Middle East Institute

“Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
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The Middle East Institute (MEI) invited Dalia Mogahed to discuss the new book she has co-authored with John L. Esposito, “Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think.” Michael Ryan of MEI introduced Ms. Mogahed, Senior Analyst and Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, as a common contributor to publications such as the Wall Street Journal and the Journal of Middle East Peace.

The book is based on 50,000 face to face interviews of 1.3 billion Muslims in 35 nations over the course of 6 years. The independently funded research project performed is the largest study of Muslim populations ever performed by Gallup. The study represents “90% of the world’s Muslim community,” including European and American members of the faith.

Mogahed quoted a question that emerged just after the attacks of September 11, “Are we at war with terrorism or Islam?” The new book is largely focused on addressing this question.

The study’s findings dissect the Muslim population into two groups, the Muslim majority and “political radicals.” Mogahed makes a clear distinction between the “radical 7%” who, like their moderate Muslim counterparts desire change, but through rapid, dramatic, and if necessary, “violent means.” She consistently referred to this group as the politically radicalized, not associating them directly with Islam.

Overall, most respondents believed that the West does not respect Muslims and their values. The 7%, as she often called them, feel not only humiliated but have also a heightened sense of fear that their freedom is being repressed or compromised. They additionally possess an overwhelming fear of domination by outside forces, particularly the United States, even in countries such as Egypt where this has never been a direct issue. Mogahed claims that the politically radicalized act out of their “perception of geopolitics, not an understanding of religion.”

For the moderates the main concerns are “economic development, greatest fear: crime, lack of security” but share the belief that the West views them as inferior in comparison. They condemn terrorism and are more likely to be concerned with their personal well-being.
“Politics, not piety is the differentiating factor between moderates and radicals.” The study also finds that between the two groups there is no apparent “difference in religiosity.”

She also noted the differences and misunderstandings between the Muslim world and the West. In response to the open ended question, “What do you admire most about the West”, Muslims answered 1) technology and 2) democracy. Reversing roles, when Westerners were asked, “What do you admire about the West they responded 1) democracy and 2) technology.

When asked, “What do you admire most about the Muslim world”, the answer was overwhelmingly “I don’t know” or no response.

Another question posed was “Is democracy compatible with Islam.” Mogahed sees this study as suggesting the answer is yes, saying “many Muslims favor religious principles and democratic rights” together. When asked about drafting a hypothetical constitution for their respective countries and its most defining characteristics, Muslims as a whole most often answered freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, rule of law, transparency in government.

And Sharia? “While favoring religious principle, most do not favor by rule of religious clerics” and most do not believe the Sharia should be the only source of legislation. Interestingly in Egypt, 65% thought Sharia should be the only source of legislation, the highest among selected countries.

On the American side, in March of 2002 Gallup asked “how much do you know about Muslim beliefs?” The answer was “Nothing” and “Not Much” at a total of 54%. In January of 2007 the answer was the same at 57%. 