



LEBANON'S AMEEN RIHANI (1876-1940)

AND

THE U.S.-ARAB RELATIONSHIP

by

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Remarks

by

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It is fitting that the diplomatic corps of the nation's capital and the descendents and so many admirers of the life and work of Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) – the founding father of Arab-American literature -- are present for this occasion. What a marvelous and moving tribute to one of the greatest writers – *59 books* -- and visionaries of this century.

It was more than thirty years ago, as a graduate student interested in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf states, that I first came across Ameen Rihani's writings on the region and his meetings with and observations of the late King 'Abd Al-'Aziz bin 'Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sa'ud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia.

From my early readings of Rihani's work, I found what he had to say endlessly fascinating. Not least among the reasons was his keen eye for vivid and exacting details about the culture and heritage of a people other than my own. This, to me, was a treasure.

Rihani's writings were the more valuable for the fact that they were laced so richly with hard-to-come-by information and insight on what, even then, was a rapidly disappearing way of life. He wrote with compassion and understanding about a people who were materially poor but rich in spirit and manners, wealthy in values and customs, blessed with the wisdom of the ages.

Only more recently, thanks to his niece, May Rihani, and other members of the Rihani family, have I come to appreciate additional aspects of the man himself, of, indeed, the extraordinary range of his reach into the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.

These latter aspects of Rihani's gifts to humanity stand out among his scrolls upon the sand, his signature on the sun. Viewed through the lens of yesteryear and today alike, they rank among the most luminous landmarks of his legacy.

In this regard, it has often been said that the only thing longer than a shadow that a man or a woman can leave behind is an institution. This is true but only by a third.

That is, it is possible for a person to leave behind two other things that can be just as lasting and every bit as rich an inheritance. These are, one, an idea or an ideal that takes on a life of its own and lasts long after its proponent's passing.

The other is an example, as in a role model, as in a timeless benchmark, as in a frame of reference – for behavior, for judgment, for guiding one along life's highway.

Rare is the person who bequeaths more than one of these legacies. But for someone to come along and posit for posterity *all three ...?*

This is just one of the many traits of Rihani's character that made him – and the shadow he cast over the rest of us -- so unique.

It is also what makes the establishment of an institute in his name that would seek to link the best in the West to the best in the East so timely and relevant.

The nature of Rihani's impact on a great many people includes not only the importance he accorded to public education.

It encompasses also what he had to say about the policies and positions, the actions and attitudes, of governments.

Not least, it extends to what he believed well-informed citizens can and must do with regard to such matters.

In Rihani's view, for one to be actively engaged in the great societal issues of one's time was to perform more than one's civic duty; if one wanted to help make the world a better place in which to live, it was a moral obligation.

These aspects of Rihani's life and example remain as poignant and pertinent now as they were when he was alive.

They have inspired countless people in ways that, for some, are difficult to describe but which those here this evening – if he could but see them now -- have no trouble understanding.

The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, and the numerous other American-Arab affairs groups on whose behalf I have been asked to speak, can be said to embody a great deal of what Ameen Rihani longed to achieve in his quest to bridge the gaps between the Arab and American peoples.

Certainly, these organizations have incorporated into their visions and missions, their programs and activities, much of what Rihani often referred to as “practical idealism.”

Practical idealism – it’s hard to take issue with the concept, and who can find fault with the phrase?

However strong one might appear to be in a given minute or hour in a day, in common with Rihani, each of us is mindful of our frailties and limitations -- and that none among us commands a corner on the truth.

Like Rihani, all are guided by the knowledge that their time on earth is short, that there is much that needs to be done, and that the resources available for the more important tasks at hand are not only finite but in short supply.

Considerations such as these help to keep one mindful of the need to be practical in whatever one might attempt to achieve in the realm of public affairs.

But what of idealism?

What is it about America’s U.S.-Arab relations organizations that do more than mirror and whisper – they echo -- some of the ideas and ideals for which Ameen Rihani stood and for which his life was so exemplary?

Perhaps one way to describe this “it’ is within a context and a perspective of what, collectively, these organizations are not as well as what, collectively, they are.

For example, as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to strengthening and expanding as many of the positive dimensions of the U.S.-Arab relationship as possible:

- **We are NOT universities. We lack academic accreditation. We confer diplomas on no one. Only on the best of days do we bestow a degree of any kind: namely, one of humility.**
- **Yet, though we are not institutions of higher education, not a day passes without our leadership, management, and staff – and our *ansar* (supporters), *assdiqa'i* (friends), and *mu'ayyidin* (volunteers, helpers) -- grappling with matters pertaining to academic course enrichment, curricula improvement, and faculty development.**
- **Indeed, in one way or another, each of us is continuously involved in all the culturally relevant areas of knowledge and understanding as they relate to the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.**
- **NEITHER do any of the non-profit and sometimes non-break-even U.S.-Arab relations organizations constitute a classroom -- in the sense of their having on prominent display an array of easels, magic markers, and erasers, although these indeed they do have; nor would their little libraries be likely to land very high on the Richter Scale of quantity or quality, though, in both areas of measurement, they are improving.**

Yet, though not a classroom, not a day goes by

without these organizations being involved in learning lessons, reaching out to students, providing real-life U.S.-Arab relations experiences for young Americans – the leaders of tomorrow -- in the form of internships and study-abroad programs and home-stays with families in Arab countries -- and without their providing leadership development opportunities in which students learn first-hand that *democracy is not a spectator sport* – that, to achieve results in the world of public affairs, one must participate.

- **Working in 20 U.S. cities with 2,000 students and 250 faculty advisers annually, one of the National Council's jobs is to do just that – to teach America's leaders of tomorrow about the Arab world, about the U.S.-Arab relationship, about how to participate in public life, how to master parliamentary procedure, how to debate, how to draft a resolution, how to build a coalition, how to win -- and how to lose -- with grace and dignity, how not to give up nor give in, how to prepare, how to persist, and how to persevere when the cause may seem lost but its aims are noble and just.**
- **In addition, none of these U.S.-Arab relations NGOs are even so much as an echo of a government in the sense that they have any authority to command or compel anyone to do anything. And no one pays them taxes. Yet not a day goes by without their being caught up in some of the great public policy issues of our time.**

- **At the elemental level, nowhere is this more true than with their individual and collective efforts to provide input and comment on some of the cutting-edge issues that link the U.S. to the Arab world. Among the more perennial issues are those that encompass American national needs, concerns, and interests.**
- **More specifically, the focus of these organizations is especially upon those issues that have implications for U.S. policies, images, and goodwill.**

Chief among these are those that pertain to peace and justice and the needs of the region's less fortunate and downtrodden who, after all is said and done, hope little more than that there is a reason to hope a little more.

- **NEITHER does a day go by without these organizations seeking ways to go beyond the strong points in the U.S.-Arab relationship – for example, where matters pertaining to U.S. basic economic and defense needs are reasonably well met, at least from the American side, but, from the perspective of both sides, the nature and number of people-to-people ties, institution-to-institution links, and the body of knowledge through which each understands and respects the other are nowhere near as strong as they could be, should be, *must* be;**
- **NOR, either individually or as a group, do these organizations qualify as licensed architects, designers, business leaders, or engineers. As such, to date, they have not surprisingly proved inadequate to**

the task of righting most wrongs that have been visited upon a great many innocent people. Nor have they been up to the task of altering substantially the many pejorative stereotypes that numerous Westerners, and especially Americans, have of the Arab and Muslim peoples. Nor have they been able to bring about a significant diminution in the extent to which many Americans apparently see nothing wrong in ridiculing and maligning the Arab people's entire culture and heritage – and much else that Arabs and the Muslims among them hold dear and, one would think, in the name of elemental decency, should be placed off-limits to an outsider's derision or defamation.

- **Yet, not a day passes without these organizations working to build a U.S.-Arab relationship that, one day, will rest on a firmer foundation than the one at present.**

If we succeed in this quest -- and succeed one day we will -- such a relationship and the foundation that helps to sustain it will be characterized by:

- **a complementarity of American and Arab interests in matters pertaining to strategic, economic, political, commercial, defense, cultural, and human resource development issues, including those that enable men and women, as much as possible, to live by their lights, to do no harm, and to achieve the best of their potential;**
- **a reciprocity of respect for each other's heritage and the moral values and religious as well as**

philosophical principles that are among the most endearing and enduring elements in any people's culture; and

- **being, year-in and year-out, from one day to the next, what Ameen Rihani never tired of being: namely, bridge-builders between the best in Arabia and the best in America.**

So one can see and say that, although he left us more than half a century ago, the life, the vision, the mission, the conviction, the commitment -- and, above all, the courage -- of Ameen Rihani have not been in vain.

On the contrary.

Indeed, Rihani's qualities continue in the form of the visions and missions of these U.S.-Arab relations organizations.

They live on in the heart and soul of the Institute that carries Rihani's name. They go forward in honor of that which is inaugurated this evening in the presence of the diplomatic corps and so many distinguished friends of Lebanon -- along with the community of Americans of Lebanese ancestry in the nation's capital -- in what Ambassador Abboud aptly, accurately, adoringly calls "the American home of Lebanon."

At the end of the day, for all of us, it is instructive to ponder the nineteenth century words of Rudyard Kipling, whose refrain -- "East is East and West is West, and Ne'er the Twain Shall Meet" -- has often been quoted.

One would think -- one would hope -- that the formidable meeting of East and West that is represented here tonight, and the many other meetings between Easterners and Westerners

that occur every day and every night in places near and far all over the world, would be more than enough to put such ideas to rest.

But, unfortunately, regardless of what one knows to be true, and despite all the efforts to date, this is not yet so.

All of which is to say that, unfortunately, more recently, national political pundits such as Harvard professor and former Carter Administration official Samuel Huntington, along with no end of talk show personalities, appear as though nothing would please them more than to be accused of being a reincarnation of Kipling's ghost.

Certainly there is no denying that Huntington and his legions of camp followers – in the media, in the political arena, in the halls of academe -- have proclaimed the imminence of a “clash of civilizations,” connoting no end of coming conflict between the peoples of the East and those of the West.

Here's the rub: the choruses that backed Kipling in his day, and that agree with Huntington in ours, would have one believe that humanity is divided into two mutually exclusive and antagonistic camps -- the plural “we,” by which Kipling and Huntington mean the West, and the plural “they,” by which they mean the East.

But the postulations and prognoses of these two legendary luminaries, however widely acclaimed and affirmed by their colleagues and philosophical disciples, could hardly be farther from the truth.

Let there be no mistake.

In the Rihani Institute and in the numerous American NGOs dealing with the Arab and Islamic worlds, there is no “we-they” paradigm at work – only varying degrees of *us-ness*.

In our hearts, we are not alone in knowing this. Nor are we a breed apart in knowing, in the marrow of our bones, that all his life Ameen Rihani – and everyone here this evening -- would have it no other way.