

Qantara.de – Dialogue with the Islamic World

Portrait Dalia Mogahed

"Every Deed Begins with a Word"

Dalia Mogahed is a member of US President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The devout Muslim counters criticism of Obama's Cairo speech by pointing out that it represents only the first stage in what will be a long dialogue process. By Amira El Ahl

Following President Obama's historic speech to the Muslim world in Cairo, Dalia Mogahed found herself at the centre of unprecedented journalistic interest. An hour after the speech was over she was still standing before the imposing dome of Cairo University, coolly and serenely giving one interview after another.

She was probably the most sought after interview partner of the day, and even in the week leading up to the speech had been kept busy doing interviews for TV stations from all over the Muslim world.

There were good reasons for all the attention. The 33 year-old is director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies in Washington and one of 25 members of the so-called Office of Religious Partnerships, set up by Barack Obama in March to advise him in his dealings with the various world religions.

A typical American life story

She is the first Muslim woman to become an adviser to a United States President. "I feel very honoured for the privilege to serve in this way, but also recognize the responsibility that I've agreed to take on," says Mogahed.

Very few appear better suited to the job than the charismatic and devout Muslim who wears the hijab from conviction. Born in Cairo, she went to America at the age of five. The family spoke Arabic at home and even today she has a discernible Egyptian twang when she speaks.

At the same time she has long been an American citizen and a model example of successful integration. "I see my life story as a typically American one," Dalia Mogahed says.

Her excellent school grades earned her a place at one of the country's top universities. She studied chemistry first before going on to do a master's degree in business administration at the University of Pittsburgh. Today she is married, has two sons and works for one of the world's leading polling organisations.

All who meet her are struck by her warm-heartedness and charisma. The 33-year-old radiates calm, imperturbability and quiet authority – even amidst the chaotic hustle and bustle that was the aftermath of Obama's speech.

Listening and understanding

Highly educated, with an analytical intelligence and precise – yet always diplomatic – choice of words, she explains how she sees her new political role. "I would say that it is my role to convey the facts about what Muslims worldwide think and feel."

The Obama government has understood how important it is to listen and to try to understand what the silent majority of Muslims, both in the US and worldwide, thinks, feels and wants.

In Dalia Mogahed, the President of the United States has found a real expert in the field. Muslim attitudes to the West are her special area of expertise. Together with writer John L. Esposito she is co-author of "Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think".

The book documents the results of a study in which 50,000 Muslims from 35 countries were interviewed. It provides an insight into the desires, fears, hopes, frustrations and opinions of Muslims worldwide.

Mogahed's insights are invaluable, especially when it comes to things such as preparation of Obama's historic speech in Cairo. Although Mogahed heard the speech for the first time in Cairo, much of it exceeded her expectations, even in the key areas suggested by her: respect for Islam, empathy for the views of Muslims and recognition of Islam's importance to civilisation.

Islam and modernity

"I felt that everything I recommended, with very few exceptions, was in the speech," says Mogahed. "But there was also so much more that I couldn't have ever imagined." President Obama's inclusion of his own experience with Islam, for example, was a key moment for her.

There was one part of the speech which must have resonated in a particularly personal way with Dalia Mogahed as she sat there in the enormous hall under the gilded dome of the university.

"I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal," Obama said. Dalia Mogahed herself perfectly illustrates the compatibility of Islam and the modern world.

Dalia Mogahed is a woman with many identities. She is a highly respected scientist, who often works a 60-hour week, an American, but also a Muslim with Egyptian roots.

"I was so proud of the speech from every single perspective," says Mogahed. Of particular importance was the fact that the President let the Muslim world know how much it is respected.

That was another reason why she chose to take on the job of adviser. "I want to help the President give the Arabs back their dignity."

She hopes that in the process she can help to break down some of the stereotypes that persist. For much too long the West has perceived of Muslims solely as religious fanatics, potential terrorists and a source of trouble.

"Every deed begins with a word"

"President Obama wants to give Muslims back their self-esteem," Mogahed says. Political considerations as well as personal conviction play a role here.

Current conflicts can only really be resolved with the help of the Islamic world and its peoples. "We need the Arab world as partner, not as an enemy," Mogahed says, "because our security is inextricably linked to better relations with the Arab world."

Dalia Mogahed is well aware that a single speech is not going to solve all the existing problems. Reaction to Obama's words in the Arab world was favourable, but it is deeds that are now being looked for. The analyst counters the critics by pointing out that this is only the beginning of what will be a long process of dialogue. "Every deed begins with a word."

Amira El Ahl

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Amira El Ahl spent two years in Cairo as foreign correspondent for Der Spiegel magazine. She has been a freelance reporter in the Middle East since 2008.

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Barack Obama's Speech to the Islamic World

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