

President Obama Visits Egypt!

Kholoud Mahamed Ali

President Obama travelled to Egypt on June 4, 2009, and gave a speech at Cairo University entitled "A New Beginning." One of our international members, Kholoud Mahamed Ali, was in the audience for that speech and here she gives us her perspective on that historic event.

Who knew much about Cairo University prior to President Obama's visit? Allow me to summarize its history. Several different parties were responsible for laying the foundation for this Egyptian university. Among them were Royalists such as Prince Ahmed Fuad, governmental persons such as Saud Zaghlul (a former Egyptian education minister) and Kassim Amin (an Egyptian judge), and various Egyptian Nationalists.

The idea for the university began as early as 1884 when an Armenian bureaucrat, Yaqub Artin, suggested that an existing professional school could be transformed into a university. By 1900, Jurji Zaydan, the editor of the magazine *Al-Hilal*, demanded that there should be an "Egyptian College School" so that Egyptians could get a modern education in Arabic while studying in Egypt. The Egyptian University finally began as a private school on December 21, 1908. It later became a state school in 1925, with colleges of engineering, science, arts, and law. In 1940, its name was changed to Faud I University, and in 1954, it became Cairo University. Cairo University now has 17 colleges and 6 institutes in Cairo, and numerous branch colleges in various locations throughout Egypt.



Cairo University, Egypt

I think President Obama chose Cairo University for his speech location because of the great history of this university. It is also the oldest university in the Middle East and is considered the lighthouse of science in the Middle East.

About the Visit In my opinion this is the most brilliant U.S. president I have ever seen. He chose the right place and the right time. When I heard about the visit, I appreciated his boldness. After his visit was announced, I saw preparations for the event at the university every day that I went to work. I thought to myself — this man will make change happen until the day of his speech.

On the day of President Obama's speech, I went to the main conference hall in the university and sat in my place for quite awhile. Finally he appeared on the stage — at the first sight I thought immediately that he is a good leader. Then he began his speech with our Arabic salute and that gave me a great first impression. When he began talking, his speech was so wonderful and amazing that I stood up and started clapping my hands without stopping. I now have great enthusiasm for the future. He mentioned a lot of things about relations between Muslims and the U.S. that I thought were good, and then he talked about women's rights. Here is an excerpt from that part of his speech that I think is worth reprinting:

The sixth issue — the sixth issue that I want to address is women's rights. I know — I know — and you can tell from this audience, that there is a healthy debate about this issue. I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal, but I do believe that a woman who is denied an education is denied equality. (Applause.) And it is no coincidence that countries where women are well educated are far more likely to be prosperous.

Now, let me be clear: Issues of women's equality are by no means simply an issue for Islam. In Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, we've seen Muslim-majority countries elect a woman to lead. Meanwhile, the struggle for women's equality continues in many aspects of American life, and in countries around the world.

I am convinced that our daughters can contribute just as much to society as our sons. (Applause.) Our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity — men and women — to reach their full potential. I do not believe that women must make the same choices as men in order to be equal, and I respect those women who choose to live their lives in traditional roles. But it should be their choice. And that is why the United States will partner with any Muslim-majority country to support expanded literacy for girls, and to help young women pursue employment through micro-financing that helps people live their dreams. (Applause.)

Really I do admire his words about women rights. I hope someday to make a linked Women's Association for the entire world that would enhance the role of women in all fields of work. After the departure of this great leader — the only U.S. president to make such a brave visit — I was convinced that he'll change a lot of things and the future will be better than the past.