

The Presentation of HRH Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz

Ameen Rihani: A Meeting Point Between Two Cultures

Washington, DC

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Your Excellencies,

Honored guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I begin by welcoming all of the participants in this Symposium, and specifically the American University in Washington which has shared in the convening of this event and which has worked to ensure its success.

I extend my apologies for not being with you. I had sincerely wished to participate in this Symposium and to listen to the important contributions that will be made by the panelists and scholars, who have specialized in Ameen Rihani, and who are knowledgeable about him – these presenters are aware of the obligation we owe him and of the importance of the role he played.

I truly wanted to attend and share in this Symposium; however, circumstances prevented my presence in Washington during this period.

And it is very true that I enthusiastically supported the creation of the Institute, which is dedicated to Ameen Rihani and carries his name since Dr. May Rihani invited me nearly two years ago, in her name and in the name of members of the Rihani family, to accept to be the Honorary Chair of the Institute.

I was honored to take charge of this role since Ameen Rihani's legacy deserves special attention and consideration, as this legacy carries what will benefit us and help us in these present circumstances.

I made sure that I contribute as much as I could to enable the continuation of this legacy by ensuring the translation and publication of his most important books regarding the Arab World, including "The History of Nejd and the Life of Abdul Aziz Al-Saud." I was honored, in 1981, to write the preface for the fifth edition of this book.

Therefore, I warmly welcome all the work and efforts that have been taken in order to value and sustain Rihani's legacy, to revive it and to study it further. I believe that the Ameen Rihani Institute, since it was launched in November 1999, is playing a pioneer role in achieving this objective. The Institute is to be commended and encouraged.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was very pleased when I heard about the concept of the Ameen Rihani Symposium, and I was even more pleased to be invited to deliver the opening statement. The source of my joy is due to two reasons:

First, I have always been an admirer of Ameen Rihani's personality, aware of the obligation we owe him, and his contributions that have enriched the Arab culture. I am also conscious of his role in drawing closer Arab culture to the other cultures. I always told myself that this man did not receive the recognition he deserved. I felt it was imperative to highlight his contributions and his intellectual and literary works.

Second, I consider Ameen Rihani's unique personality, diverse contributions to literature, political thought, and culture, as a real bridge between the East and West, as the title of this Symposium indicates.

We today are in dire need of shining a light on personalities, such as this one, that bring together cultures and that create opportunities for dialogue between civilizations. It is clear to all that we are living in difficult times where many voices have been raised to claim that there is an inevitable clash of civilizations. While other voices that have worked for rapprochement and that have searched for common points among cultures have been lowered and are becoming silent.

Ameen Rihani, throughout his life, was from the type that dedicated his life to be a bridge between two cultures and to be a meeting point for two civilizations from the day he migrated from his village, Freike, in Lebanon in 1888. Throughout his rich life that he spent between the US and the Arab World, Ameen Rihani did not ever neglect this role to which he had dedicated his life. He consecrated all of his literary and political skills to play this role as fully and as completely as he could.

For this reason, it is not surprising that Ameen Rihani would start his literary life by translating the poetry of Abul-‘Ala’ Al-Maari into English. It is important to note that his diverse literary and intellectual contributions are produced in Arabic and English, and that all of his achievements are centered around a main concept: how to introduce the culture and the values of the West to the East, and how to introduce the East and its causes and priorities to the West.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Ameen Rihani decided that his life’s work would be to light the road of his Arab countrymen to help them realize the importance of being dynamic and maintaining solidarity. He hoped the Arab countries would adopt this approach.

Ameen Rihani carried and delivered a clear message of bringing together the Arab and Western cultures, and of finding harmony between the spirituality of the East and the material accomplishments of the West. His message emphasized bringing a healthy balance between the mind and the spirit. Ameen Rihani appeared at a time when the Arab World was experiencing a rebirth, whereby he addressed questions about identity, searched for his cultural roots, sifted through his heritage, and revived it all.

During that phase many questions boiled to the surface, those same questions continue to preoccupy us, questions about Arab nationalism, Arab unity, the relationship between religion and politics, and our relationship with the West. Naturally Ameen Rihani was part of that powerful movement that shook the entire nation. He occupied himself with these questions with one objective: how to ensure the renaissance of the nation.

Through his diverse intellectual and literary works, and his lectures and other activities, Ameen Rihani gave a personal answer to these questions. The truth is that all of his efforts were driven by a modern vision and a genuine concern about the future of this nation.

Ameen Rihani tried throughout his life to present a comprehensive paradigm to modernize the Arab nation. This program is based on religious tolerance, science, and the spirit of national unity. He gave special effort to spread education and culture because he believed they are the sole solution and entry point to the new century.

Ameen Rihani did not tire of defending his principles. For example, he took a remarkable position by confronting religious fanaticism. It is important to remind us of his unwavering stand against religious divisions, which he considered a major reason for social difficulties in Lebanon that could be cured through long-term social awareness.

Ameen Rihani once wrote to the President of the American University of Beirut in 1929, and said:

“Revolutions do not help, education is the sole solution. I hope that my idea will capture your attention. When I return to Freike next year I want to do something in support of the university and its educational goals. My idea is to open my home to 10 or 12 students who are graduates of different universities to share my ideas, hopes, and life. I want them to be from different religious backgrounds, to live in my home.

I will present to them a daily talk about a phase or another of the goals of nations. We will address a variety of subjects that are religious, social, behavioral, economic, and artistic; the unity of God will be the basis of my teachings about religion. Each guest will remain a member of his religion. The actual religion we will practice will be based on the brotherhood of mankind, and narrow politics will stay out.”

How wise were his words. If this indicates anything, it indicates a sincere will to contribute to creating a better future, one that matches the expectations and values of the age.

Ameen Rihani, therefore, is not just a literary figure, he is a true philosopher. That is why it is not surprising that he is called the “Philosopher of Freike.” It is also not surprising that the Egyptian philosopher Zaki Najeeb Mahmoud said about Rihani, “He is for the Arabs what Tagore was for India and what Emerson was for the United States.” In my opinion, this sentence effectively summarizes Ameen Rihani and his impact.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Mistaken are those who think that Ameen Rihani is among the immigrants that cut their relationship with their mother nations and that “melted” in the ocean of the United States. On the contrary, Ameen Rihani succeeded in utilizing his stay in the US, his mastery of the English language, and his exposure to American society, to open political channels with the thinkers and the leaders of the US. Rihani introduced the Arab causes to the American opinion leaders, and invited them to support these causes. A proof of that is his meeting with American President Theodore Roosevelt with whom he discussed the Palestinian cause. Another proof is his continuous lobbying for understanding of the Arab viewpoint, and his participation in a number of international conferences to represent the Arab World.

Rihani carried a commitment that did not waver with regard to Arab nationalism. He said, “Arab unity will happen for sure, it will be an indication of selflessness and elevation, and a level of evolution.” His commitment to the Palestinian cause was not less than his commitment to Arab unity, and he said:

“We are all Palestinians when Palestine is threatened. Our own rights are jeopardized by powerful financial and political forces.”

Ameen Rihani was by himself an entire Arab lobby. How much we need such people today. We need people like him, who will take pro-active and positive positions within US society and who act rather than merely complain about the power of the Zionist lobby and its reach to decision makers in the US.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Ameen Rihani is a multi-faceted person with a range of contributions. He is a literary figure, a poet, a traveler, a thinker, and a political figure.

I would hope that the scholars and the presenters at the Symposium will address all of the facets of his contributions.

One aspect that I would like to shed light on, is the marvelous trip that Ameen Rihani took in 1922 to visit the Arabian Peninsula. Based on the information I have, Ameen Rihani was the first among Arabs and Westerners to undertake in a single voyage a trip that covers a vast and hitherto unknown region (in those days).

During this voyage he met the political leaders of the Arabian Peninsula, developed a personal relationship with them, and got to know first hand their visions, personalities, and their thinking.

The results of this unique trip were six important books about the region. Rihani wrote these books between 1924 and 1932. For a long time, they were among the most popular books.

Of these books I would like to note *The Kings of Arabia*, *The Modern History of Najd*, and *Ibn Saud: His People and His Land*.

In fact, it suffices to say that these books are still considered, up till today, a resource that no researcher who is studying our region and its modern history, can do without. This is true, specifically because Ameen Rihani wrote them based on personal visits and discussions with the movers of events, and his immediate observations of the people and the geography, and their interrelationship. His approach is quite unique in Arab culture which usually does not celebrate such “risky” adventures.

During Ameen Rihani's trip to the Arabian Peninsula, he got to know King Abdul Aziz, may he rest in peace. Rihani played a significant role as an intermediary between Abdul Aziz and other regional leaders. Whoever reads the correspondence between these two men can grasp this fact.

King Abdul Aziz said about Rihani: "I find in my friend Ameen Rihani a formidable national reformer and a man genuinely concerned with the Arabs and their unity. I extremely admire his literature, his knowledge, and his true national spirit."

From my knowledge of my father, King Abdul Aziz, I can state that he would not have uttered these words to anyone but an individual who had a special place in his heart, because he never extended his friendship and warmth except to those who had earned it.

When Rihani wrote to King Abdul Aziz asking permission to call on him, the King answered: "How can we reject someone who requests to visit us when he is from the heart of the Arabs?"

"They said you are an American coming to the Arab World to spread Christianity; they said you represent some companies that want to establish a presence; they said you are coming from Hijaz on behalf of the Sharif seeking to confirm his claims; and they said other things about you, too.

“And we replied that if there is anything in your intent to hurt us, we know how to defend ourselves, and if there is anything to be gained, we know how to benefit. And we, honored sir, know your objective. May God bless you.”

These words indicate that King Abdul Aziz clearly understood the purpose and intent of Ameen Rihani and he considered him a true friend. He received him as a special guest and provided the opportunity for Rihani to learn first hand the region, its people, its norms, and its traditions.

The correspondence between King Abdul Aziz and Ameen Rihani is unique. This correspondence captures the unique exchange between, a thinker with a sharp vision who is concerned with Arab unity and Arab renaissance, and a leader who is working toward realizing these objectives despite severe conditions and difficult constraints.

I am grateful that that their correspondence was collected and published. It is a valuable legacy that should not be forgotten or lost.

Despite certain reservations that King Abdul Aziz held regarding Ameen Rihani's assumptions, the King remained constant in his friendship and acknowledged the contributions of Rihani and the depth of his knowledge. I remember that the King ended one of his letters saying: "I want you to know, Ameen, that our friendship is above all these issues."

King Abdul Aziz could see through to the real man and recognize his true value. He wanted to say that his friendship to Rihani would remain despite differences in their political views. On the other hand, Ameen Rihani's works indicate that he knew the King, his personality, and his historic role better than any of his contemporaries – despite the fact that they did not know each other for a long time.

In his valuable book, *The Kings of Arabia*, which is rightly considered to be one of the most beautiful of books of exploration, Ameen Rihani says he was told, "Ibn Saud is an ignorant *bedouin* ... who has no heart and no religion." Rihani indicated these statements were false claims, and he came to immediately realize the value of King Abdul Aziz and his lofty status. Rihani said about him, "I got to know all the leaders of the Arabs and I did not find among them a greater man than he. I am not exaggerating in what I

am saying. He is truly great is his open welcome, his smile, his words, and his expressions. At his first meeting, he shares his thinking fearlessly and nobly reveals his innermost thoughts. This is the mark of a man who knows himself and who has faith in God and in himself. The man in him is greater than the king, and undoubtedly rules his people with benevolence and not through authority.”

Truly I do not exaggerate if I say that I have not read or heard a description of my father King Abdul Aziz, may he rest in peace, that is more accurate and more understanding of my father’s personality than this description that Ameen Rihani wrote about him.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish the Symposium all the success, and I hope that its main message reaches out and is heard. The message of the Symposium emphasizes that civilizations differ and vary but do not clash, as long as there are individuals like Ameen Rihani that dedicate their life, and consecrate their efforts, to be a proactive bridge among civilizations and to become a meeting point among cultures.

HRH Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz