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BATTLE IN BROOKLYN | A PRINCIPAL'S RISE AND FALL

# Critics Cost Muslim Educator Her Dream School



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

Debbie Almontaser, who built ties with Christians and Jews, announced in October that she would sue to be reinstated as principal.

By **ANDREA ELLIOTT**  
 Published: April 28, 2008

[Debbie Almontaser](#) dreamed of starting a public school like no other in New York City. Children of Arab descent would join students of other ethnicities, learning Arabic together. By graduation, they would be fluent in the language and groomed for the country's elite colleges. They would be ready, in Ms. Almontaser's words, to become "ambassadors of peace and hope."

Things have not gone according to plan. Only one-fifth of the 60 students at the Khalil Gibran International Academy are Arab-American. Since the school opened in Brooklyn last fall, children have been suspended for carrying weapons, repeatedly gotten into fights and taunted an Arabic teacher by calling her a "terrorist," staff members and students said in interviews.

The academy's troubles reach well beyond its cramped corridors in Boerum Hill. The school's creation provoked a controversy so incendiary that Ms. Almontaser stepped down as the founding principal just weeks before classes began last September. Ms. Almontaser, a teacher by training and an activist who had carefully built ties with Christians and Jews, said she was forced to resign by the mayor's office following a campaign that pitted her against a chorus of critics who claimed she had a militant Islamic agenda.

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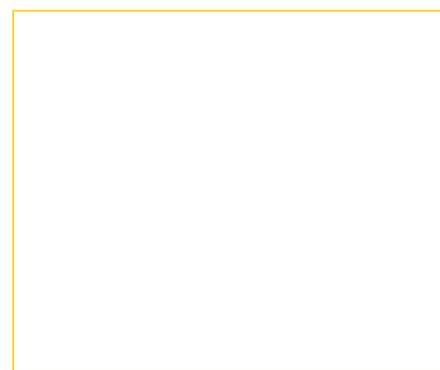


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Debbie Almontaser, labeled a "jihadist" by some opponents, amid supporters at a church in Brooklyn in January.

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Annie Tritt for The New York Times

**FIGHTING BACK** Debbie Almontaser, who built ties with Christians and Jews, announced in October that she would sue to be reinstated as principal.

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Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

**PROTEST** Opponents of the school outside City Hall in January: Stuart Kaufman, center, Irene Alter and, in the rear, Jeffrey Wiesenfeld.

What do you think about the resignation of Debbie Almontaser as the principal of the Khalil Gibran International Academy?  
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radical Islam."

Mr. Pipes refers to this new enemy as the "lawful Islamists."

They are carrying out a "soft jihad," said Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, a trustee of the [City University of New York](#) and a vocal opponent of the Khalil Gibran school.

Muslim leaders, academics and others see the drive against the school as the latest in a series of discriminatory attacks intended to distort the truth and play on Americans' fear of terrorism. They say the campaign is also part of a wider effort to silence critics of Washington's policy on Israel and the Middle East.

In newspaper articles and Internet postings, on television and talk radio, Ms. Almontaser was branded a "radical," a "jihadist" and a "9/11 denier." She stood accused of harboring unpatriotic leanings and of secretly planning to proselytize her students. Despite Ms. Almontaser's longstanding reputation as a Muslim moderate, her critics quickly succeeded in recasting her image.

The conflict tapped into a well of post-9/11 anxieties. But Ms. Almontaser's downfall was not merely the result of a spontaneous outcry by concerned parents and neighborhood activists. It was also the work of a growing and organized movement to stop Muslim citizens who are seeking an expanded role in American public life. The fight against the school, participants in the effort say, was only an early skirmish in a broader, national struggle.

"It's a battle that's really just begun," said Daniel Pipes, who directs a conservative research group, the Middle East Forum, and helped lead the charge against Ms. Almontaser and the school.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, critics of radical Islam focused largely on terrorism, scrutinizing Muslim-American charities or asserting links between Muslim organizations and violent groups like [Hamas](#). But as the authorities have stepped up the war on terror, those critics have shifted their gaze to a new frontier, what they describe as law-abiding Muslim-Americans who are imposing their religious values in the public domain.

Mr. Pipes and others reel off a list of examples: Muslim cabdrivers in Minneapolis who have refused to take passengers carrying liquor; municipal pools and a gym at [Harvard](#) that have adopted female-only hours to accommodate Muslim women; candidates for office who are suspected of supporting political Islam; and banks that are offering financial products compliant with sharia, the Islamic code of law.

The danger, Mr. Pipes says, is that the United States stands to become another England or France, a place where Muslims are balkanized and ultimately threaten to impose sharia.

"It is hard to see how violence, how terrorism will lead to the implementation of sharia," Mr. Pipes said. "It is much easier to see how, working through the system — the school system, the media, the religious organizations, the government, businesses and the like — you can promote

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“This is a political, ideological agenda,” said John Esposito, a professor of international affairs and Islamic studies at [Georgetown University](#) who has been a focus of Mr. Pipes’s scrutiny. “It’s an agenda to paint Islam, not just extremists, as a major problem.”

That portrait, Muslim and Arab advocates contend, is rife with a bias that would never be tolerated were it directed at other ethnic or religious groups. And if Ms. Almontaser’s story is any indication, they say, the message of her critics wields great power.

Ms. Almontaser watched city officials and some of her closest Jewish allies distance themselves from her as the controversy reached its peak. She was ultimately felled by an article in The New York Post that said she had “downplayed the significance” of T-shirts bearing the slogan “Intifada NYC.”

Last month, federal judges issued a ruling — related to a lawsuit brought by Ms. Almontaser to regain her job — stating that her words were “inaccurately reported by The Post and then misconstrued by the press.”

While city officials and the Education Department declined to comment about Ms. Almontaser because of the lawsuit, a lawyer for the city said she had not been forced to resign.

In her first interview since stepping down, Ms. Almontaser said that education officials had pressured her to speak to The Post and had monitored the conversation. After the article was published, she said, the department issued a written apology in her name, without her approval.

“I kept saying I wanted to set the record straight,” said Ms. Almontaser, 40. “And they kept telling me, ‘You can’t undo what was done.’” **A Call to Lead**

In April 2005, Debbie Almontaser got a telephone call that would change her life. The man on the line, Adam Rubin, worked for a nonprofit organization, New Visions for Public Schools. He was exploring whether to help the city create a public school that would teach Arabic. The group already had seed money — a \$400,000 grant from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) — but needed the right person to help lead the venture.

Everywhere Mr. Rubin went — from the mayor’s office to a falafel stand in Brooklyn — people mentioned Ms. Almontaser. She was a teacher, a native Arabic speaker and arguably the city’s most visible Arab-American woman.

After 9/11, Education Department officials had enlisted Ms. Almontaser to hold workshops on cultural sensitivity for schoolchildren. She spread the message that Islam was a peaceful religion. She told of how her own son had served as a National Guardsman in the clearing effort at ground zero. She was soon attending interfaith seminars, befriending rabbis and priests. Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) honored her publicly. She became a ready commentator for the media, prompting some Muslims to joke that she was the city’s “talking hijabi.”

In fact, it had taken a long time for Ms. Almontaser to embrace the hijab, or head scarf. Born in Yemen, she was 3 when she moved with her family to Buffalo. Her parents encouraged her to blend in. She called herself Debbie rather than Dhabah, her given name. She began wearing a veil in her 20s, as a Brooklyn mother whose life revolved around PTA meetings and Boy Scout trips. She took to riding on the back of her husband’s motorcycle, her head scarf tucked beneath a black helmet. She got used to the stares and learned to be unapologetic.

In the months following the Sept. 11 attacks, she offered other Muslim women the lessons she had learned: “The only way to claim this as your country is to continue on with your life here,” she recalled telling them.

For years, Ms. Almontaser had hoped to become a principal. But soon after joining hands with New Visions, she faced her first challenge. To administer the Gates grant, the school needed a community partner. Two groups wanted the job: a secular Arab-American social

services agency and a Muslim-led organization that runs Al-Noor School, a private Islamic establishment in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

Ms. Almontaser said she tried to remain neutral as discord erupted between the two groups. Quietly, though, she worried that if an organization linked to a private Islamic school took the lead, the city would never approve the project, despite the group's pledge to keep religion out of the curriculum.

Ultimately, a steering committee led by Ms. Almontaser voted in favor of the social services agency. Leaders of the Muslim group walked away feeling disrespected and distrustful of her, several of the group's members said in interviews. It was a rupture that would come back to haunt Ms. Almontaser.

As preparations moved forward, a design team assembled by Ms. Almontaser named the school after the Lebanese Christian poet and pacifist Khalil Gibran. A [Palestinian](#) immigrant had suggested the name, hoping it would deflect any concerns that the school carried a Muslim orientation.

In February 2007, the Department of Education announced that the school had been approved. It would eventually encompass grades 6 through 12, teach half of its classes in Arabic and be among 67 schools in the city that offer programs in both English and another language, like Russian, Spanish and Chinese. Ms. Almontaser designed a recruitment brochure to attract the school's first class of sixth graders.

The leaflet cited the words of Mr. Gibran: "In understanding, all walls shall fall down."

### **Opposition Forms**

Irene Alter, a peppy, retired Queens schoolteacher, was sitting at her computer one morning that February when she read an article in The New York Times about the Khalil Gibran school, she said. A series of questions flooded her head.

Which courses would be taught in Arabic? How would Israel be treated in the study of Middle Eastern history? Then in April, she read an op-ed article by Mr. Pipes in The New York Sun.

Conceptually, such a school could be "marvelous," Mr. Pipes wrote, but in practice, it was certain to be problematic. "Arabic-language instruction is inevitably laden with Pan-Arabist and Islamist baggage," he wrote, referring to the school as a madrasa, which means school in Arabic but, in the West, carries the implication of Islamic teaching.

Given how little Mr. Pipes knew about the school at the time, the word was "a bit of a stretch," he said in a recent interview. He defended its use as a way to "get attention" for the cause. It got the attention of Ms. Alter, 60, who contacted Mr. Pipes and, with his encouragement, helped form a grass-roots organization in response to the school project. Mr. Pipes joined the advisory board of the group, which called itself the Stop the Madrasa Coalition.

Mr. Pipes, 58, has emerged as a divisive figure in the post-9/11 era. An author of 12 books who has a doctorate in history from Harvard, he has made a career out of studying and critiquing Islam. His research group, which he established in downtown Philadelphia in the early 1990s, "seeks to define and promote American interests in the Middle East," according to its Web site.

Among his supporters, Mr. Pipes enjoys a heroic status; among his detractors, he is reviled. Those sharply divergent views reflect the passions that infuse Middle Eastern politics, arguably nowhere in the United States more than in New York City.

Mr. Pipes is perhaps best known for Campus Watch, a national initiative he created to scrutinize Middle Eastern programs at colleges and universities. The drive has accused professors of, among other things, being soft on militant Islam and sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. It has stirred widespread controversy and, in some cases, may have

undermined professors' bids for tenure.

Mr. Pipes was joined in the monitoring effort by other self-declared watchdogs of militant Islam. Their Web sites are often linked to one another and their messages interwoven. One critic, David Horowitz, founded Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week, a campaign aimed at college campuses. He noted in an interview that monitors of radical Islam have increasingly trained their sights on nonviolent Muslim-Americans.

"They don't throw bombs, but they create political cover for ideological support of this jihadi movement," he said.

Mr. Pipes places Muslims in three categories, he said: those who are violent, those who are moderate and those in the middle. It is this middle group, he argued, that now poses the greatest threat to American values.

"Are these people who are not using violence but who are not fully enthusiastic about this country and its mores, its culture — are they on our side or are they on the other side?" he asked.

Ms. Almontaser never considered herself unenthusiastic about America, she said. But as the conflict over the Khalil Gibran school intensified, she came to be seen by many through Mr. Pipes's lens. In his article in *The Sun*, he referred to Ms. Almontaser by her birth name, Dhabah, and called her views "extremist." He cited an article in which she was quoted as saying about 9/11, "I don't recognize the people who committed the attacks as either Arabs or Muslims." (As *The Jewish Week* later reported, Mr. Pipes left out the second half of the quote: "Those people who did it have stolen my identity as an Arab and have stolen my religion.")

The Stop the Madrassa Coalition focused primarily on Ms. Almontaser as a strategy, said Mr. Pipes, because the group could get little information about the school itself. The coalition quickly publicized several discoveries. Ms. Almontaser had accepted an award from the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a national Muslim organization that critics claim has ties to terrorist groups (an assertion the group adamantly denies). In news articles, Ms. Almontaser had been critical of American foreign policy and police tactics in fighting terrorism. She also gave \$2,000 to Representative [Cynthia A. McKinney](#) of Georgia, whom Mr. Pipes and others have characterized as an Islamist sympathizer. (Ms. McKinney, who is no longer in office and did not respond to requests for an interview, has had a strong following among Arab-Americans in part because of her criticism of the [Patriot Act](#).)

Critics of the Madrassa Coalition say its tactics are typical of campaigns singling out Muslims: They lean heavily on guilt by association. The nuances of the claims against Ms. Almontaser were lost as the controversy lit up the blogosphere, said Chip Berlet, a senior analyst at Political Research Associates, a liberal organization outside Boston that studies the political right. One Web site, [MilitantIslamMonitor.org](#), displayed photographs of Ms. Almontaser wearing her hijab in different styles, suggesting that she had undergone a public relations makeover to "disguise" her "Islamist agenda." The criticism of Ms. Almontaser and the school spread to newspapers, eliciting negative editorials in *The Daily News* and *The New York Sun*.

Ms. Almontaser was stunned, she said: Her school would touch upon religion only in its global studies class, following the same curriculum as all New York public schools. She tried to keep her head down, she said, and set out to recruit students, half of whom she hoped would be Arab. But opposition to the school mounted after critics learned that its advisory council included three imams (along with rabbis and priests), that there would be an internship for students with a Muslim lawyers' association and that the proposal for the school suggested it might offer halal food. (The advisory council never met and has since been dismantled, and the school does not offer halal food, Education Department officials said.)

As the attacks continued, Joel Levy of the New York chapter of the [Anti-Defamation](#)

[League](#) published a letter defending Ms. Almontaser in *The Sun*. Mr. Levy made reference to the possibility that his organization would provide anti-bias training to Ms. Almontaser's staff.

The letter caused a stir among some Arab-Americans, who were bothered by Ms. Almontaser's ties to Jewish groups. In late June, *Aramica*, an Arabic and English newspaper based in Brooklyn, ran a cover story with the headline "Zionist Organization Supports Gibran School Principal," focusing on the link between Ms. Almontaser's school and the Anti-Defamation League.

In just five months, Ms. Almontaser's image had been transformed. She was rendered a radical Muslim by one group and a sellout by another.

### **T-Shirts, and a Resignation**

At first, some city officials rallied to Ms. Almontaser's side. Among them was David Cantor, the chief spokesman for the Department of Education, who wrote in an e-mail message to the editor of *The New York Sun*, Seth Lipsky: "I won't allow Dan Pipes a free pass to smear Debbie Almontaser as an Islamist proselytizer who denies Muslim involvement in 9/11. It is a false picture and an ugly effort."

But behind closed doors, department officials were nervous, Ms. Almontaser recalled. With her help, she said, they drafted a confidential memo of talking points to review with reporters: the school was "nonreligious," for example, and Ms. Almontaser was a "multicultural specialist and diversity consultant."

The Stop the Madrassa Coalition pressed its campaign. In July, one of its members, Pamela Hall, made a discovery that would elevate the controversy. At an Arab-American festival in Brooklyn, she spotted T-shirts on a table bearing the words "Intifada NYC." The organization distributing them, Arab Women Active in the Arts and Media, trains young women in community organizing and media production. The group sometimes uses the office of a Yemeni-American association in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Ms. Almontaser sits on the association's board.

Ms. Hall took a photograph, and a few weeks later, the coalition announced on its blog that Ms. Almontaser was linked to the T-shirts.

On Aug. 3, Ms. Almontaser received a call from Melody Meyer, a spokeswoman for the Education Department. "What does 'Intifada NYC' mean?" Ms. Almontaser recalled Ms. Meyer asking.

Ms. Almontaser was stumped, she said. She knew of the group. But she had never heard about the T-shirts, she said she told Ms. Meyer, adding that "intifada" meant "uprising" and was linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Most reporters lost interest in the T-shirts after Ms. Meyer explained that neither Ms. Almontaser nor the school was linked to them, but *The Post* persisted. Ms. Almontaser said Ms. Meyer and Mr. Cantor pressured her to respond to the newspaper in an interview.

"I said, 'Wait a minute,'" recalled Ms. Almontaser, who was critical of *The Post's* coverage of Arabs and Muslims. "I am not comfortable doing the interview."

Ms. Meyer promised to monitor the conversation, Ms. Almontaser said, and Mr. Cantor instructed her not to be "apologetic" about the T-shirts. While both Ms. Meyer and Mr. Cantor said they could not comment on the case, a city lawyer said that Ms. Almontaser was told to avoid discussing the T-shirts and intifada altogether, and was never pressured to speak to *The Post*.

During the *Post* interview, Ms. Almontaser said, she told the reporter, Chuck Bennett, that the Arab women's organization was not connected to her or the school, and that she would never be affiliated with any group that condoned violence. Then Mr. Bennett asked

her for the origins of the word intifada, she said.

“The educator in me responded,” Ms. Almontaser said. She explained, with Ms. Meyer listening in on the three-way phone call, that the root of the word means “shaking off.” Ms. Almontaser then offered what she described as a lengthy explanation about the evolution of the word and the “negative connotation” it had developed because of the Arab-Israeli struggle.

“The thought went across my mind to be extremely careful with my words — not to offend the Jewish community and not to offend the Arab-American community,” she said. “I was feeling pressure from all sides.”

Although Ms. Almontaser said she never spoke to the reporter about the T-shirts, she defended the girls in the organization because she believed that the reporter was set on “vilifying innocent teenagers.”

After the reporter hung up, Ms. Almontaser recalled, Ms. Meyer told her, “Good job.”

The next day, The Post ran the article under the headline “City Principal Is ‘Revolting’ — Tied to ‘Intifada NYC’ Shirts.” The article quoted Ms. Almontaser as saying that the girls in the organization were “shaking off oppression,” words that The Post, according to a ruling by federal appellate judges, attributed to Ms. Almontaser “incorrectly and misleadingly.”

Complaints about Ms. Almontaser began pouring into the Education Department, and Mr. Cantor informed her that an apology would be issued in her name. Ms. Almontaser objected, she said, and asked that the department clarify her comments to The Post, which she said were distorted, rather than apologize.

Mr. Cantor insisted on an apology, she said, and e-mailed her the proposed wording. The first sentence was not negotiable, she recalled him telling her. The apology began: “The use of the word intifada is completely inappropriate as a T-shirt slogan for teenagers. I regret suggesting otherwise.” Ms. Almontaser responded in an e-mail message that Mr. Cantor should change the latter sentence to “I regret my response was interpreted as suggesting otherwise.”

The press office issued the original apology. Pressure soon mounted for Ms. Almontaser to resign. [Randi Weingarten](#), the head of the teachers’ union, published a letter in The Post criticizing Ms. Almontaser for not denouncing “ideas tied to violence.” On Aug. 9, Deputy Mayor Dennis M. Walcott asked Ms. Almontaser to step down, she said. “The mayor wants your resignation by 8 a.m. tomorrow so he can announce it on his radio show,” Ms. Almontaser recalled Mr. Walcott saying.

She said he promised her that in exchange for her resignation, the school would still open, and she would remain employed. She resigned the next day, taking an administrative job at the Education Department. She kept her principal’s salary of \$120,000.

On his radio program, Mayor Bloomberg announced that Ms. Almontaser had “submitted her resignation,” which “was nice of her to do.”

“She’s certainly not a terrorist,” he said, adding that she was not “all that media savvy maybe.”

Three days later, Ms. Almontaser was replaced by an interim principal, Danielle Salzberg, who is Jewish and speaks no Arabic.

### **Chaos in a [New School](#)**

On Sept. 4, the Khalil Gibran International Academy opened its doors at 345 Dean Street as parents ushered their children past a throng of reporters, photographers and television crews.

Chaos soon erupted inside. Students cut classes and got into fights with little

consequence, said staff members, parents and students. At least 12 of the 60 students showed signs of behavioral problems or learning disabilities, said Leslie Kahn, a licensed social worker and counselor who was employed at the school until January. (Education Department officials, who denied repeated requests by The Times to visit the school, said there are currently six special-needs students there.)

“Something is flying through the air, every class, every day,” Sean R. Grogan, a science teacher at the school, said in an interview. “Kids bang on the partitions, yell and scream, curse and swear. It’s out of control.”

Physical altercations are frequent, Mr. Grogan and others said, with Arab students and teachers the target of ethnic slurs. “I just don’t feel safe,” said an Arab-American student, 11, who will not return to the school next year.

In the first days after Ms. Almontaser resigned, she felt numb, she said. Her support among Arab-Muslims remained uneven. Had she not alienated some who wanted more of a role in the school’s creation, “the whole community would have stood behind her,” said Wael Mousfar, president of the Arab Muslim American Federation. “A lot of our kids would be part of that school.”

Ms. Almontaser soon found herself flanked by a new group of supporters, including Jewish and Muslim activists, who began lobbying for her to be reinstated as the school’s principal. On Oct. 16, Ms. Almontaser announced that she was suing the Education Department and the mayor. She claimed that her First Amendment rights had been violated because she was forced to resign after she was quoted as saying something controversial.

She requested that the city be prevented from hiring a permanent principal until her case was resolved. A judge rejected the request, and Ms. Almontaser appealed. In March, a federal appeals court upheld the ruling, but the judges were sharply critical of the city’s handling of Ms. Almontaser’s case.

“This was a situation where she was subject to sanction not for anything she said, not for anything she did, but because a newspaper reporter twisted what she said and the result of it was negative press for the city and the Board of Ed,” Judge [Jon O. Newman](#) told a city lawyer at a hearing in February.

Ms. Almontaser’s case will proceed in the Federal District Court in Manhattan.

The Stop the Madrassa Coalition continues to protest the school. The group sued the Department of Education in October, requesting detailed information about the school’s creation, faculty and curriculum. While the department has handed over thousands of records, the coalition’s lawyer said the documents leave many questions unanswered, including which textbooks the school is using to teach Arabic. A department spokeswoman said that a list of textbooks selected for the school was sent to the lawyer last fall.

The coalition has also broadened the reach of its campaign. Some members have joined with the Center for Policy Research in American Education, a new organization that will research the influence of radical Islam on public schools around the country.

In recent weeks, conditions at the Khalil Gibran school have improved, said several students and staff members. Holly Anne Reichert, who was appointed as the permanent principal in January, said in an interview that she had reduced some of the disruptive behavior by minimizing class sizes. She added that the media attention had led to a “chaotic experience” for students. “Adults have created this, and children are the ones who have had to endure,” she said.

The school will move to a larger space in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, by next fall.

Ms. Almontaser still attends interfaith dinners and awards ceremonies. During the day, she works for the city’s Office of School and Youth Development. Part of her job entails

evaluating other schools.

In an odd twist of fate, she was sent to the Bronx last fall to review a small, innovative school that had opened the same month as Khalil Gibran. It also taught a foreign language: Spanish. The students seemed to be thriving. As Ms. Almontaser walked the hallways, she was shaken, she said.

“It wasn’t that I was envious that her dream materialized,” said Ms. Almontaser, referring to the principal. “It was seeing her sixth graders, her teachers, and seeing that she did it. And I didn’t get a chance.”

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