by Bill Gates, the school is part of the "restructuring" to new, smaller schools promoted by the city's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. The stated aim of the school is to promote "understanding of different cultural perspectives" and teach Arabic, modeled on some 60 existing dual-language city schools that include instruction in Spanish, Chinese, Russian and other languages.

In response to the announced plans for the school, a campaign against it was initiated last March, in which it was portrayed as a potential terrorist threat and the conception that the Arabic language and Arabic culture are fit subjects for study was cast as suspect. The right-wing Zionist ideologue Daniel Pipes set the tone for this attack, writing that, while the United States needs Arabic speakers for the so-called war on terror, "learning Arabic in itself promotes an Islamic outlook."

Pipes, a right-wing columnist for the *New York Post* and *New York Sun*, is director of the neo-conservative Middle East Forum, which promotes the use of American militarism to serve the interests of Washington and Israel. Notorious for his hostility to Muslims in general as well as his unconditional support for Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, Pipes also runs Campus Watch, a McCarthyite-style web site that targets university professors critical of Israel.

Also feeding the attacks on the school were articles written by Beila Rabinowitz and William Mayer on the rabidly anti-Muslim web sites PipeLineNews.com and Militant Islamic Monitor. They referred to the KGIA as a "jihad school."

According to Pipes, writing in the August 15 edition of the *New York Sun*, "By June, a concerned group of New York City residents

joined with specialists [specialists in smear campaigns and witch-hunts, presumably-SL]—among them my colleague, R. John Matthies—to create the Stop the Madrassa Coalition." Madrassa is Arabic for school, but is used here in a politically loaded way to imply that the school would be an Islamic religious institution.

Listed on the "coalition's" advisory board are figures such as Frank Gaffney, the former Reagan administration Pentagon official and long-time neoconservative, who is today one of the most prominent advocates of a preventive war against Iran. Also on the board are Pipes and Sarah Stern, president of the "Endowment for Middle East Truth," a Likudite propaganda group, whose own board, not coincidentally, features both Pipes and Gaffney.

The Thomas More Law Center, a national "Christian public interest law firm," known for its harassment suits against Planned Parenthood and its intervention in the Terry Schiavo case, announced it will represent continuing opposition to the school.

Almontaser, the targeted principal, was known in New York for working with Jewish organizations in an attempt to promote dialogue in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. She trained with the anti-bias program of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to become a facilitator for diversity training in the public schools.

In August, upon the urging of the Department of Education, which had previously advised against media contacts because of the campaign against the school, Almontaser agreed to do an interview with the *New York Post*. She answered a series of questions submitted in advance by *Post* reporter Chuck Bennett that related directly to the school. At the end of the interview, Bennett suddenly asked the principal, what was the meaning of "Intifada"? Almontaser, reading a definition of the root word from a dictionary, replied that in Arabic the terms basically meant, "shaking off."

Revealing his real intention of ambushing Almontaser, Bennett told the principal that a group with whom she shared an office, Arab Women Active in the Arts and Media (AWAAM), had produced a T-shirt bearing the slogan "Intifada NYC." Almontaser replied, "I understand it is developing a negative connotation due to the uprising in the Palestinian-Israeli areas. I don't believe the intention is to have any of that kind of [violence] in New York City. I think it's pretty much an opportunity for girls to express that they are part of New York City society . . . and shaking off oppression."

The *Post*, owned by billionaire Rupert Murdoch who recently bought control of the *Wall Street Journal*, seized upon this brief encounter to launch a series of lurid articles aimed at vilifying Almontaser, whom they labeled as the "Intifada-Principal" and "revolting." One article stated, "...the hijab (head scarf)-wearing principal of a taxpayer-funded school founded especially for Arab

students has issued a fatwa against the kids of New York.” While the *Post* painted the school as a scam to get public funds to set up an Islamic school, only six of the 44 students who had registered at the time were Arabic-speaking, and 75 percent were said to call themselves “black.”

Almontaser, who emigrated from Yemen at the age of 3, is on the board of Saba, the Association of Yemeni Americans, and AWAAM, which does not have its own office, runs one its youth programs from Saba’s offices. This was the extent of her connection to the supposedly infamous T-shirt.

AWAAM’s founding director, Mona Eldahry protested that the use of the word “Intifada,” meant merely as a call for community empowerment, in the context of the group’s training of young women in media production and community organizing, was being called terrorism.

Trying to establish alleged guilt by association, the *Post* labeled AWAAM as an “extreme” Muslim group, based on the fact that some of AWAAM’s founders are also active in a Palestinian group, al-Awda, which supports the Palestinians’ right of return. The *Post* then quoted the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) as claiming that this other organization was an active supporter of Hezbollah and Hamas.

The ADL had in fact defended Almontaser for months from opponents of the school. Her association with the agency, as well as her work with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater New York, had provoked criticism within the Arab community.

With the *Post* slander campaign, the right-wing Zionist effort to victimize Almontaser and scuttle the school picked up support from leading New York City Democrats. City Council member Peter Vallone Jr., for example, piped up with, “This shirt should read, I promote terror.”

In an attempt to stop these attacks, Almontaser issued a public apology, saying that she was guilty of “minimizing the word’s historical associations” and that this “implied that I condone violence and threats of violence. That view is anathema to me and the very opposite of my life’s work.”

At this point, United Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, who is a member of the Democratic National Committee, weighed in. Rather than defending Almontaser, a veteran teacher and long-time member of her own union, Weingarten joined the witch-hunt. She fired off a letter to the *Post* declaring that she agreed “wholeheartedly” with its editorial demonizing the principal.

“Both parents and teachers have every right to be concerned about children attending a school run by someone who doesn’t instinctively denounce campaigns or ideas tied to violence,” the union leader added, referring to the use of the word “Intifada” as “war-mongering.”

The labor bureaucrat managed to sum up everything reactionary and backward in this smear campaign, while stabbing in the back a person she was supposedly paid to represent.

Within four days, Almontaser felt compelled to resign, perhaps hoping to save the school that she had worked hard to develop from being closed altogether. The city announced the appointment of a new interim principal, Danielle Salzberg. While she had also worked on the school’s curriculum, Salzberg, ironically, cannot speak Arabic and is an orthodox Jew. According to a gloating article published in the *New York Post*, which cited interviews with friends and relatives, she is also “an ardent Zionist who considered moving to Israel.”

Zein Rimawi, an organizer with the Arab Muslim American Federation, said of Salzberg’s appointment, “It’s like somebody spit

in our face as Arabs. They didn’t hire an Arab principal [for] a Chinese school. It doesn’t make any sense.”

New York Civil Liberties Union Director Donna Lieberman asserted that the school was singled out for scrutiny even though, “there is no evidence of discrimination in the admission of students. There is no evidence that the school will promote religion.”

Oblivious to Almontaser’s democratic rights and the consequences for academic freedom, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein insisted that they still supported the school but it was better for Almontaser to resign. “She’s certainly not a terrorist,” Bloomberg allowed, but added that it was “nice of her” to step down.

Speaking to a rally of more than a hundred supporters in front of the Department of Education headquarters, the following week, Rabbi Michael Feinberg, who supports the school, described the campaign against it as “the lowest of McCarthyite tactics.”

This is no exaggeration. The Intifada, which began at the end of 1987, was a popular uprising by the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza, involving mass demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience. It was provoked by conditions of grinding oppression and the brutal destruction of the basic rights of the Palestinians under Israeli military occupation. To transform any positive reference to these events as tantamount to advocacy of terrorism—and the failure to condemn such a reference as an offense punishable by the loss of employment—represents a sinister attempt to suppress any political challenge to the policies pursued by Israel and Washington in the Middle East.

The stark consequences of such attacks were summed up by one 16-year-old AWAAM youth video producer, who responded on the organization’s web site [<http://awaam.org/>]: “The fact that a T-shirt is being portrayed as a terrorist uprising makes me scared about what else could be used against us.”



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