



## The Travails of Brooklyn's Arabic Academy

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A question mark hangs over the opening of New York City's planned Arabic-language school, the Khalil Gibran International Academy.

That the topic remains open is surprising. Other than objections from a few of us – the *New York Sun*'s editorialists, its columnist Alicia Colon, the investigative team of Beila Rabinowitz and William A. Meyer, plus my own [article](#) and [blog](#) on this subject – the school enjoys unflinching support. The [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) helps pay for it. The mayor's office, the [Anti-Defamation League](#), and the [United Federation of Teachers](#) endorse it. Newspaper coverage from the *New York Times*, *New York Daily News*, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, and *International Herald Tribune* attempts to discredit us oppo-

nents, sometimes [stooping to distort](#) our arguments.

Even the parents at two locations who protested KGIA's being placed in their children's buildings speak not of the school's personnel and curriculum, only of such issues of insufficient schoolroom space and the mixing of older students with younger ones. As [one of them](#) put it, "Our issue is not with the substance of the school. It's with the space."

Such parental objections led the Department of Education to abandon its push to place KGIA in a Brooklyn primary school. Instead, it found a location for the next two years, and a department spokesman stated with finality: "This is not a tentative decision. The school will open at this site in September."

That said, the school's prospects appear less than certain. Firstly, the 2006-07 academic year nearly over, fifth graders generally know which school they will attend next year, and though some families have [expressed interest](#) in KGIA, not a single student has yet enrolled there.

Second, that the Department of Education has apparently instructed school administrators [not to talk to the press](#) about KGIA bespeaks a siege mentality.

Third, that all twelve members of KGIA's [advisory board](#) are connected to religious institutions validates concerns about its being, in fact, a religiously-oriented school.

Fourth, the advisory board's three Muslim members all have Islamist connections unsuited to a taxpayer-funded school. [Khalid Latif](#), the imam of New York University, threatened that university's president that should a student event displaying the Danish cartoons take place, "the potential of what might happen after they are shown" should be "not taken lightly." [Al-Hajj Talib 'Abdur-Rashid](#) belongs to the "National Committee to Free Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin" (Al-Amin being a [convicted cop-killer](#)). [Shamsi \(or Syamsi\) Ali](#) runs a madrasa in Queens where an almost exclusive focus on Koran memorization might be breaking state educational laws.

Finally, parents will not be assuaged by resolving problems about school crowding and the mixing of differ-

ent-aged students for, whatever they say publicly, the evidence suggests that their real objection to KGIA involves the school's inculcating pan-Arabism and radical Islam.

- Why did New York parents accept without demurrer schools teaching Chinese, Creole, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish, while the parents of *two* schools have rejected the KGIA?
- The too-crowded argument is hollow, for the second school building has an over-capacity of about 680 seats, far more than what the new school expects for the 60 students during its first year and double that many the second.
- School administrators promise [heightened security](#) to the school building that houses the KGIA, implicitly suggesting this is a parental concern related to Arabic instruction.
- Parents sometimes speak off-message and reveal their real feelings. [Katia Lief](#), for example, worried about "a cultural-religious school" with "girls in burqas." (That she some days later wrote a [confused apology](#) for the "girls in burqas" comment only confirms the parents' fear of plain talk.)
- It is common to object to Islamic institutions by raising practical issues such as crowding, traffic, and parking. In a co-authored study [dating from 1991](#), I already noted several instances of this

pattern in Europe and the United States, and it has become even more routine since then.

The fact is that Islamic institutions, whether [schools](#) or [mosques](#), do have a pattern of extremism and

even [violence](#). Concerns are valid and should be aired openly. School Chancellor Joel Klein has promised that "If any school became a [religious school](#)," he would shut it down, adding that he will not tolerate "a [political school](#) with a political agenda."