

DEBBI ALMONTASER AND THE PROBLEMATICS OF PARANOID POLITICS

Lawrence Davidson

Who is Debbi Almontaser?

Every land has its good people. These are people who are tolerant and broad minded, people who have a strong sense that their own well-being is intimately connected to that of their neighbors regardless of color, religion or ethnicity. It is rarer to find those who are compelled by this inner sense to act on these principles, and try to make their little part of the world better. In the United States, when such people make the headlines, we usually give them the keys to the city. But, not always.

Debbi Almontaser is one such person. A Muslim American of Yemeni birth who grew up in the United States and, after moving to New York City, felt liberated by its multicultural environment. For seventeen years she worked in the New York City public school system as a special education teacher and adviser on multicultural and inclusion-oriented educational techniques. She gave public lectures, ran professional panels and conducted workshops on these subjects. She served on the boards of an almost endless list of community based organizations looking to promote tolerance and intergroup understanding. She particularly promoted interfaith understanding and an improved knowledge of the religion and way of life of Muslim Americans. When it came to making New York City a better, more tolerant and livable city, Debbi Almontaser was exemplary *inclusionist*.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks her efforts intensified. Almontaser's opinion is that those who carried out the attacks had not only hijacked civilian aircraft to serve their criminal purpose, but had hijacked the religion of Islam along the way (Garrels, 2006). The real Islam was demonstrated when, in response to the request for help from the New York Department of Education, Debbi Almontaser entered schools with Arab American students and growing racial tension. She helped calm these potential trouble spots even as the US government began to target her community. She protested the detention of 8,000 Muslim Americans without due process and, at that point, began conducting community classes on the constitutional rights of citizens. For these efforts someone reported her to the police for suspicious activity. Her response was to convince the authorities that what they really needed

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were good mediators with the city's increasingly insecure Muslim community. The New York Police turned to her for just such help. Her message to both Muslims and non-Muslims is that this is a land of immigrants and Muslims are part of the mix. The Muslim life is compatible with the American life.

As a consequence of these efforts the awards and recognition came rolling in. She was appointed as Coordinator of External Programs for the Brooklyn public school system. She was twice featured on Voice of America as an example of an outstanding Muslim American. She was designated the "go to person" on diversity issues for the Borough of Brooklyn, the New York City Police Department, and members of the City Council. She was given a great number of awards by local civic and religious groups including Jewish ones. Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky of the New York Jewish Theological Seminary called her a "Community educator extraordinaire, veteran Muslim-Jewish dialoguer [and] committed patriot" (Almontaser, 2008).

At one point Almontaser met Mayor Michael Bloomberg and convinced him that the city's Arab American community deserved some recognition and consideration. The mayor agreed with this telling her that as a Jew, he felt it was important to do so (Garrels, 2006). Out of this encounter came New York City's annual Arab Heritage Week. It also might have paved the way for a next step in Almontaser's career, one that would change her life and many others, and not necessarily for the better.

The Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA)

In April of 2005 the city of New York decided to add to their list of 67 dual language public schools. The city's Department of Education, in partnership with New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit operation that assists public school systems in the creation of smaller schools, decided that a dual English-Arabic school would be timely. While the goal would be a diverse student body with about 50 percent Arabic and 50 percent English speakers, it was felt that the institution could help ease Arab American immigrant families into their new society. Having made this decision, Debbi Almontaser was approached to put together a formal application for the new school. Over the next year she recruited a team of educators and community activists, created a 1,400-page proposal for the city's consideration and also managed to secure a \$400,000 start-up grant for the project. The proposed school would be named the Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA) after the Lebanese Christian poet Khalil Gibran and run from grades 6 to 12. A primary goal of the institution was to graduate students who were fluent in Arabic. In February 2007, almost two years after the project's inception, New York City's Department of Education announced the approval of Almontaser's application. The city's first English-Arabic public school was on its way to becoming a reality.

Not long after, the project came to the attention of the country's leading Islamophobes. Just as every land has its positive and enriching inclusionists, so every land has its negative, debilitating *exclusionists*. Not surprisingly, the exclusionist exhibits the opposite characteristics of a person like Debbi Almontaser, our exemplary inclusionist. Where the inclusionist works for tolerance and understanding, there are others who work for intolerance and the sowing of suspicion either out of paranoid fear or for sheer political gain. Where the inclusionist fights against stereotyping and the exercise of bias, there are others who are unwilling or perhaps incapable of seeing others in any other way than stereotypes. Islamophobes are exclusionists with a particular focus on Muslims and Arabs.

The first shot fired in the direction of the Khalil Gibran Academy came from Professor Diane Ravitch, an historian of education at New York University. In a March 7, 2007 article on KGIA in the *New York Sun*, she proclaimed that "it is an abdication of the basic principle behind public education to set up separate schools to teach uncritically one history and one culture" (Garland, 2007). There were several problems with this assertion. First of all, the school was not designed to teach, nor did it have any intention of teaching "uncritically" a single history and culture. Several statements from Department of Education leaders and others, cited in the same article, made this clear. The school would "follow the Department of Education regulations," people should remember that "there is an Asian school opening in Flushing. It's the same thing," and KGIA would not be a "vehicle for political ideology." When issues concerning inter-group conflict come up the curriculum would reflect the "programming on conflict resolution and diversity run by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding" and so on. Second, if it was "an abdication of the basic principle behind public education" to set up separate culturally oriented schools, how was it that a renowned professor whose primary focus was modern US education had missed her home city's other 67 such schools? Why was she getting so upset over this one?

The second shot came from the leading Islamophobe exclusionist Daniel Pipes. Pipes is the director of an organization called The Middle East Forum, which essentially seeks to promote the Zionist ideology in the United States and thereby assure Israel's national interests. It does so in part through the Forum's own journal, *Middle East Quarterly*. These efforts are often pursued in a negative fashion by sowing seeds of distrust and misunderstanding of Arabs and Muslims among the US population. Pipes' outlook on Muslim Americans seems to be dictated by his Zionist fanaticism. Muslim Americans tend to be critical of US policy which unquestionably supports Israel's criminal behavior. As their numbers grow, they constitute a potential counter lobby which, in alliance with others, might someday successfully challenge that pro-Israel policy. This, in itself, seems sufficient to motivate Pipes to sow whatever dissension he can between non-Muslim and

Muslim/Arab Americans. Casting all Muslims as potential terrorists is one of his primary tactics.

In the process, Pipes has developed some very wild concepts which he presents as facts. This can be seen in his April 24, 2007 response to the KGIA project. On that day Pipes published an op-ed piece in, again, the *New York Sun*. It was entitled "A Madrassa Grows in Brooklyn." The title itself was a radical distortion of the proposed school. A madrassa is normally understood, particularly in the West, as an Islamic religious school.

The KGIA project was, of course, not a religious school, and Mr. Pipes certainly should have known he was being misleading to label it so. Nonetheless, he may well have convinced himself of the assertion through the use of equally distorting "evidence"—for instance, through a distortion of the character of the Arabic language. Thus, he asserted, "Arabic-language instruction is inevitably laden with pan-Arabist and Islamic baggage." He supports this with corroborating opinions from his own journal and unchallenged, equally wild assertions, by Islamists. Now one might say that learning a new language opens one up to an empathetic understanding of the people who speak that language. That is potentially true. But to suggest that learning a language is inherently a process of indoctrination ("learning Arabic in and of itself promotes an Islamic outlook") is quite something else. One might as well proclaim that studying English guarantees that one will support democracy. Mr. Pipes confesses that he has spent years studying Arabic, but surely he has not been seduced by the alleged "Islamist dimension" of the language. Thus, he himself stands as a proof against his own assertion.

Such opposition as this led to the formation of an organization, the *Stop the Madrassa Coalition* (Pipes was on its advisory board) the fear mongering of which helped incite neighborhood fears and make initial efforts to find a good location for the school difficult. As it turns out the group soon concentrated its wrath on Debbi Almontaser.

The Intifada T-Shirt Affair

We are all of us local creatures, bounded by numerous walls or boundaries. Our chosen careers set up one wall, and the nature of our family life creates another. Some of us live behind higher walls than others. For instance, the walls of Debbi Almontaser are relatively low ones. Certainly she is a practicing Muslim and that creates a paradigmatic boundary that shapes her world. However, it is equally certain that she has no trouble seeing over that boundary into the worlds of others and she is accepting and tolerant of those other spaces in which people live. In addition, she has a positive appreciation of the space between walls that we all must share.

The Islamophobes on the other hand have boundaries over which they cannot see. And because that is so everything they learn about what goes on outside of their own small world they interpret based on narrow assumptions rather than open learning. Those assumptions distort the world into one of friends and foes, us and them. And the foes are classified through negative stereotypes. Such people made up the membership of the Stop the Madrassa Coalition. So it was that everything they learned about Debbi Almontaser was automatically, almost unconsciously, perceived in terms of a dangerous enemy.

What sort of evidence was garnered to back up this almost a priori assignment of enemy status? Here are the main complaints: (1) Almontaser got an award from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). CAIR is an advocacy group which promotes the civil rights of Muslim Americans. However, from behind the high walls of the Islamophobes CAIR was transformed into an ally of terrorists. That meant Ms. Almontaser, having been sighted positively by CAIR, must herself be suspect. (2) Almontaser had been publicly critical of aspects of American foreign policy and of the police tactics sometimes used in the "war on terror." The expression of such criticism is, of course, the legal right of all Americans. It is speech protected by the First Amendment of the US Constitution. No matter, from behind the distorting boundaries that hem in the Islamophobe world, such speech qualifies a person as potentially dangerous. (3) She had given money to the presidential campaign of Cynthia McKinney (Green Party candidate) who was herself strongly critical of US foreign policy and of the constitutionally questionable aspects of the Patriot Act. And so it went. As evidence of someone's dangerous intents this sort of information proves nothing, unless it is interpreted from a paranoid, conspiracy prone point of view. Given that point of view, Almontaser was guilty by association (association with those who, rationally construed, were guilty of nothing).

It was from within this distorting environment that the Islamophobes came up with the "Intifada New York" t-shirt affair. In July of 2007 a member of the Stop the Madrassa Coalition just happened to be wandering about an Arab American festival in Brooklyn, New York. There this person spotted a t-shirt that read "Intifada NYC." She (the person was female) took a picture of the shirt and went back to report to the coalition. It turned out the t-shirts were produced by an organization named Arab Women Active in the Arts and Media. The group had rented space in the Yemeni-American Association office in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Debbi Almontaser was a member of the Association's Board of Directors.

It could only have been from behind those high walls that cut you off from the rest of the rational world that the Stop the Madrassa Coalition cooked up the notion that the t-shirts were part of a plot to incite an "uprising" in New York City and that Ms. Almontaser was part of it all.

Yet they managed to do this and publicize it too with the help of Rupert Murdoch's newspaper, the *New York Post*.

Almontaser had never heard of the t-shirts nor did she have any direct connection with the group that made them. But these facts, quickly explained by Department of Education spokespeople were no deterrent to the *Post*, which demanded an interview with Almontaser (Bennett and Winter, 2007). She knew the reputation of the *Post* as a platform for Islamophobe reporting and told the Department that she "was not comfortable doing the interview." But the Department of Education apparently felt that they could handle the situation and so told Almontaser that they wanted her to go ahead and speak to the *Post* reporter. They would have one of their public relations people monitor the session. During the interview, conducted on August 6, 2007, the reporter, a Mr. Chuck Bennett, asked her to explain the "origins of the word intifada." She responded that "the root of the word means shaking off" and that it had acquired a "negative connotation" because of its connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict. She also told the reporter that she did not believe that the girls who created the t-shirts were in any way violent.

After the interview the Education Department monitor told Almontaser that she had done a "good job," and no doubt she had. But no one had factored in the potential for mendacity inherent in *Post* reporting. The *Post* story ran the next day under the headline, "City Principal Is Revolting" and asserted that Ms. Almontaser had said that the Arab girls who made the t-shirts were planning to "shake off oppression." Later the New York State's appellate court would describe the report as "incorrect and misleading." But that might very well have been the newspaper's intent, for the article soon triggered an orchestrated campaign of complaints about Almontaser directed at the city's Department of Education. And what was the response to all this by David Cantor, the Education Department's chief spokesman, and the person who had urged Almontaser to do the interview in the first place? Cantor insisted that Almontaser issue an apology. For what? Well, apparently for being misquoted by a biased piece of yellow journalism.

Things only got worse. Mr. Cantor typed up an apology that said, "The use of the word intifada is completely inappropriate as a t-shirt slogan for teenagers. I regret suggesting otherwise." But Almontaser had never suggested otherwise, so she requested that the second part of the statement read, "I regret my response was interpreted as suggesting otherwise." Mr. Cantor ignored Debbi Almontaser's correction and issued the original misleading apology. So this was the situation at the end of August, 2007: (1) A prejudiced organization, the Stop the Madrasa Coalition, had made a false connection between a t-shirt with the word "intifada" on it and Ms. Almontaser. (2) The *New York Post* had misrepresented Almontaser in a way that strengthened the false association. (3) The chief spokesman of the

Education Department had compounded the entire mess with a misleading apology issued without Almontaser's consent.

Soon pressure increased on the Education Department to dismiss Almontaser. The head of the New York City teacher's union, Randi Weingarten, put out a letter, again in the *New York Post*, claiming that Ms. Almontaser held "ideas tied to violence" (see: Quester, 2007). This public statement showed that a person of immense political influence, someone who was an "educator" was perfectly capable of saying nonsense in a manner that was destructive of other people's careers. Then on August 9 the city's deputy mayor, Dennis Walcott announced that Almontaser had to go. The implicit threat here was that if she did not resign, and do so immediately, the KGIA project would be shut down. Almontaser did resign to save the school and Mayor Bloomberg announced this shortly thereafter on his city radio show. "She's certainly not a terrorist" he told his audience, rather she is not "all that media savvy" (Elliott, 2008).

Actually, Almontaser's "media savvy" had nothing to do with what had happened. The media mistake was all on the part of the city's Department of Education which pushed Almontaser into the *Post* interview. From that point on, misrepresentation of her position was made by just about everyone who took up the issue. When later, in March 2008, a Federal Court of Appeals commented on the case it stated that the situation was bizarre because it dealt with the question of "whether a public employee, who is required by her employer to speak to the press as a condition of her employment, may be sanctioned for speaking accurately when her statement is, as her employer knows, inaccurately reported and then misconstrued by the press" (Elliott, 2008).

Confronted with the Stop the Madrassa campaign, the city officials essentially panicked. They imagined protests and bad publicity and decided that Almontaser was the sacrificial lamb necessary to appease the wrath of the Islamophobes. Thus, what she had once described as her "American Dream" (the establishment of the Khalil Gibran Academy) "turned into an American nightmare" (Medina, 2007). It did not take long for Almontaser and her supporters to regroup for, by the end of August 2007, there were already calls for her reinstatement. What followed was a two-pronged effort of community support that included, on the one hand, demonstrations in front of the Department of Education, and petitions by a wide array of groups, including Jewish ones and, on the other hand, court action as Almontaser sued the city first for violating her first amendment rights and then for employment discrimination. The law suits failed due to technicalities, but an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) report, issued in March 2010 found that the city had discriminated against Almontaser "on account of her race, religion and national origin" (Elliott, 2010). Unfortunately, the judgment was non-binding and the city dismissed it as false.

Looking at the matter more deeply, Debbi Almontaser's religion or ethnicity got her fired only because the city leaders were intimidated by a vocal band of bigots. The same group could have gone after someone else and got the same result. For instance, if the city had appointed a Jew who had known sympathies for the Arabs, and particularly Palestinians, Daniel Pipes would have been right out there beating the war drums and helping to form the opposition. The city would have then responded the same way. Nor did Almontaser's firing end the matter for the Stop the Madrassa Coalition, because KGIA was still out there and functioning. For several years they made noise by insisting that the school needed close monitoring lest it become a training ground for terrorists. As for Almontaser, she eventually was forced to give up her battle with the city simply because, by 2010, she could no longer financially sustain the effort. The school itself still operates, not without problems. It has had three principals in three years and there are reports of student discipline problems. It would seem that the city of New York sacrificed the stability of the school's learning environment in the hopes of staving off bad publicity. The school was hurt and they got the bad publicity anyway.

The American Way of Defamation

How are we to understand what happened to Debbi Almontaser? Is this a unique story? As it turns out it is not unique and, indeed, neither is the Islamophobia movement as a whole. Historically, such movements and such discriminatory attacks on individuals have been going on in a cyclical fashion since the United States was founded. There has always been an element of the American population who view their social and political environment in terms of absolute good and evil, constantly see treachery in their midst and fantastical conspiracies leading to the demise of American culture and perhaps national destruction too. One might think of them as a "value vulnerable" minority. Over the nation's history this element has identified plots against established values and the well-being of the community as emanating from Free Masons, Jesuits (particularly of French origin at the end of the eighteenth century), international bankers, communists (the twentieth century's favorite), homosexuals, abortion rights advocates and even pacifists (of great concern at the time of World War I), and now Muslims. In each case the accused group is seen as attempting to infiltrate key American institutions ranging from government offices to school systems. Given the imagined stakes—the very defense of the United States, the leader of Western civilization, in its never ending clash with degenerate enemies—compromise can never do. What is necessary is the will to stand up against evil, to persist in a fight to the finish.

This phenomenon of what amounts to historically persistent fear of differences has been studied by the historian Richard Hofstadter (1965). He has run through

most of the American episodes of these outbursts (some of which are mentioned above) and ascertained that each is characterized by a similar exaggerated and emotionally charged way of seeing the world. Hofstadter calls this the "paranoid style in American politics," but there is no reason to assume that it is to be found only in the US.

Today Free Masons and Jesuits are quite passé. International bankers are back in favor. Pacifists are largely forgotten and the communists have been vanquished (although lingering anti-left feelings persist). Homosexuals and abortion rights advocates are still candidates for conspiracy theories for the likes of Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell (American tolerance of these groups supposedly motivated God to use the September 11 attackers to punish the United States). However, the real enemy of the moment, for those addicted to the paranoid style in American politics, are so called radical Muslims bent on using terrorism to defeat America and its steadfast ally Israel. This is also melded with Islam's supposed undying hatred of Western values and the institution of democracy. Debbi Almontaser was transformed into an agent of this imagined enemy by people who have an ignorant and fear driven case of collective paranoia.

Almontaser is not alone here. The same people who went after her, and in particular one has to note Daniel Pipes, are involved in a hunt for Muslim friendly faculty in the nation's universities. In September of 2002 Pipes created the website Campus Watch on which he posted the names and positions of academics in the field of Middle East Studies whom he deemed "apologists for suicide bombing and militant Islam." He stated that Campus Watch is designed to "hover over the shoulders" of such professors "and remind them of their egregious statements" are being monitored and could "even cause them trouble when they try to win tenure or get a new job." The site also asks students to keep Campus Watch informed about professors who "reject the views of most Americans and the enduring policies of the U.S. government about the Middle East" (Pipes, 2007).

So, the truth is that Debbi Almontaser is but one of a series of victims of a movement whose distortions and smears resemble those of past movements such as The Know Nothings (1840s and 1850s), and various parties which have targeted, at one time or another, immigrant groups such as the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, the Chinese, the Jews, Latino/as, ad infinitum.

What Can Be Done?

There is little likelihood that these episodes of paranoid thinking are going to disappear anytime soon. As a cyclical phenomenon, we seem to be historically stuck with them. This being the case we must try to minimize the damage such episodes do as they periodically threaten to infect the body politic. We must try

to figure out what makes the populace susceptible to such extremism and address that vulnerability. With this in mind, one can note that the effectiveness of the present, on-going attack on American Muslims in general as well as those who teach about Islam, its culture and religion, and now even the Arabic language, is directly related to the ignorance of the general population about the Middle East on the one hand, and American foreign policy in the region on the other. That ignorance deprives citizens of the necessary knowledge to think critically about what groups like Stop the Madrassa say. It is not a coincidence that the KGIA, a school designed to address, in a small and local way, just that ignorance, was targeted. As Debbi Almontaser would no doubt agree, accurate knowledge about the Middle East, its culture and religions, as well as the reality of America's relation with that region, must be disseminated in schools, community centers, active interfaith groups, etcetera nationwide. If this is not done effectively, the efforts of paranoid thinkers will simply take us down the road to another era such as those characterized by Red Scares and the McCarthy hearings.

As the Almontaser case shows, one cannot always rely on politicians and bureaucrats to help in this effort. The nature of American politics is lobby-centered. That means if an organized group of citizens can represent an obstacle, or be of assistance to the political career of office holders they will get a response. The imagined capacity of the Stop the Madrassa Coalition to create bad publicity for New York City, and thus its political leadership, was sufficient to motivate the firing of Debbi Almontaser, albeit in a rather clumsy way. Once the Department of Education had committed itself to removing her, causing the bureaucrats the embarrassment of having to backtrack would have taken exceptional pressure. The support she was able to muster, largely after the fact, was not sufficient to reverse the situation.

The educational task of Debbi Almontaser and all those who would support and assist her is a long and arduous one, principally because it is never ending. That seems to be just the way things are with human beings addicted, as they apparently are, to their in-group/out-group ways. But let us take some comfort in the advice of Thomas Jefferson, who recognized our ongoing problem when confronted with the unjust Alien and Sedition Act of 1798. He told his fellows to have patience, take advantage of the opportunities that "luck" brings, and fight like hell for one's principles. The last characteristic is, perhaps, the most important one.

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