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The Khalil Gibran International Academy: Diasporic Confrontations with an Emerging Islamophobia

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Reactions to the establishment of the Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA), the first New York City public school to teach an Arabic dual curriculum with a focus on Arab history and culture, were intense. Over the summer of 2007, KGIA and its principal, Debbie Almontaser, became lightning rods in local and national Arab American and Jewish communities, drawing considerable media attention. The school was to be public, part of the public space funded by city resources, and as such it was a focus of general concern. Because dual-language and culturally specialized schools have succeeded across the nation, it is important to understand hostile responses to the KGIA, which was targeted for its associations with a language and an identity that, in the minds of many Americans, are stigmatized and highly suspect. Debbie Almontaser, an observant Muslim who wears the hijab, was all too easily associated with negative stereotypes of the “Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim Other” (Naber 2006: 236), and attacks against KGIA and her leadership can be seen as part of an emerging Islamophobia.

The conflict over KGIA assumed national significance because it unfolded in New York City. Home to one of the world’s largest, most influential Jewish communities, New York is an urban setting in which overt Arab identities, expressed publicly through pan-Arab nationalism and support for Palestinian statehood, are discouraged and persistently thwarted. As in other American cities, Arab-Jewish relations in New York are fundamentally shaped by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both communities locate themselves “here,” in the U.S., and “there,” in the Middle East, by supporting parties to a foreign conflict that

has become a central component of their diasporic identities. As Arabs and Jews renegotiate these identities in American society, they set new guidelines for determining their distinctly American selves, but these selves cannot be entirely divorced from images of a Jewish or Arab Other who is considered a potential threat. KGIA, accordingly, served as a litmus test for New York's Jewish community: whether a Jewish group or leader chose to support or criticize Almontaser and the school gave them a clearly defined place on the spectrum of Jewish organizations. This test was applied with similar results in the Arab American community; for example, collaborating with Jewish organizations made Debbie Almontaser the recipient of vocal criticism from within her own community. On all sides of the contest, people realized that the success of KGIA would be an important opportunity for Arab Americans in New York City to generate positive attention and public support. Understanding why the school attracted mostly negative attention instead will provide critical insight into how Arab and Muslim Americans are denied normative status in the U.S. as the borderless "war on terror" persists.

My Role and Research Methods

I became personally involved with the Khalil Gibran International Academy after reading about it in early 2007 during my junior year abroad in Cairo, Egypt. Since I am interested in both Arabic and education, this school presented an ideal opportunity. From June through August of 2007, I interned with Debbie Almontaser at KGIA, working on a number of initiatives, including the enrollment process. In October, I spoke on Almontaser's behalf at a rally on the steps of City Hall in the aftermath of the summer controversies.¹ My research is drawn from this period, and from interviews I conducted with community and staff members during the following fall and winter. Although I tried to be neutral and fair, I did view myself as a representative of the Jewish community. Funding for my summer came from a Hillel internship, sponsored by the largest American Jewish campus organization, and I worked primarily out of the Jewish Federation office in the external relations department. As KGIA represented a complicated set of issues, I was asked to represent KGIA and defend it to the mainstream Jewish public. In this role, I met with various Jewish leaders who work with the Arab American and Muslim American communities, and I was expected to provide them with a report about the school. While I did not see myself as a spy, I was certainly an insider asked to respond to the controversies and questions at hand. My delicate role allowed me to bal-

ance the components of my identity as needed and as benefited me—and the several parties I represented—in varying situations.

Case Study: The Khalil Gibran International Academy

In understanding, all walls shall fall down.
—Khalil Gibran

In February 2007, a number of local and national media outlets based in New York City announced the establishment of the Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA). The school was to be led by Debbie Almontaser, a Yemeni American Muslim educator who had worked to build ties with Christian and Jewish communities. The intent was to provide New York City's youth with "the opportunity to expand their horizons and be global citizens."² The school was awarded a grant from New Visions for Public Schools and invited to join a small group of community-based schools. KGIA partnered with the Arab American Family Support Center, a social service agency, and began to solicit support from Brooklyn's Arab American population. The New Visions proposal stressed the multicultural perspective of the school: "New York is a microcosm of the world. And, Brooklyn, as one of the most diverse boroughs in the nation and home to one of the oldest Arab communities in America, is the perfect site for KGIA."³ The namesake of the school, Khalil Gibran, was a renowned Lebanese Christian immigrant, poet, and author of *The Prophet*. Although a Christian Arab is more representative of New York's communal demographics, some leaders from the Muslim Arab community felt that naming the school after a Christian was a defense mechanism designed to avoid the Muslim connotations of an Arab school. Some community members argued that they should not have to defend themselves or name the school after Khalil Gibran. KGIA, a school led by a woman who publicly wears the hijab, should, they believed, represent a milestone for both the Arab American and Muslim American communities. Most community people, however, supported Gibran as a model Arab American and a positive, recognizable face for the school.

As the KGIA gained publicity in April 2007, controversy erupted in response to Almontaser and her efforts. Daniel Pipes, a Jewish neoconservative historian and analyst, began documenting and criticizing KGIA in the right-of-center newspaper the *New York Sun*. Pipes has made himself known, particularly throughout the Jewish community, for his involvement with the Middle East Forum and Campus Watch—both watchdog organizations dedicated to "fighting radical Islam" and "protecting Americans and their allies."⁴ In 2007, he

also founded Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week, an initiative that reached two hundred American college campuses. In his article “A Madrassa Grows in Brooklyn,” Pipes wrote that “Arabic language instruction is inevitably laden with pan-Arabist and Islamist baggage.”⁵ He claimed that Debbie Almontaser was a 9/11 denier, held anti-American views, and had called President Bush a “nightmare.” Pipes and his supporters founded the Stop the Madrassa Coalition, using the Arabic term *madrassa*, which is widely associated among English-speakers with the training of Muslim extremists, to further instill a sense of fear in the public. Almontaser considered this translation when naming the school and decided to use the word “academy” (*akademiyya*) rather than “school” (*madrasa*) for exactly this reason. Critics also identified Almontaser by her Arabic first name, Dhabah, “the better to render her alien . . . adding the phrase ‘a.k.a. Debbie,’ treating her chosen name as a sort of criminal alias.”⁶ The coalition website asked Joel Klein, chancellor of New York City’s schools, to “keep your promise . . . shut down the Khalil Gibran International Academy. Now.”⁷ Arab identity and American patriotism were painted as two poles in opposition to one another, an argument that proved convincing to the general public as opposition to the school increased.

On August 6, 2007, a local tabloid, the *New York Post*, accused Almontaser of condoning T-shirts that read “Intifada NYC.” The shirts had been produced two years earlier by members of Arab Women Active in Art and Media (AWAAM), a group that had once shared an office space with the Saba Association of American Yemenis, for which Almontaser is a board member.⁸ This loose connection led to a media storm. When asked about the meaning of the word *intifada*, Almontaser stated: “The word basically means ‘shaking off.’ That is the root word if you look it up in Arabic.” She said the T-shirts were “pretty much an opportunity for girls to express that they are part of New York City society . . . and shaking off oppression.” Following this interview, newspaper headlines included “Intifada Principal,” and “What’s Arabic for ‘Shut It Down.’” It was implied that Almontaser had taken this opportunity to condone, rather than condemn, the Palestinian Intifada, which is *the* contentious point in New York City. The clarifying comment she made during her interview was strategically left out: “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.”⁹ With this statement, which was later published in alternate news sources, the Arabic word *intifada* was separated from the Palestinian political activism captured by the Intifada.¹⁰

After several days, countless articles, and a number of threatening verbal assaults, Almontaser was forced to resign her position as founding principal

of KGIA. Randi Weingarten, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, wrote that “the word ‘intifada’ is something that ought to be denounced, not explained away.” She further claimed that Almontaser “was becoming a lightning rod. Instead of debunking the misapprehensions about the school, all she did was confirm them.”¹¹ As I read letters to the editor published in various local and national newspapers and blogs following the initial attacks on Almontaser, supportive statements were extremely rare. Almontaser was quickly replaced by an interim principal, Danielle Salzberg, a Jewish representative from New Visions who had worked with the school in a limited capacity. The media seized the opportunity to write about an allegedly Zionist principal taking over an Arab school. Headlines included “Jew-Turn” and “Hebrew ha-ha.” Conflict around KGIA’s intentions instantly translated into a Jewish-Arab controversy as an Arab public school seemed brazenly to trespass on Jewish space.¹² Ms. Salzberg was later replaced by Holly Reichert, another non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaker, who remains the school’s principal. Throughout the 2007–2008 school year, Almontaser’s case gained attention across the city as coalitions formed both in support of and in opposition to her efforts. Activists organized Communities in Support of KGIA (CSKGIA), whose goal was to reinstate Almontaser as KGIA’s principal. Many of its leaders, including Almontaser’s lawyer and CSKGIA’s main organizer, were Jews who believed it was their duty to reclaim the Jewish voice from its increasingly anti-Arab reputation. While their efforts must be recognized, Daniel Pipes did manage to successfully instill fear in both the Jewish and general public of New York City, whose greatest concern was that their tax dollars would be spent on a terrorist training camp disguised as a public school.

The KGIA Community: Partners and Allies

*Our community will extend beyond the walls of the school.*¹³

Debbie Almontaser has long been in the public eye, as both an Arab and a Muslim, particularly since September 11, 2001. She is a specialist in multicultural education and has been employed by the Department of Education for nearly twenty years. Her efforts have included facilitating workshops on Arab culture and Islam, co-founding the September 11th Curriculum Project, and coordinating Arab American Heritage Week in New York City. She co-designed and developed curricula entitled *(Re)embracing Diversity in NYC Public Schools: Educational Outreach for Muslim Sensitivity* and *Arab Peoples: Past and Present*, both representing efforts to bring the Arab and Muslim voice into the public

education system. She belongs to mainstream Arab American organizations like Women in Islam and maintains positive ties to the Jewish community through the Dialogue Project and a number of joint projects with prominent Jewish organizations. In conjunction with her impressive credentials, she also represents a “safe” Arab American community member: a religious Yemeni Muslim raised in America. Her loyalty to the United States was apparent: her son, an Army Reserve officer, served as a rescue worker at “ground zero” in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, illustrating his family’s commitment to American values and nationalism.

When developing KGIA, Debbie Almontaser was careful to establish a safety network that she believed would protect and support the school. Early suspicions of KGIA centered on the belief that it would send an Islamic message to its students, so Almontaser formed an advisory board of interfaith religious leaders in the spring of 2007 that consisted of rabbis, pastors, and imams. The rabbis emphasized that they knew KGIA was not a religious school and that they did not join the board to encourage interfaith connections. Although Almontaser intended the board to serve as guardians and allies of the school, this strategy ultimately backfired. Critics used the creation of the board as an excuse to investigate board members and hold Almontaser responsible for any of their questionable comments. Stop the Madrassa declared one of the board’s imams to be a radical jihadist, citing his mosque’s website as proof. Because this imam was a prison chaplain, Stop the Madrassa members claimed that he contributed to “radicalization and recruitment in U.S. prisons,” and that, consequently, “we soon will see KGIA students in combat fatigues emblazoned with patches picturing the sword of Islam.”¹⁴ They demanded a response from Mayor Bloomberg, questioning why a man of this background, who “attempts to undermine basic American beliefs and traditions,” was sitting on KGIA’s advisory board.¹⁵ This guilt-by-association tactic was employed throughout the summer to undermine KGIA.

Almontaser and supporters believed that KGIA would not be subject to accusations that it was an extremist *madrassa* if the school was clearly situated within the public realm. In response to mounting anxieties, Chancellor Joel Klein promised that “if any school became a religious school . . . or it became a national school . . . I would shut it down.”¹⁶ Almontaser’s past experience in the public school system should have guaranteed credibility, but the Department of Education’s support provoked concern instead. The most commonly uttered phrase was, “Is this where my tax dollars are going?” Concerned New Yorkers felt that, because the school was public, they held a degree of ownership in it. Suddenly, there was an Arabic or potentially “Islamist” school opening in their

neighborhood, on their streets, with their money. Vocal non-Arab and non-Muslim critics feared the label “community-based school,” refusing to accept that KGIA belonged on their turf or could ever be part of their community.

Critique and Fear: Defining the “Hatemongers”

Just think, instead of jocks, cheerleaders and nerds, there's going to be the Taliban hanging out on the history hall, Al Qaeda hanging out by the gym, and Palestinians hanging out in the science labs. Hamas and Hezbollah studies will be the prerequisite classes for Iranian physics. Maybe in gym they'll learn how to wire their bomb vests and they'll convert the football field to a terrorist training camp.
—Unidentified blogger in *The New York Times*¹⁷

Because public schools in other parts of the country, particularly in Virginia's Fairfax County and in Dearborn, Michigan, have long offered Arabic as an accredited foreign language, I began to investigate a critical question: “Why not in New York?”¹⁸ Why, in New York, did this school come under such intense scrutiny? It was widely believed that the school was treading on sensitive ground, on Jewish space. Although not all criticism of KGIA originated among Jews or Zionists, Jewish fear of Arab Americans was a theme constantly reinforced among those who followed the controversy. The actual composition of the Stop the Madrassa Coalition, the campaign against KGIA, remains unclear. Although Daniel Pipes eventually admitted his participation, as did one of his (non-Jewish) colleagues, the remainder of the campaign's advocates never revealed their true names.¹⁹

The impact of 9/11, too, must be recognized. According to Louis Cristillo, coordinator of the Muslims in New York City Project, “with New York City being Ground Zero, this is all a reflection of 9/11.”²⁰ As a result of terrorist attacks committed by a small group of Arabs, Arab Americans as a collective are now held accountable. Debbie Almontaser experienced this reality; notwithstanding debate within her community about how to commemorate the second anniversary of 9/11, she was active in the planning of both a local candlelight vigil and a candlelight march, although she feared such programming might incite hate crimes.²¹ Even with a figure like Almontaser in the leadership of KGIA, Daniel Pipes relentlessly portrayed the school as an extremist breeding ground, stoking fear of terrorism and anti-Israel activity. The latter threats, he believed, are inevitable results of studying Arabic and gaining sympathy for the Arab world. According to James Coffman, as cited by Pipes: “Arabized students show decidedly greater support for the Islamic movement and greater mistrust of the

West.”²² In this view, studying Arabic increases the likelihood that students will become terrorists or join anti-American Islamic movements.

Whatever their motivation, those who attacked Debbie Almontaser and opposed KGIA employed a familiar strategy. David Cole outlines what he believes to be the McCarthyist tactics now being exercised against Arab Americans and Muslim Americans as features of the “war on terror.” Organizations like Campus Watch, the David Project, and *FrontPage Magazine*, among others, target new enemies for our era: “Muslims, Arabs and others in the Middle East field who are identified as stepping over an unstated line in criticizing Israel.”²³ These organizations, according to Cole (2003: 2), implemented historically McCarthyist techniques such as censoring subversive speech and assuming guilt by association. Pipes was aware of his methods, and he eventually confessed that the “T-shirts’ call for a Palestinian Arab-style uprising in the five boroughs, admittedly, had only the most tenuous connection to Ms. Almontaser.”²⁴ Pipes’s confession begs the question: Why did critics of KGIA view the school as a threat deserving this method of attack?

Sharing Disputed Space

Where space must be shared, conflicts are likely to multiply.

—Suzanne Keller, *Community*

The conflict over the establishment of the Khalil Gibran International Academy, a school designed to foster Arab American identity in New York City, arose from a reluctance to share space with a group whose identity is perceived to be oppositional to one’s own. The people most likely to feel this way were antagonistic members of the American Jewish community, who feared official endorsement of a narrative of Arab American and Muslim American identity that would overlap with, and infringe on, their previously claimed space. America is essentially a microcosm of the modern world, where “diaspora runs with, and not against, the grain of identity, movement, and reproduction” (Appadurai 1996: 171). Consequently, America serves as a staging ground for diaspora communities to participate in conflicts that are otherwise located abroad. In this process, communities attempt to carve out ownership over actual public, American, non-diasporic spaces and resources; to “superimpose a place on an existing place” (Lees 2006: 194). Edward Said offers his insight into the general, but often Jewish, fear of Arabs staking claims to territory in public space: “If the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is a negative value. He is seen as a disrupter of Israel’s and the West’s existence . . .” (2000:

424–25). Diaspora communities in conflict have historically believed that their cause must vanquish that of the opposing group, not only abroad but in the U.S. as well, since the American public can be sympathetic only to one cause, not both.²⁵ Therefore, a rising Arab identity must mean a falling Jewish identity and vice versa. This assumption was the constant backdrop of the KGIA dispute, as members of each community attempted to assert their ownership and sense of belonging in New York City's complex landscape.

“Who Can We Work With?": A Jewish Perspective

The Jewish community has internally debated its relationship with the American Muslim and Arab communities, particularly since 9/11, but ultimately these debates trace back to the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel. The organized Jewish community, which supports and represents larger populations of American as well as world Jewry, independently determines what threats and benefits might result from various dialogues or joint projects. A 2004 article in *The Jewish Week*, a mainstream and widely distributed newspaper, addressed the complexities of this prevailing conversation. Editor Gary Rosenblatt, in his article “How to Deal with American Muslims,” made the following observation: “Whether, and how, U.S. Jews should deal with Muslim groups in this country is a vital issue that needs to be explored and discussed, particularly in the wake of 9-11. And the variety of possible responses—ignore them, confront them, dialogue with them—tells us as much about our own politics, beliefs and level of confidence as it does about the perceived potential threat of a growing Muslim presence in American life.”²⁶

Rosenblatt weighs the options of interacting with American Muslims, or refusing to engage with them. On the one hand, American Jews should be sympathetic to a “fellow minority group being blamed for the actions of a small group of terrorists from other countries.” Jews, too, are well acquainted with scapegoating and the dangers of collective guilt. On the other hand, Muslims “are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, blame Israel for the conflict in the Mideast, and have targeted Zionism (and in some cases Jews) as the core of world problems.” These factors lead to the inevitable question, “Who can we work with?” This issue has been addressed by Harvard scholar Raquel Ukeles, who attempts to resolve the dilemma by confronting the danger of non-communication between coexisting communities. Ukeles argues that the Jewish community “needs to reconsider the criteria it uses to identify credible partners, including redefining ‘moderate,’ or there will be no one left to talk to.” Rosenblatt adds, “We fool ourselves if we think we can work with (at

least on domestic issues) and educate only American Muslims who meet our standards of Mideast correctness.”

In my own experience, those standards are highly problematic and dangerously exclusive. Most mainstream Jewish organizations, like the Anti-Defamation League and national Jewish federations, do not include in their mission statements specific guidelines that determine who they “are not willing to work with.” Rather, they implement a seemingly impossible set of guidelines, which shifts on a case-by-case basis. It is crucial for the Jewish community to distinguish between domestic goals and foreign policy initiatives; yet American Jewish organizations must stand behind Israel in order to maintain mainstream support, which translates into major communal funding. These standards frequently compel the Jewish community to alienate any group that supports the Palestinian cause, which is typically viewed as a threat to Israel’s security. There are no mainstream Arab American or American Muslim organizations that categorically condemn Hamas or reject calls for Palestinian statehood in terms meant to satisfy the security interests of Israel. Political positions of this kind, if adopted independently or to appease the American Jewish public, would result in a loss of credibility in the Arab American and/or American Muslim communities.

This difficult situation, faced by major organizations in many American diasporic populations, directly influences relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities. Prominent, mainstream organizations like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) are targeted by influential Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), then systematically excluded from dialogue and collaboration with the organized Jewish community and, whenever possible, with the community’s interlocutors in the larger society. Links to CAIR, which once honored Debbie Almontaser, were a key component in the case against her and KGIA. Isolating organizations like CAIR, however, thwarts the type of interfaith dialogue recommended by Ukeles. During a 2007 summer meeting I attended with leaders of the Jewish community, a representative from the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York criticized other participants for their attempts to foster dialogue with Arab and Muslim New Yorkers: “You are meeting with nobodies.” They were meeting with “nobodies” because their undefined, yet restrictive, organizational guidelines effectively prevented them from working with “somebodies.” There is too much danger in talking to the latter group, since the “somebodies,” it is widely believed, may well be connected with terrorism. The risk of working with “nobodies,” however, is severe in itself, as the Jewish community attempts to share space with others and be

prominent yet approachable. This paradox, it appears, is producing a standstill in dialogue.

“Who Can We Work With?": An Arab Perspective

This debate has parallels in the Arab American community, where it is widely assumed that Jewish organizations that support Israel are inherently opposing the Palestinian struggle for statehood and supporting apartheid, thus begging the question: “Who can we work with?” Linda Sarsour, the director of the Arab American Association, labeled the Anti-Defamation League “the most racist organization in the country”²⁷ for its pro-Israel policy. Although various collaborations do exist, particularly in social services, a clash between the two populations is echoed in the lack of formal partnerships between mainstream organizations from the “opposing” communities.

Throughout her career, Debbie Almontaser has struggled to appeal to both sides, to have partners both within and outside of the Arab American community. Antoine Faisal from *Aramica*, the widely circulated local Arab American newspaper, attacked Almontaser for ADL’s public support of KGIA. Although Almontaser had not agreed to a formal relationship between KGIA and ADL, ADL’s defense solicited this response from Faisal:

Imagine a NYC charter school for African Americans called the Rosa Parks Academy with an emphasis on Black History and culture whose principal was found to have had a long standing relationship with the KKK. Is there anyone who wouldn’t be disturbed by this?²⁸

Faisal, and the community leaders interviewed in his article, set a distinct standard for who they were not willing to work with: Zionists. While ADL does have many constructive policies, they do support Israel and are therefore perceived by such critics as a Zionist organization that deserves to be isolated.

There were, however, Arab American voices in the discussion that offered alternative points of view. Aref Assaf, from American Arab Forum, courageously responded that drawing boundaries around Zionism was dangerously limiting. Assaf challenged critiques of ADL that fixated on their Zionist framework. “If we object to the support of ADL,” he argued,

should we not also refuse the financial aid the school will receive from the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation? [on the false assumption that Bill Gates is a Jewish supporter of Israel] . . . should we as Muslims not work with the ACLU . . . because it endorses gay marriages? If our moral compass is so truly flawless, should we even open a school in America, the main supporter of Israel . . . ?²⁹

Assaf attempts to redraw the boundaries of “who we can work with” by noting the success of Jewish organizations in making their issues more mainstream by partnering with a greater variety of groups. Yet Assaf realizes that refusing to collaborate with any Jewish organizations in response to pro-Israel policies is dangerous and would “render our issues beyond mainstream America.”³⁰ Arab Americans, like American Jews, must determine the risk level of compromising their loyalties abroad when forming partnerships that will greatly advance their diaspora stature in the United States.

Jewish Extreme versus Jewish Mainstream

You shall not oppress the stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

—Exodus 23:9

As I followed the KGIA controversy, I was surprised to find that Jews were prominent on all sides of the argument. They were the most vocal opponents of Debbie Almontaser and her most committed supporters. Jews claimed this struggle as their own, often insisting that it was more a dispute between Jews than between Jews and Arabs or Muslims. Support for Almontaser preceding her resignation was taken up by liberal Jews, who are often considered extreme and on the fringe and, as a result, fail to generate mainstream appeal. Although the Coalition in Support of KGIA gained support from the Arab American community and drew representatives from CAIR, the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee, renowned scholar Rashid Khalidi, and others, it was Jews who were highly visible and active on both sides. KGIA functioned as a litmus test within the Jewish community, defining the landscape of “who’s who” and where they stood.

The two ends of the “why we should or should not work with American Muslims” spectrum can be explored by looking closely at a distinct struggle: that between Daniel Pipes and Rabbi Michael Paley. Paley, who is my father, studied Islam during his graduate studies and has since gained years of experience in communal and interfaith relations. As scholar in residence at UJA–Federation of New York, which is funded by many conservative donors and certainly holds support for Israel high in its organizational mission, Rabbi Paley must be cautious and often draws criticism for his progressive views. He and Pipes are frequently posed as spokesmen for opposing sides, particularly in the aftermath of Almontaser’s resignation. One of these oppositions occurred after a Florida synagogue invited a representative from CAIR to give a high-

holiday sermon. In the aftermath, according to a *St. Petersburg Times* article,³¹ Pipes warned that “increased affluence and enfranchisement of American Muslims . . . will present true danger to American Jews.” Paley, in response to the demand that CAIR support Israel, argued that “it should not be the job of CAIR to support Israel . . . CAIR is a Muslim organization.” The Muslim speaker agreed, arguing that “some critics will never accept CAIR unless we put Israel first and we’re not willing to do that.”

This argument pervaded the KGIA case, as outlined in the *Jewish Week* article “Jewish Shootout over Arab School.”³² Advocating a tolerant stance, Paley spoke against the demands made of Arab and Muslim Americans that “they pass an acid test—that Muslims are terrorists until proven innocent,” since this means that “none will pass.” It will prove dangerous for the Jewish community *not* to accept other immigrant groups, he added, since mistreatment of the foreigner contradicts the scriptural position stated clearly in Exodus. Paley believes that refusing dialogue with or support for Arab and Muslim Americans will undermine the America that has treated Jews so favorably. America could, he believes, be the ideal location for Jews and Arabs to coexist and solve their conflict. Pipes, on the other hand, feels that a school like KGIA “requires scrutiny beyond that of any other group’s school.” He avidly supported the Bush administration’s policy of profiling, maintaining that “if you’re looking for terrorism you must give special scrutiny to this community.” Pipes believes that securing American borders overrides the need to protect American (and Jewish) values that, in Paley’s view, encourage the acceptance of the stranger.

Not in Our Name: Community Misrepresentation in the Public Arena

כל ישראל צרכים זה לזה

All Jews are responsible to each other. . . . One people, as if they are one person.

—Jewish dictum

Reactions to the Khalil Gibran International Academy generated a crisis of representation within the Jewish community. As has always been true of diaspora Jewries, the acts of one can represent the whole. Donna Nevel, a founder of Communities in Support of KGIA, joined this coalition because she felt the attacks on Almontaser were perpetrated “in the name of the Jewish community.” This assault, she believes, was a misrepresentation of the Jewish community. The acts of one small cohort of Jews should not, in her view, be mistaken for the voice of an entire community. Nevel believed it was her responsibility “to

stand up and say, ‘this is not our community. They don’t reflect our community. You may think that you’re speaking on behalf of our community but this is not what the Jewish community wants.’”³³ Jewish organizations have struggled for years to create a mainstream identity and to claim a positive image for themselves in American society. Paley agreed with Nevel, saying: “If it hadn’t been for the Jews attacking, I don’t think I would have found it appropriate for me to defend.”³⁴ He struggles to interject Jewish organizational defense only when necessary. Debbie Almontaser adopted a similar “Not in Our Name” stance following 9/11, when she contended that her community was misrepresented by the actions of a few individuals. Almontaser was stigmatized for her response to young students who asked her about Muslim involvement in 9/11: “I don’t recognize the people who committed the attacks as either Arabs or Muslims.” The remainder of her comment, which the *New York Post* chose not to publish, focused on a personal reputation that was damaged by others and must now be reclaimed: “Those people who did it have stolen my identity as an Arab and have stolen my religion.”³⁵

Entering the Public Arena

*If you live here then become an American first
and maintain your personal culture privately.*

—Comment posted by Marie, a reader of the *New York Sun*³⁶

The process of creating a mainstream identity, sometimes viewed as a commodity, provides a minoritized community with a point of access to American society and a visible presence in the national mosaic. Melani McAlister addresses the role of the private cultural world (marriage, home, and family), which she believes is “necessary to constructing the ‘inside’ of the national community; that ‘inside’ is then mobilized to represent the nation itself in its public mode” (2001: 12). In other words, there is a need to expose allegedly private identities in the public sphere in order to form a realistic and accurate representation of the community in question (Shryock 2004: 301–303). Providing the public with a positive glimpse into the life of a marginalized community ideally allows it to be seen not as a cultural impurity but rather as an accepted part of American society. This process occurs in the public sphere and is accomplished through such familiar mechanisms as museums, parades, festivals, and monuments.

It is also accomplished in public schools. Arab American researcher Moustafa Bayoumi argued in support of KGIA that “a school institutionalizes the Arabic language and culture within the mainstream framework . . .

institutionalizes it within a society.”³⁷ The Khalil Gibran International Academy, according to Louis Cristillo, is “perfect in the sense that it’s really at the forefront of curriculum development of areas that are sorely needed in the New York public school system.”³⁸ Few New York City public schools have Arabic curricula; only two high schools offer Arabic courses, and the Arabic Regents exam was only developed in the last few years. This lack of knowledge about Arabs and Arabic has long been institutionalized in the American public education system. There are massive gaps in information about the Middle East and the Arab world in public school curricula. KGIA was originally conceived as an attempt to fill these gaps with accurate information and to impart critical knowledge of a misunderstood culture and understudied language to a new generation of American public school students, who would impart this knowledge to the general public.

Stop the Madrassa was especially concerned that the curriculum taught at KGIA would be pro-Arab, pro-Muslim, and anti-Israel, and its supporters demanded to inspect the school’s teaching materials. They were unable to gain access to KGIA curricula, however, because in the summer of 2007 a curriculum had not yet been adopted. Curricula pertaining to Arabs and Muslims remain underfunded and underdeveloped, both at KGIA and across the nation. Given this lack of materials, Debbie Almontaser selected the Scholastic My Arabic Library for use at KGIA. This teaching resource, contrary to Pipes’s assumptions, is intended to represent mainstream American identity and culture to the Arabic-speaking Middle East, rather than the reverse. Scholastic collaborated with the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative to translate American children’s books and ship them to the Middle East. In 2007, students in Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco were given access to My Arabic Library. The aim of this initiative, according to Scholastic, is to ensure that “millions of children, many of whom never had access to quality books like these, will now get to experience stories that capture their imaginations and teach them about the world.”³⁹ Ironically, the stated goal is actually to benefit the Middle East by introducing it to American children’s literature, not to enrich, or “endanger,” students like those attending KGIA by offering them sympathetic information about the Arab world.

The Dangers of Misunderstanding: Public Education as a Solution

Given the complex range of issues that shaped the KGIA debate, it is important to point out that the central objection to the Khalil Gibran International Academy was its status as a public rather than private or charter

school. Controversy arose around whether highlighting Arab identity and the Arabic language is, in fact, the responsibility of public education. While promoting culture or language in the public domain through city-funded schools is not generally prohibited, teaching religion is. Surfing the current wave of Islamophobia, critics of KGIA suggested the synonymous nature of Arabic, Islam, and an anti-Western mentality. The popular argument posed by *New York Times* contributor and Harvard law professor Noah Feldman was that “Islam will presumably be taught” and that KGIA “is a watered-down, American version of the British and Canadian models of state-run religious schools catering to Muslims.”⁴⁰ Feldman suggested that, due to its religious nature, KGIA has private religious value rather than public secular value. This argument is easily critiqued: the sheer fact that perhaps 75 percent of Arab Americans are *not* Muslim and that less than 20 percent of the Muslim world speaks Arabic would be information enough to correct Feldman’s misunderstanding.⁴¹ Still, it is hard for most Americans to distinguish between Arab and Muslim identities. It is also true that the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Muslims and that Islam, as an aspect of Arab civilization and history, is not a topic any school dedicated to understanding Arab language and culture could realistically ignore.

Debbie Almontaser, as a religious Muslim, has worn the hijab for her entire career with the Department of Education, and her manner of dress reinforced the common assumption that KGIA would be an Islamic school. While she has never been prevented from wearing the hijab by her employers, Almontaser has certainly been targeted for criticism because she wears it. Her decision to publicize her Muslim identity provoked opposition from those who believed that such a religious symbol was threatening to the American school system. Elements of this scenario are reminiscent of *L'affaire du foulard*, in which French Muslims were banned from wearing the hijab in public schools. In France, the individual’s right to wear the scarf was judged a threat to the integrity of a public sphere free of religious symbolism (Benhabib 2004: 183). Similarly, to critics of KGIA, Almontaser’s hijab represented her desire to impose her private identity on the public sphere. Her hijab was emphasized and stigmatized; it gave critics the opportunity to attack her Muslim identity, even though the teaching of Islam, as a religion, was not the intention of KGIA. Almontaser considers herself perfectly capable of distinguishing between her private identity and her public responsibilities. As she has constantly asserted, the school she envisions would teach about religion, just as all public schools teach about the major world religions. Learning *about* Islam is appropriate to American curricula because religion is a major component of American society.

A Borderless War against Indistinguishable Identities

Representations of the Arab and Muslim communities in the United States, as well as abroad, have always been blurry, and they have become particularly confused in light of recent events. The September 11 attacks were carried out by men who were Arab and professed to be Muslim. Since that moment, uncertainty about Arabs and Muslims has grown. The American government has given minimal effort to comprehending the complexities and contradictions that mark these identities. Popular American misconceptions about what defines Arabs and Muslims have proven dangerous, particularly in this moment of conflict. When exacting revenge for the 9/11 attacks, cultural and geopolitical borders were entirely unclear, and the American government determined that the acts of a handful of individuals could in fact be treated as the acts of a nation, a religion, a country, a community. The complex struggles between figures like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were played down, or remained unrecognized. Pervasive ignorance about Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims produced deadly outcomes. In the act of plotting an appropriate response to the 9/11 attacks, the American government imposed an imagined sense of responsibility on two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, which it promptly invaded and still occupies, at a cost of trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of human lives.

Wars waged abroad are particularly complicated for America, a nation composed of numerous immigrant populations and domestic diasporas. The U.S. government has yet to create a consistent policy for the treatment of immigrant communities and individuals whose home countries are under attack. This is due to the (sometimes) awkward fact that American citizens can identify with, and even belong to, other nations and states, a predicament that leads to a critical question: Can immigrants relocate their political imaginations within American borders, or does a substantial part of their loyalty and patriotism remain abroad? Concerns about the dual loyalties of diasporic communities, which can lead to ambivalent attachments to American society (Appadurai 1996: 172), are not illegitimate. As American mono-patriotism becomes an increasingly unrealistic expectation, many diasporic communities do indeed have dual loyalties. Transnational identities, defined by links to multiple places (“here” and “there”), are nourished and reinforced by return trips to immigrant homelands, by interactions with new immigrants, and by solidarities cultivated by community institutions (Cainkar 2002: 6). These patterns of identity reinforcement are found among both secular and religious communities, and they

are nowhere more evident than in American Jewish loyalties to Israel. Such feelings are intelligible to most Americans, and one might easily conclude that the anxiety triggered by the prospect of an Arab public school in New York City was fueled by the ideological discomfort caused by the realization that “dual loyalties” are now a common feature of American society and might be legitimately available to all citizens, even when the loyalties in question are Arab and Muslim.

Insisting on Stigma

While a collapse of identities occurred overseas, and Afghans and Iraqis were lumped in a uniform class of Muslim enemies, American civilians worked out a similar tendency to categorize their enemies sloppily at home. Misperceptions about Arabs and Muslims, especially an inability to distinguish between the two, had serious consequences on the domestic front. “Immigrant communities are targeted,” writes Nadine Naber, “when the United States goes to war in their homelands; the significance of this process is that it legitimizes the distinction between ‘Americans’ and a constructed enemy Other/enemy of the nation” (2006: 236). Those perceived to be Arab were held accountable. They were labeled terrorists, called Osama, and asked to apologize for attacks they did not carry out or support. Muslims and Arabs, it was believed, possessed the most dangerous dual loyalty of all: allegiance to Islam and the Arab world. Hyphenated Muslim and Arab American identities were stigmatized and viewed as inconsistent and potentially dangerous. As President Bush repeatedly stated, “You’re either with *us* or with *them*.” While *them* referred to the terrorists, and not to Arabs and Muslims as a whole, the labels were treated as synonymous and interchangeable.

Determining loyalties is a critical step in defining Otherness and isolating political impurities that threaten American society. Debbie Almontaser was subject to accusations of impurity and disloyalty: she wears the clothing, prays the prayers, and speaks the language of the enemy. The stigmatization of the hijab was shocking for American Muslims, who “felt that their hijab was legitimately part of the American cultural landscape” (Hatem 2005: 44). At the same time, allowing overtly Muslim behavior and Arab identities into the American mainstream was, for many critics of the KGI, unimaginable. This level of acceptance represented what many Americans feared: that Middle Eastern Muslims are no longer only in the Middle East (McAlister 2001: 261). That “they” might now have their own public school would mean that being Arab and Muslim was simply another way of being American. What oppo-

nents of the KGIA seemed to fear most was not the Arab Muslim as alien and Other, but the likelihood that the Arab Muslim might be incorporated into the American Self.

The Khalil Gibran International Academy served as a battleground, and a laboratory, for understanding conflicting definitions of American identity. Fears of KGIA focused on the possibility that it would erode the *us vs. them* binary that has been essential to American rhetoric in a “war on terror” that is, at ground level, a war against Arabs and Muslims. For many New Yorkers, KGIA had the potential to serve as a terrorist training cell, an American *madrassa* that would infiltrate our society and propagate dangerous Arab mentalities. It has become clear, however, that the battle is not one of *us vs. them* but rather one of *us vs. us*. This internal clash represents a long-standing but nevertheless urgent American battle: the struggle to define ourselves. Although situated within the framework of a war against terrorism, the current conflict has resulted in a war of identity centered on a culture under siege. According to Rabbi Paley, “The foreign war is not just a foreign war against real Muslims, who pose no threat to us, but [also a war waged] for the sake of our identity.”⁴² The domestic struggle of various diasporic communities is one of definition: “Who are we?” This question has shaped the struggle between American Jewish and Arab and Muslim American communities. Many leaders in these communities believe their communal identities will be compromised if a place is carved out for an “opposing” identity, particularly in the public domain. This communal struggle is charged by distrust of “the Other” and persistent attempts to maintain an outdated, parochial understanding of what it means to be American.

America today is a compelling reality for American Jewry in the larger context of Jewish history. America provides a haven for diasporic communities, and if this country upholds its potential and embraces its reality, it can become the first truly global nation. For Jews, a nation constantly in diaspora, America holds unique opportunities. This country can serve as a microcosm in which all overseas entanglements can be confronted. Here, populations struggling in diaspora can learn what it means to be a reinterpretation of a community rooted geographically in another time or place. The global nature of American society enables us to reconsider conflicts abroad on the common ground of a hyphenated American identity. The Khalil Gibran International Academy, which should not have been a school about the Arab-Israeli conflict, became a critical site for confronting, if not necessarily reconsidering, one of the most important overseas conflicts in shared American space. The future

of the school is unresolved, and the struggle for Arab and Muslim space in New York, and in the American public sphere, continues. It is a disturbing, potentially enlightening contest over who we, as Americans, can be.

Epilogue

According to the NYC Department of Education, the first year of the Khalil Gibran International Academy was a success. In reality, however, the school was ridden with serious, debilitating problems. In the fall of 2007, the Department of Education transferred a number of special-needs students into the incoming sixth-grade class, well aware that the school was ill equipped to address their behavioral and educational needs. Sean Grogan, KGIA's former science teacher, reported to *The New York Times* that "kids bang on the partitions, yell and scream, curse and swear. It's out of control."⁴³ One of the school's Arabic teachers informed me that one of the students had called her a "terrorist." By the conclusion of the school year, half of KGIA's staff had been removed and the plan to extend KGIA to a high school had been crushed. Since her resignation, Debbie Almontaser has lost both a court case and an appeal to have her position reinstated.⁴⁴

Notes

1. Arab Women in the Arts and Media website: <http://www.awaam.org/uploads/paley101607.mov>.

2. New Visions grant proposal, the Khalil Gibran International Academy; copy in author's possession.

3. Ibid.

4. Middle East Forum home page: <http://www.meforum.org>. Pipeline home page: <http://pipelinenews.org/>.

5. Daniel Pipes, "A Madrassa Grows in Brooklyn," *New York Sun*, April 24, 2007. <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/madrassa-grows-in-brooklyn/53060/>.

6. Samuel Freedman, "Critics Ignored Record of a Muslim Principal," *New York Times*, August 29, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/29/education/29education.html>.

7. Stop the Madrassa home page: <http://stopthemadrassa.wordpress.com/>.

8. Chuck Bennett and Jana Winter, "City Principal Is 'Revolting': Tied to 'Intifada NYC' Shirts," *New York Post*, August 6, 2007. http://www.nypost.com/seven/08062007/news/regionalnews/city_principal_is_revolting_regionalnews_chuck_bennett_and_jana_winter.htm.

9. Andrea Peyser, "Shirting the Issue: 'Sorry' Principal First Defends 'Intifada'-Wear," *New York Post*, August 7, 2007. http://www.nypost.com/seven/08072007/news/columnists/shirting_the_issue_columnists_andrea_peyser.htm.

10. To clarify: “Intifada” literally means the act of shaking off. In this context, it refers to two Palestinian uprisings against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The First Intifada lasted from 1987 to 1993 and originated in Palestinian civil disobedience, general strikes, and boycotts, although it is widely remembered for the violent, highly publicized act of stone throwing. The Second Intifada, also known as the al-Aqsa Intifada, began in September 2000, arguably in response to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount. This Intifada was significantly more violent than the first, with greater publicity and a higher number of casualties. It is yet to officially end although most believe it to be over.

11. Julie Bosman, “Head of City’s Arabic School Steps Down under Pressure,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/11/nyregion/11school.html>.

12. The rise of Zionism and the growing alliance between the United States and Israel has long shaped the Arab American landscape. Many Arab populations, including Lebanese, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Egyptians, have been displaced during wars with Israel. From its 1948 independence, to the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1973 war, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and the Gulf wars, Israel has deeply affected the region. As Arab Americans respond to this reality, American Jews have consistently viewed their efforts with suspicion. Powerful pro-Israel lobbies, like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, currently overpower the practically invisible pro-Palestinian lobby.

13. New Visions grant proposal, the Khalil Gibran International Academy.

14. “There’s Something Fishy about KGIA ‘Advisory Board,’” online posting, October 10, 2007. <http://stopthemadrassa.wordpress.com/2007/10/10/theres-something-fishy-about-the-kgia-advisory-board>.

15. Ibid.

16. NY1 News, “Arabic Language School Struggles to Find a Home,” May 4, 2007. <http://www.ny1.com/default.aspx?ArID=69409&SecID=1000>.

17. Samuel Freedman, “Critics Ignored Record of a Muslim Principal,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/29/education/29education.html>.

18. Helen Hatab Samhan, “Who Are Arab Americans?” Arab American Institute Foundation. <http://www.aaiusa.org/foundation/358/arab-americans>.

19. Daniel Pipes, “New Approach Needed for Arab School,” *New York Sun*, August 15 2007. <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/new-approach-needed-for-arab-school/60542/>.

20. Louis Cristillo, personal interview, January 24, 2008.

21. Daniel J. Wakin, “For Muslims, an Uneasy Anniversary; Urge to Speak Out Conflicts with Low-Profile Instincts,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/19/nyregion/for-muslims-uneasy-anniversary-urge-speak-conflicts-with-low-profile-instincts.html?sec=&spn=&pagewanted=1>.

22. Daniel Pipes, “A Madrassa Grows in Brooklyn,” *New York Sun*, April 24, 2007. <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/madrassa-grows-in-brooklyn/53060/>.

23. Larry Cohler-Esses, “The New McCarthyism,” *The Nation*, November 12, 2007. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20071112/cohler-esses>.

24. Daniel Pipes, “New Approach Needed for Arab School,” *New York Sun*, August 15, 2007. <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/new-approach-needed-for-arab-school/60542/>.

25. Of course, not all American Jews, Arabs, or Muslims develop their identities in relation to homeland politics or overseas conflicts. My argument will deal with those who do.

26. Gary Rosenblatt, "How to Deal with American Muslims," *Jewish Week*, September 10, 2004. Online at <http://www.israelforum.com/board/showthread.php?t=6933>.

27. Antoine Faisal, "Zionist Organization Supports Gibran School Principal," *Aramica*, June 29–July 11, 2007. <http://www.viewda.com/webpaper/aramica/>.

28. Ibid.

29. Aref Assaf, "Questioning Motives?" *Arab American Forum*, July 18, 2007. http://www.americanarabforum.org/questioning_motives.htm.

30. Ibid.

31. Susan Taylor Martin, "With CAIR, Compromise Complicated," *St. Petersburg Times*, 23 September 2007. http://www.sptimes.com/2007/09/23/Worldandnation/With_CAIR__compromise.shtml.

32. Larry Cohler-Esses, "Jewish Shootout over Arab School," *Jewish Week*, August 17, 2007. <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=14422>.

33. Donna Nevel, personal interview, January 15, 2008.

34. Rabbi Michael Paley, personal interview, January 15, 2008.

35. Larry Cohler-Esses, "Jewish Shootout over Arab School," *Jewish Week*, August 17, 2007. <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=14422>.

36. Daniel Pipes, "The Real Arab School Fear," *New York Sun*, May 22, 2007: <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/real-arab-school-fear/54935/>. "Marie," Reader Comment on "The Real Arab School Fear," online posting, July 26, 2007: <http://www.nysun.com/comments/33284>.

37. Moustafa Bayoumi, personal interview, January 24, 2008.

38. Louis Cristillo, personal interview, January 16, 2008.

39. Scholastic website: http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/press_04172007_CP.htm.

40. Noah Feldman, "Universal Faith," *New York Times Magazine*, August 26, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/magazine/26wwln-lede-t.html>.

41. Factbook home page: http://www.factbook.net/muslim_pop.php.

42. Rabbi Michael Paley, personal interview, January 15, 2008.

43. Andrea Elliot and Samuel Freedman, "Critics Cost Muslim Educator Her Dream School," *New York Times*, April 28, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/28/nyregion/28school.html?ex=1210046400&en=eb31eoad46ef2191&ei=5070&emc=eta1>.

44. Associated Press, "NY Appeals Court Rejects Claim by Arab School Principal," March 20, 2008.

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